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# GIs to Aid Downed Airmen

Associated Press

Washington

U.S. combat troops can be sent into Laos to protect search-and-rescue teams trying to save stranded American airmen in that embattled country, Nixon administration spokesmen declared yesterday.

The policy pronouncement, originating with a statement by a U.S. command spokesman in Saigon, raised the possibility that small American combat units may be given temporary rescue assignments, and perhaps find themselves involved at least briefly in hostilities.

At the Pentagon, spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim is the use of infantrymen to guard rescue operations represents "absolutely no change" in policy.

At the White House an official called the practice "protective encirclement" of rescue missions and said they would not constitute any violation of legislative restrictions in the use of ground troops and advisers.

## BAR

The Cooper-Church amendment passed by Congress last year bars President Nixon from introducing ground combat troops or military advisers into Cambodia and Laos. It does not—and in the Administration view, cannot—deny the President use of resources available to him to save American lives in the Southeast Asian conflict.

Nevertheless, the prospective use of combat forces on such limited assignment raises questions about a possible buildup effect if in the particularly violent conflict which has broken out between South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese in Laos, larger American units had to be

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sent in to rescue the rescuers.

The South Vietnamese attacked a critical area of North Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh supply trail in Laos on February 8. The United States has supplied air support, both fixed-wing combat planes and helicopters including gunships and transports. Anti-aircraft fire from Communist forces around the South Vietnamese position has been heavy.

## COPTERS

Military informants here said that 19 American helicopters have been lost so far in this fighting; others have been shot or forced down but have been lifted out for possible repair. Thus the number of rescue operations carried out, using U.S. helicopter rescue techniques, is believed to have averaged considerably more than one a day but the total has not been disclosed.

Informants here and in Saigon said that so far as they knew none of the operations to date has involved U.S. combat protection teams. The protection on the ground, instead, has been supplied by quick-reaction, Black Panther units of South Vietnam's First Infantry Division.

The sudden surge of inter-

est and the responsiveness of American spokesmen on the question indicated that government authorities now foresee a time when U.S. combat units may have to be introduced, possibly because the qualified South Vietnamese units will become much more heavily involved in the fighting.

## RESCUES

In normal U.S. search-and-rescue operations in hostile territory the airlifted rescue teams are protected by rifle platoons of 35 men.

A White House official said such groups have long been used in getting Americans out of dangerous predicaments. Helicopters lift out the people being rescued; supporting aircraft attack enemy ground positions to suppress their fire, and ground combat troops set up a protective zone around the whole operation.

In Saigon, the U.S. command spokesman said "we would do anything we felt necessary to rescue downed crewmen."

"If the need arose and an American life was at stake," he said, "we would do it."

"These would not be ground troops sent in to engage the enemy," the spokesman said. "They would be directly associated with search and rescue."