



DANGER AHEAD: U.S. armored column passes downed helicopter between Laos border and

On Route 9, an Ambush Every Day

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LANGVEI, South Vietnam, March 23—The last four miles of Route 9, down which exultant South Vietnamese troops moved unopposed to the Laotian border six weeks ago, have become a daily ordeal for the American tank crews that are covering their retreat under heavy fire.

Since Friday the men of this jumbled United States armored cavalry base have been making the run to the border through a hail of Communist bullets and rockets to recover what they can of

cannon and tanks they were forced to leave behind at a fire base called Style when, as one of the troopers put it, "we got chased out of there."

They are almost always ambushed on the way, and today was no exception.

A handful of tanks and armored troop carriers set off to recover an 8-inch cannon at the fire base. Half a mile from Langvei they passed a small band of tired and frightened Montagnard refugees, fleeing the battles that have engulfed their quiet mountain village. After another mile an enemy rocket-propelled grenade hissed

out of the underbrush and exploded near the last tank.

Almost before a second rocket erupted in a plume of gray smoke and the whine of shrapnel, the armored column opened up into the brush with all its weapons. The 40-mm. twin cannon on the tanks pounded steadily in wide arcs along the road while the .50-caliber heavy machine guns and lighter .30's kept up a steady chatter.

Only two men received light shrapnel wounds and the others considered themselves lucky. The column

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continued on and the roadside began to show the ravages of the heavy fighting last week.

Burnt-out shells of American troop carriers, some of them still smoking, were skirted. The convoy crunched over pieces of shattered engines, smoldering tires and the rest of the black, shapeless rubble of the battlefield.

There were heaps of abandoned shells, scattered tents and sleeping bags and littered bunkers in the empty outpost.

Two Men Badly Wounded

When the column had advanced about two miles from Base Style, the lead tank hit a mine, which tore the feet off two soldiers riding above the tracks. Their crewmates carried them to the next troop carrier and the column rushed by the crippled tank as enemy spotters on the surrounding hills directed in mortar fire.

At intervals along the road the crews opened up with their guns, cannon and grenade launchers, and the dry and already shattered trees and brush shook as the hills echoed with explosions.

The Americans passed more wrecked trucks and tanks. Then, at the top of a small rise within sight of the Laotian border they saw the first vehicle of a returning South Vietnamese tank column that had been trying to fight its way out of Laos since Saturday.

As enemy mortar shells and rockets exploded all around, the Americans opened up a cordon through which the Vietnamese moved. Their tanks were packed with airborne soldiers who occasionally waved and smiled but the Americans did not respond.

What's the Object Worth?

As the Vietnamese rolled past, the Americans brought out fresh ammunition. A medical-evacuation helicopter beat its way in to pick up the two men crippled by the mine explosion.

"I wonder how much that 8-incher is going to be worth when we get it out of there," a gunner remarked.

"It's already cost us those two guys' legs, and it wasn't worth that, he said after a moment, and he spat on the road. "This is the last time I'm going down this bad son of a bitch."

The column continued. When it got close to the fire base, which is just 200 hundred yards across the winding Tchepone River from Laos, there were bodies of outh Vietnamese soldiers all along the roadside.

The firebase was eerily quiet when the column reached it an hour and a half after setting out. The hastily abandoned bunkers were littered with broken boxes, boots, fragments of clothing and crumpled pinup posters.

An overturned trailer near what had been the command bunker had spilled out reams of triplicate Army forms and carbon paper and a broken typewriter.

An officer explained that the trailer had been packed by retreating troops in anticipation that it would be retrieved but that the South Vietnamese had rifled it.

The eight-inch cannon was there. The men hooked it to a large tank retriever, which wrenched it out of its fire-blackened emplacement.

Then, running smoothly on the lifeless, dust-choked road, the armored column made it back to Langvei without further loss.