

# SOUTH VIETNAMESE BATTERED BY FOE AT A BASE IN LAOS

Paratroop Battalion Holding  
a Hilltop Is Assaulted by  
Infantry and Tanks

POST POSSIBLY OVERRUN

U.S. Officials Declare G.I.'s  
Will Not Invade the North  
and Doubt Saigon Will

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Special to The New York Times

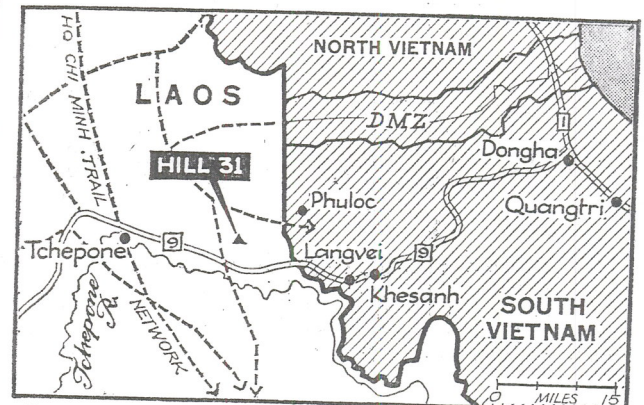
SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 26—Enemy tanks and infantrymen badly battered a South Vietnamese battalion in Laos yesterday and today in some of the fiercest fighting since the start of the allied drive against the Ho Chi Minh Trail network.

Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, the commander of the South Vietnamese forces that crossed into Laos Feb. 8, said that both sides controlled parts of the hill on which the battalion—about 500 men—had set up a base.

Speaking to reporters at Khesanh, in the northwestern corner of South Vietnam, he said that reinforcements were on the way and “we are again attacking to regain control of the hill.” [Military sources were quoted by The Associated Press as having said that the hill had been overrun by the North Vietnamese.]

### Copter Pilots Quoted

The situation was confused. Official sources in Saigon continued to insist that the post had not fallen to the enemy and reports from the field quoted South Vietnamese officers and American helicopter pilots as having said that the defenders had been forced to give up many of their defensive positions.



[In Washington, officials said that the United States has no intention of sending troops into North Vietnam and doubted that South Vietnam would do so. The officials said that invasion threats attributed to President Nguyen Van Thieu were at least partly aimed at diverting enemy forces from their build-up in Laos.]

The focus of the fighting was the position designated as Hill 31, six miles inside Laos and about 15 miles northwest of Langvei, in South Vietnam. Hill 31 is near the hilltop position that was overrun by enemy

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troops last weekend.

As the heavy fighting continued, the South Vietnamese command here reported for the ninth consecutive day that there was no forward movement by its 16,000 troops in Laos. For several days forward elements have been said to be about 16 miles from the South Vietnamese border.

Reports from the field said the defenders of Hill 31 had come under attack by 20 light Russian-made tanks in five waves of four tanks each. An official spokesman here said that eight tanks had been destroyed by American aircraft.

The South Vietnamese command estimated the strength of the enemy as a regiment, perhaps as many as 2,000 men.

No accurate estimate of they were expected to be casualties was available, but heavy. Genral Lam said that perhaps 1,000 enemy soldiers had been killed by the defenders, mainly paratroopers. “There was very close combat

and hand-to-hand fighting many times,” he reported.

Enemy troops also attacked an artillery base and an infantry battalion position south of Route 9 in Laos. Spokesmen in Saigon said that both attacks had been repulsed.

The South Vietnamese command reported that 45 enemy soldiers had been killed in one attack, and 8 in the other. South Vietnamese losses were put at 3 men killed and 15 wounded.

United States aircraft pounded the attacking enemy troops and tanks around Hill 31 through the day. The American military command reported the loss of a second F-4 fighter-bomber in the intensified action over the southern panhandle of Laos. Military sources said that one of the planes had been shot down while attacking enemy troops near Hill 31.

American and South Vietnamese helicopter pilots reported that enemy antiaircraft fire around the hill had made res-

cue missions impossible for a time. Lieut. Col. Robert F. Molinelli, the commander of the American helicopters providing support for the South Vietnamese operation in Laos, said: “Never has antiaircraft fire been so heavy as in the past two days around Hill 30 and Hill 31.”

Hill 30, the nearby position that is also occupied by South Vietnamese airborne troops, has been under increasing enemy attack this week. American reconnaissance pilots reported that several North Vietnamese tanks had been seen around the hill.

"The symptoms are very bad," said a South Vietnamese officer at a forward command post near Khesanh. "This is not because of our lack of ability to fight at the hill," he continued, "but because of the almost total ineffectiveness of American air power."

In response, American helicopter crewmen said that the airborne and artillery positions around the hill could have been saved if the South Vietnamese had been, as one American put it, "coordinated and alert."

In other combat action, two Vietcong sapper squads, supported by what was said to be a battalion, broke into a provincial capital in South Vietnam about 100 miles northeast of Saigon.

The South Vietnamese command said that the eight-hour attack against Phanthiet, the capital of Binhthuan Province, had been repulsed after allied tanks were ordered into the city.

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