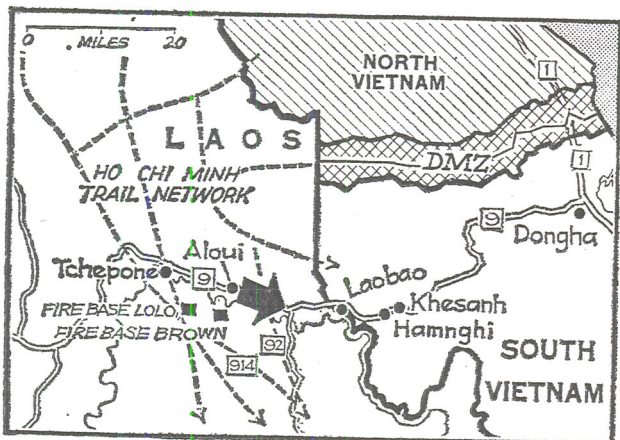


2,000 TROOPS LEAVE LAOS, PURSUED BY HANOI UNITS; U.S. PLANES BOMB IN NORTH



The New York Times

March 22, 1971

Arrow shows where South Vietnamese armored units were fighting their way back toward border on Route 9.

ARMOR RUSHED IN MAR 22 1971 Almost All Available Helicopters Utilized in Rescue Effort

By ALVIN SHUSTER
Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 21 — More than 2,000 South Vietnamese troops crossed the border from Laos today while North Vietnamese forces pursued them, posing a possible threat to American installations supporting the six-week-old campaign.

Virtually every American helicopter here was thrown into the effort to bring back the South Vietnamese. About 9,000 of the soldiers remained in Laos, less than half the number there at the peak of the operation, which was mounted to disrupt enemy supply lines.

Enemy Pressure Intense

The Americans reinforced their heavy artillery and rushed armor to the frontier as the South Vietnamese continued to pour into the area of Khesanh, the big American support base.

Military sources said that enemy troops in South Vietnam would try to cut Highway 9, the key route over which the withdrawing forces would move to their rear bases.

It was clear that pulling the South Vietnamese out of Laos was proving more difficult than getting them in. The resistance encountered at the start of the operation on Feb. 8 was light. The pressure now is intense. Several more heavy attacks were reported today against the units covering the retreat.

Meanwhile, the United States command said American planes swept over North Vietnam as far as 120 miles above the demilitarized zone that straddles the border between North and South Vietnam, to attack enemy SAM missile sites, other anti-aircraft sites and related support facilities."

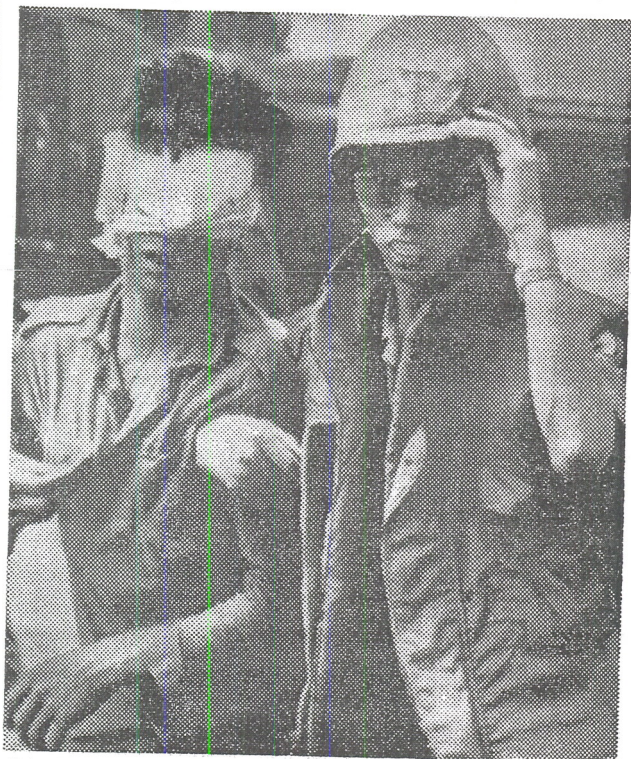
Shift in Plan Indicated

The command said the "limited-duration" strikes were in response to anti-aircraft attacks against reconnaissance planes and American aircraft bombing supply lines in Laos. It was understood that the strikes involved more fighters and bombers and covered a wider area than any other attack so far this year against North Vietnam.

Along Route 9 in Laos, South Vietnamese armor was pulling back from the abandoned base at Aloui and, spokesmen said, "fighting every inch of the way."

The withdrawal, which could be completed within the next few days, seemed to observers here to come earlier than expected, because of the relentless enemy opposition. Although official spokesmen in-

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Associated Press

OUT OF IT: A South Vietnamese soldier wounded in Laos is led by a medic to hospital in Hamngi, South Vietnam.

sisted all along that the operation would be limited in time and space, many sources had suggested that the South Vietnamese would remain until the rainy season in May.

Confirming that the campaign was now in its "withdrawal phase," military sources insisted tonight that no date had been set by the planners before the operation.

"When the planning was done, the operation was divided in phases," one military source said. "The unknowns were such that right from the start we knew we would have to do it week to week and depend on the commanders in the field to shift to other phases." The military informant continued:

"As discussed at the beginning, the number of days needed varied in wide limits. We did not have an agreed timetable or period that was as long a time as we've been in there now.

"With the forces it was possible to commit to the operation, I would say I am satisfied with it."

Size of Force Questioned

Some observers here have wondered why only 20,000 South Vietnamese troops were sent into the enemy's home ground for a job that some high-ranking military officers once said would require many more than that. Some officers here say that to have committed more troops would have left too many gaps in the defenses elsewhere in South Vietnam and Cambodia, and would have required many more supporting American helicopters.

In any event, military sources said the operation had "seriously disrupted" the enemy supply lines winding through the southern panhandle of Laos and "pre-empted Hanoi's plans for winter and spring offensives." All this, they said, enhanced the chances of peace in South Vietnam and Cambodia.

The unanswered questions, however, are how much the operation has set back Hanoi and whether it was all worth it. Military sources said it was too early to say how much time had been bought by the bitter campaign.

They reported that no enemy supply traffic had moved southward on Route 92, a key artery, since two days after the start of the offensive. They said traffic on Route 914, which feeds supplies into the northern provinces of South Vietnam, had been substantially reduced.

Moreover, they said, the loss of 11,000 enemy soldiers, the number reported killed in the operation, had destroyed the effectiveness of 13 of the 33 combat battalions thrown into the battle by Hanoi. In contrast, they said, only 4 of the 22 South Vietnamese battalions were crippled.

In listing the problems encountered in the operation, the military sources cited the condition of Route 9, found to be much worse than expected. The road, which crosses into Laos, should have served as a key supply route, thus easing the job of American helicopters.

"What we thought were just ditches turned out to be 25 or 30 feet deep," one military source said.

The result was a tremendous burden for the American helicopter pilots, who flew more than 145,000 sorties during the operation, encountering what was called the most intense antiaircraft fire of the Indochina war.

6 More Copters Lost

Six more helicopters were shot down over the weekend, the American command announced, bringing to 82 the total destroyed in support of the operation. The command said 59 crewmen had been killed, 68 wounded, and 20 were missing. Many other helicopters have been shot down, but they are not included in the official total because they were salvaged.

Defending the performance of the South Vietnamese troops in what was called "one of the biggest and toughest battles" of the war, military sources argued that the poor showing of some of the units should not reflect on all of them. The worst incident, the sources reported, came in the battle of Hill 30 early in the campaign when a battalion commander left his troops.

"In the military lexicon," one military source said, "that was an unforgiveable sin."

Apart from the intensity of the enemy resistance and anti-

aircraft fire, the planners of the operation were surprised at the mobility shown by the North Vietnamese in shifting their surface-to-air missiles closer to the scene of battle. At least one SAM missile complex was moved into Laos, but was reported destroyed by American warplanes. The decision of Hanoi to send in the big T-54 tanks was also unexpected.

In the latest action reported, the South Vietnamese command said that battles raged all day north and south of Route 9 in Laos with the heaviest assaults launched against the marine battalion at Dongha, about six miles from the border. It said that 314 enemy soldiers had been killed; South Vietnamese losses were put at 48 killed and 104 wounded.