

# Desperate Saigon Soldiers Scramble for Helicopters

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HAMNGHI COMMAND POST, South Vietnam, March 21—The men who are considered South Vietnam's best soldiers are coming out of Laos, some in orderly fashion, others in panic. The North Vietnamese are right behind them.

For five days, American helicopters have been shuttling between the Laotian battlefields and the allied staging area at Khesanh, near here, bringing out as many weary South Vietnamese ground troops as possible.

The American pilots — the only United States forces operating across the border—are also bringing out horror stories. The pilots say that many of the South Vietnamese soldiers, their leaders lost, break into an undisciplined retreat when the helicopters come down through enemy fire to pick them up.

Instead of returning the fire, according to the pilots, the South Vietnamese cower in their foxholes until the helicopter is near the ground and then scramble for a place on the rapidly overloaded craft.

"We just have to kick some of them off," a pilot here said

today as he prepared to return to Laos in a new helicopter. His previous one was shot yesterday.

"We have to think about ourselves, too," he added. "You just cannot lift this bird with 15 guys clinging to it."

Reports that South Vietnamese troops are carried out clinging to the landing skids are frequent.

Some soldiers manage to hold on, and can be seen landing here gripping the skids in the harsh beating winds of the rotor. But there are others who fall off when they can hold on no longer and drop as much as 3,000 feet to the ground, the pilots say.

"You can't blame them — every helicopter that comes in makes them think it is the last one, the last chance to get out," another pilot said.

Everywhere now there are the signs of the pullout.

Army trucks, loaded with dust-caked and dismantled equipment, are lined up on Route 9, the long highway that cuts the border, ready to move

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through the Annamite Mountains back to the coast.

The activity on the road, which was reopened in February for the operation, is indicative of the enemy's determination to harass the withdrawing South Vietnamese troops. The allied advance westward along the road was almost without incident when the operation began on Feb. 8. Now larger and larger sections have become unsafe.

American helicopters are reporting enemy ground fire closer to Khesanh every day. South Vietnamese officers say an enemy regiment—about 1,500 men—has moved closer to Route 9 between Khesanh and the border, menacing the withdrawal of three South Vietnamese armored battalions that abandoned Fire Support Base Aloui inside Laos Friday.

The American armored commanders expect the columns to reach here tomorrow. An American adviser said sarcastically: "Oh, they will. You have not seen how our ARVN armor can move backwards."

The Vietnamese commanders here describe the pullback as a "change in direction," but an American infantry adviser said: "The only direction they are going is home."

The American advisers, who took a back seat during the Laotian operation because the Vietnamese forces did the fighting alone for the first time, have assumed some of their old authority.

At an armored division camp near here, an American major asked a South Vietnamese captain why a vehicle had not yet been repaired. But the American did not wait for an explanation.

"Well, you'd better get it fixed quickly tomorrow," the adviser snapped, "because we have to move on out of here." The Vietnamese captain tried to be conciliatory, but the American ignored him.

In addition to threatening Route 9, the North Vietnamese have also bombarded Khesanh for the last six days.

The huge American air and logistical support base for the South Vietnamese operation has changed dramatically, from a noisy, bustling plateau—studded with tents and aircraft—into a nearly silent plain with men digging hard to make bunkers and foxholes.

Brig. Gen. Pham Van Phu, who commands the South Vietnamese First Infantry Division, stood in the sunshine outside his command bunker here yesterday when the rockets began to hit the base.

"Now they know where we are," one Vietnamese artillery officer said, as the men scrambled into the bunker.

"But they don't know that it is the First Division," General Phu said, "because we are mobile."

And as he waited for the end of the barrage, the general reminisced about his days as a captain in the French colonial army, and how he had held his outpost at Dienbienphu 40 minutes longer than the French commander fighting near him before the final wave of Communist troops swept up the hill and forced his surrender.