

Saigon's Beaten Troops 'Would Rather Surrender'

United Press

Saigon

Badly beaten South Vietnamese soldiers, some of whose units lost up to four-fifths of their men and who were quoted as saying they would rather surrender than fight anymore, were pulled out of Laos yesterday and re-

placed by Rangers and Marines.

Military spokesmen acknowledged that the South Vietnamese army in Laos had been forced into a 12-mile retreat because of heavy North Vietnamese counterattacks.

Despite front reports to the contrary, allied officials from Saigon to Washington

continued to insist that the U.S.-supported Laos offensive was going well. Earlier yesterday, military spokesmen described the report of a South Vietnamese rout just a "rumor."

REFUSAL

At the front just inside South Vietnam, members of the tough South Vietnamese First Infantry Division told a Vietnamese-speaking newsmen after their return Thursday that they had refused to fight another day in Laos.

"We had been fighting for six weeks in Laos," said one battle-weary soldier. "We would rather surrender than fight anymore."

The soldiers were badly battered by North Vietnamese troops before their pullout to South Vietnam. One battalion lost at least 390 of its original 500 men in five days of heavy fighting, the South Vietnamese high command reported.

About 2000 of the bloodied and battered South Vietnamese were airlifted out of Laos by U.S. helicopters who deposited them at the U.S. base

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of Khe Sanh, a dozen miles inside South Vietnam.

The same helicopters brought the fresh South Vietnamese rangers and marines back into Laos.

In the four days of heavy fighting, Saigon's troops have fallen back to a front that lies within 15 miles of the South Vietnamese frontier.

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One of the turning points was when the South Vietnamese were forced to abandon a hilltop artillery base in Laos called Fire Base Lolo. Military spokesmen said at least 120 South Vietnamese were killed there and 270

wounded, but they claimed that at least 1667 Communists had been killed since Sunday in the same battle.

Fire Base Brown remained under intense attack yesterday afternoon, amid reports that it is also being evacuated by the South Vietnamese. However, spokesmen in Saigon insisted that its troops are still in the area of the Fire Base.

Since the South Vietnamese occupied and then withdrew from Sepone, a strategic road junction area that served as a transshipment point for Communist supplies, they have been moving southeast, back toward the Laotian border in what their spokesmen describe as a "mobile strategy" aimed at further disrupting the enemy supply network.

The area, south of Highway 9—the key South Vietnamese supply road from the border—has been the scene of heavy fighting in recent days. First the South Vietnamese troops evacuated Fire Base Sophia and then Fire Base Lolo.

There has been little word on the activities of the bulk of the 20,000 South Vietnamese troops operating elsewhere in Laos. An estimated 3000 troops have been moving through the area southeast of Sepone, meeting increased Communist resistance.