

ARMOR QUILTS LAOS WITH HEAVY LOSS; 5,000 STILL THERE

100-Vehicle Saigon Force,
After Losing 90, Fights
Way Out Along Route 9

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OPERATION NEAR ITS END

U.S. Copter Units Starting to
Leave Khesanh—3 G.I.'s
Killed in Ground Attack

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Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Wednesday, March 24 — A South Vietnamese armored force of 100 tanks and heavy tracked vehicles fought its way out of Laos yesterday.

The entire South Vietnamese operation in Laos, begun on Feb. 8 with the announced aim of disrupting the enemy's supply-trail network, was nearing an end. Government spokesmen said the return of the armored force, which lost about 90 vehicles in heavy fighting along Route 9, reduced the number of troops still in Laos to fewer than 5,000.

Only two Marine brigades remained as "a rear guard for the retreat," a South Vietnamese military source said.

Dismantling at Khesanh

Meanwhile, dismantling operations appeared under way at Khesanh, the large allied base for the Laos operation, in the northwestern corner of South Vietnam. The installation, which in weeks past was swarming with helicopters and bustling with other activity, was reported to have an almost deserted air, yesterday.

Troops were still dug in deeply, but the headquarters area of the helicopter command post was reported being moved out.

[United States helicopter units began leaving for bases at Chulai and Phubai to the southeast, The Associated Press reported, and it was understood that Khesanh would be closed within three weeks.]

Enemy Infiltrators Unopposed

Three American were killed and 13 wounded at Khesanh early yesterday as the base came under a ground attack for the first time since it was opened at the end of January for the Laos operation.

The attack, which was reported preceded by an intense barrage of rockets and artillery fire, began as about 40 enemy demolition men walked unopposed from a deep ravine half a mile away up to the helicopter landing pads. South Vietnamese guards have been

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responsible for base security at Khesanh.

The United States command said the enemy destroyed two American helicopters, damaged three others and blew up 2,000 rounds of air-to-ground rockets. One of the enemy soldiers was captured and 14 were killed during three hours of fighting that began at 3 A.M., the command added.

The loss of another helicopter in the Laotian operation was announced by the Saigon command yesterday afternoon, bringing the six-week total of losses to 86.

As the South Vietnamese withdrawals have continued, enemy attacks have increased in the area near Khesanh, particularly along the last few miles of Route 9, the east-west road that cut across the Laotian panhandle and the northern part of South Vietnam.

Had to Ford River

The South Vietnamese armored column that came out yesterday was blocked from using part of the road in Laos and had to detour and ford the Tchepone River. It had been trying to leave Laos for four days.

As it rolled east inside South Vietnam, with the tops of the armored personnel carriers crowded with paratroops who could not squeeze inside, the column came under mortar and rocket attack.

One of the vehicles hit a mine and spun around as its track was blown off. The crew and the men riding on top abandoned it, leaving their packs and rifles behind. They

reportedly had to run to catch up with the rest.

The armored equipment did not show signs of intensive use while inside Laos, reports from the scene said. United States military sources have observed privately that the South Vietnamese made little effort to make Route 9 passable in Laos, even for tracked vehicles, and that the armored units were of little use in much of the rugged, mountainous terrain onto which nearly 20,000 other South Vietnamese troops had been lifted by helicopters, well north and south of Route 9.

Troops Regrouping

Most of those troops have now been withdrawn to bases at Dongha and Hue in South Vietnam, military sources said, where they are refitting and regrouping, possibly for further operations in the area around Khesanh and in the Ashau Valley less than 50 miles to the south.

Those remaining in Laos are said to be at two fire bases, Hong Ha, on a mountaintop four miles inside Laos, and Dong Da, eight miles in, but the troops are trying to withdraw from those bases too.

The United States command last night made public further details on the air strikes that American planes carried out against anti-aircraft positions in North Vietnam Sunday and Monday. It said the raids were on the same scale as those of last November, which involved 250 fighter-bombers.

The targets, the command said, were principally three surface-to-air missile sites. One was just east of the Mugia Pass on the Laotian border, about

50 miles north of the demilitarized zone along the border between the two Vietnams, another about 15 miles east of the pass and a third near the Laotian border 16 miles north of the demilitarized zone.

The three missile sites were destroyed, the command reported.

However, the enemy was said to have fired at least five missiles at the attackers, and one of the planes, an Air Force F-4, was downed near the coastal city of Donghoi. The command said the two-man crew was rescued on the ground there this morning.

It was the first American aircraft brought down by a missile since February, 1969, according to military spokesmen.

Gains for Laotians Reported

VIENTIANE, Laos, March 23 (UPI)—Laotian troops supported by artillery and air strikes went on the offensive today and recaptured a position held by North Vietnamese forces five miles northeast of the royal capital of Luang Prabang, military sources reported.

Commanders were said to have sent 500 reinforcements to the Luang Prabang area to cope with 3,000 North Vietnamese troops putting pressure on the city, and more fresh units were expected to be airlifted into the area tomorrow.