

Heavy Fire Continues to Slow Saigon's Laos Drive

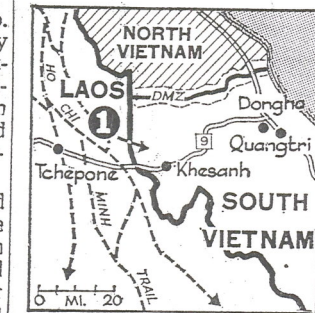
SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 22 (AP)—With heavy enemy fire continuing, the South Vietnamese drive against Communist supply trails and bases in southern Laos was reported stalled today for the fifth consecutive day.

Lead elements were still said to be only 17½ miles from the border of northwestern South Vietnam, which they crossed two weeks ago, although earlier statements sometimes placed them much deeper inside Laos. There are reports of strong enemy resistance at several points along the trails.

The United States command announced the loss of two more helicopters, bringing to 26 the number that have been officially acknowledged as lost in supporting the South Vietnamese operation. An American spokesman said that of this total 17 had been shot down in Laos and 9 in the northern part of South Vietnam, with total American casualties in these crashes 29 killed, 15 missing and 26 wounded.

Reports from the northern edge of the South Vietnamese drive in Laos said Rangers were struggling to hold blocking positions in the face of heavy rocket and mortar fire from the North Vietnamese.

Over the weekend, enemy attacks drove remnants of one South Vietnamese battalion from a hilltop base six miles inside Laos and about nine miles north of Route 9, the east-west road that forms the axis of the drive. It was reported that 298 of the battalion's 450



The New York Times Feb. 23, 1971
South Vietnamese post in Laos (1) continued under heavy fire. In Cambodia, a river convoy ran into ambush near capital (2).



men were killed or wounded in a three-day siege.

The survivors were said to have carried 108 wounded with them, but to have left 60 others behind with the bodies of 130.

A ranger base a mile away, also under siege since Thursday, was still reported holding out under heavy fire.

But a United States helicopter was reported to have lifted out a slightly wounded American helicopter crew chief, Dennis Fujii of Hawaii, who was stranded at the hilltop base last Thursday and was said to have manned a radio to direct United States air strikes against the enemy positions.

A South Vietnamese spokesman at Quangtri, a rear base for the Laotian operation, said that Saigon's forces in Laos had killed 63 North Vietnamese in a series of clashes north and south of Route 9. He said 11 South Vietnamese were killed in these clashes.

Meanwhile, a Government communique issued here said the South Vietnamese forces on the ground and United States air strikes so far had destroyed 12,603 tons of enemy munitions. Also listed as destroyed were 12 Soviet-made PT-76 tanks, 65 trucks, 400 bicycles, 125,000 gallons of fuel, 4,500 feet of pipeline and a large quantity of food and other equipment. The communique said the ground forces had seized 1,231 rifles and 198 heavy weapons.

It also said that 1,960 North Vietnamese troops had been killed, including about 500 by the United States air strikes, but some American officials said this was an exaggeration.

The South Vietnamese put their losses at 168 men killed and 661 wounded. These figures did not include the 298 Rangers reported killed or wounded in a North Vietnamese rout of a base.

Thieu and Abrams Confer

SAIGON, Feb. 22 (UPI) — President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam, Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, the United States

commander in Vietnam, and Ambassador Elsworth Bunker conferred for an hour today.

Word of this conference added to an atmosphere of concern over the progress of the campaign in Laos despite South Vietnamese announcements about the destruction of enemy supplies.