

The Thrust Into Laos: Next Few Weeks Will

By ALVIN SHUSTER

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Feb. 28—The South Vietnamese thrust against enemy supply routes in Laos is entering its crucial stage, in the view of authoritative American military sources here.

The hill battles in recent days underscore the intense determination of Hanoi to defend its

Ho Chi Minh Trail network, but military sources emphasize that it is far too early to judge whether the

operation, which is going into its fourth week, will fall short of its original objectives.

The operation has not been a smashing success, but it has not been a failure either. The next few weeks should tell.

In the next 10 days, for example, the South Vietnamese, supported by American air power and artillery, plan to start moving westward again in force along route 9. They have been officially placed at about 16 miles inside Laos for nearly two weeks now and the plans reportedly call for a move of another five or six miles.

Gunships on the Way

More American helicopters, including 30 more Cobra gunships, are on their way to the area. Fifty-seven C-130 cargo planes loaded with tons of ammunition landed at the staging base at Khesanh yesterday. South Vietnamese marines, who so far have left the fighting to the paratroops, rangers, infantry and armored cavalry units, have now moved to the border for an imminent crossing.

"Every move depends on what happens to the move before that," a military source here said. "It depends on enemy strength and intention. It depends on the weather and anti-aircraft fire. There is no schedule as such."

Nevertheless, high-ranking military sources here acknowledge that the allied thrust has moved slower than expected and they give the following reasons:

The enemy was cautious at the beginning. The allied moves toward the border were delayed by as much as six days by bad weather. Hanoi was not sure what the South Vietnamese and Americans were up to. It could not determine how far west Saigon's troops would move into Laos along Route 9 and how far north and south of the highway they would operate. Enemy resistance was light at the outset.

Terrain a Major Factor

But the unfamiliar terrain of mountains and jungles in Laos proved more treacherous and difficult for the South Vietnamese than expected. There were more intricate trails and roads, more areas to secure than the planners foresaw. Weather inhibited air support and the operation quickly lost its fluidity and mobility.

With the allied thrust lacking its two major weapons—air mobility and firepower—North Vietnam then decided on a course of action. The apparent decision, according to military sources here, was to try to contain the South Vietnamese in the bulge they had created from the Laotian border.

Accordingly, the South Vietnamese have been kept so busy trying to secure and hold their positions that they have been unable to jump ahead or to conduct large-scale searches for huge caches of supplies.

This is not to suggest that the South Vietnamese have been totally ineffective in their efforts to damage Hanoi's supply network. Advance ele-

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Provide a Verdict

ments have been inching north and south of Route 9 and now operate at about 15 to 20 miles north of the highway and about 30 miles south.

Many key trails are in that area and the disruption of the flow of supplies in the eastern section of the trail network has been significant but hardly decisive. The key to real success lies in reaching the huge storage area, designated 604, near Tchepone, and into at least the northern portions of supply depot 611, south of Route 9.

Despite its early classification as a principal strategic objective, Tchepone, about 30 miles west of the border, does not have to be taken, military sources here insist, because most of the key supply roads are east of that town. But the military sources acknowledge that it would be "an important psychological victory" if the South Vietnamese could move that far.

Whether they can depends on a number of imponderables. There are an estimated total of 30,000 enemy combat troops in the area. The South Vietnamese say they have put 16,000 men into Laos, but the more accurate estimate seems to be about 12,000.

Airpower helps offset the numerical advantage of the

enemy and the official casualty figures indicate that North Vietnam is paying a heavy price. But Hanoi may be willing to continue to pay the cost and send even more troops into the struggle from the reserve divisions in North Vietnam.

Faced with that prospect, would the South Vietnamese decide on a phased or hasty withdrawal? Would they send in even more men from positions in South Vietnam? And, Americans ask worriedly, would the morale of the South Vietnamese troops sag with future setbacks?

Another unanswered question is the extent to which American airpower can be effective as the operation goes on. Enemy antiaircraft fire remains intense and South Vietnamese ground troops are beginning to complain that Americans are not arriving in time with supplies and ammunition.

The South Vietnamese command remains calm about the operation and the apparent lack of any spectacular progress to date. One high South Vietnamese official said today that "all was going well" and that "we expected large casualties on both sides."

"There is no intention of stopping where we are or pulling back," he continued. "We are hurting them more than they are hurting us. We have disrupted the supply lines and even if we pulled out tomorrow we will have set them back five or six months."

Much remains to be done, however, if the operation is to be termed a success. One mili-

tary source estimated last week that only about 20 per cent of the job has been done so far.

As might be expected, contingency plans exist for lifting the South Vietnamese out of Laos in a hurry. There is no inclination at this point to use them. More setback lies ahead, but the hope in Saigon is that more success does too.