

Key to Incursion Into Laos: U.S. Helicopters

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KHESANH, South Vietnam, Feb. 23—Brooding about possible obstacles to the South Vietnamese drive against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos, senior American military advisers last week saw three major problems: the roads, the monsoon weather and antiaircraft fire. Yet, over the weekend, in good weather, far from any road, one of the finest South Vietnamese combat battalions was lost to an enemy attack

News Analysis

on its mountaintop landing zone five miles across the border in Laos. American helicopters, unable to bring supplies or reinforcements through the curtain of ground fire, returned to their base here while the 39th Ranger Battalion was losing more than half its men.

Afterward the Vietnamese military command said no further advance into Laos was planned.

To an observer who saw the Rangers leave here more than two weeks ago, saying almost defiantly, "We are going with no return," their setback seemed to be due not so much to a failure of spirit, for they apparently fought hard and well, as to overconfidence.

And it was clear that the ban against American advisers crossing with South Vietnamese troops into Laos operated against the effectiveness of the American helicopter gunships and bombers that were called

upon to provide air cover for the South Vietnamese.

Aircraft cannot just drop bombs where they see targets; they need detailed instructions from the ground or from aerial observers and usually American advisers perform this function.

This time they were not there except for one crew chief—Specialist Dennis Fujii—who was shot down in the attack on the 39th Rangers and who called in air strikes to repel the enemy. Pilots here thought the man was a hero.

The South Vietnamese forces are scattered in about 10 landing zones covering perhaps 200 square miles, with no way of getting reinforcements, supplies, ammunition, or equipment except by helicopter.

The strategy depended on air power to support a force of 16,000 men in an area of known antiaircraft positions, where tanks and armored vehicles could not move about on the ground.

The South Vietnamese forces have been buoyed with a sense of military prowess since their successful incursion into border areas of Cambodia last spring, and their attitude as they went into Laos was one of confidence.

But after the South Vietnamese reached a point about 16 miles beyond the border, the enemy began pressing attacks on the northern flank.

The 39th Ranger Battalion bore the brunt of the attack, and 178 were killed or are missing and 145 were wounded —

three quarters of its total strength — in heavy fighting Saturday and Sunday. It also lost the ebullient confidence it had two weeks ago.

Scores of the troops scrambled aboard the few helicopters that were able to rescue the wounded yesterday.

The enemy paid a high price. Helicopter pilots supported the South Vietnamese reports that more than 600 North Vietnamese soldiers had been killed.

Still, as of today, the allies had not yet been able to pinpoint and eliminate the enemy artillery positions, and another Ranger position lies exposed on an isolated mountaintop a mile west.

Ground Fire Is Heavy

South Vietnamese commanders have said that everything depends on the ability of helicopters to ferry ammunition and troops, to prepare landing zones by blanketing them with rocket and gunfire and to provide protection for the positions. Until last weekend, they could.

The South Vietnamese appear to have left themselves few options in case helicopter support was cut off.

For example, the Ranger base of Phuloc just inside the South Vietnamese border about 11 miles south of the demilitarized zone is on top of a hill overlooking a river valley that is so heavily guarded with antiaircraft positions that American helicopters dare not fly there.

There are no roads to Phuloc, and one American major there shook his head yesterday and said: "I just don't understand the idea of airlifting troops into positions where you can't move armor around on the ground to protect them."

The terrain around Phuloc, and across the border in Laos, is broken and forested, and enemy positions have been dug in for years.

Even along Route 9, the axis of the operation along which South Vietnamese armored columns have moved into Laos, commanders have chosen not to move supplies by convoy.

Brig. Gen. Pham Van Pu said, "We do not have enough troops to occupy both sides of the road all the way into Laos and provide route security."

As long as helicopter gunships and air strikes can provide that security, the operation does not appear to have been subjected imprudently to risks.

Weather Curbs Copters

But helicopters cannot take off in bad weather. During the northeast monsoon season, now at its height, low clouds and fog often reduce visibility to zero.

One American said: "bad weather allows the enemy to consolidate his resistance, and establish antiaircraft positions. Bad weather is really bad for us and good for him."

Several bad spells around Feb. 9 and Feb. 17 brought the operation to a standstill in its earlier stages, and now the antiaircraft fire has checked it again.

Technical problems appear to bring out the weakest points in the South Vietnamese part of the operation. The Vietnamese helicopter pilots are unfamiliar with landmarks in the rolling plateaus and mountains in Laos and frequently get lost.

Often, flying over Route 9, they follow its twists and curves to avoid getting lost, and they have difficulty finding landing zones. Circling, while pilots search for the zones, exposes helicopters to antiaircraft fire and has resulted in four reported crashes so far.