

44-DAY OPERATION

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500 Left Behind to Aid Defense of Khesanh, Bombarded Daily

By CRAIG R. WHITNEY
Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Thursday, March 25 — The South Vietnamese drive against enemy supply lines in Laos ended yesterday, 44 days after it began.

About 500 South Vietnamese marines were left behind to man a mountain position two miles from the border, but their mission was to help in the defense of the rear base at nearby Khesanh, in northwestern South Vietnam. The marines, on Co Roc Mountain in Laos just south of Route 9, were expected to be withdrawn within two days.

[Two thousand South Vietnamese troops abandoned the last South Vietnamese fire base in Laos and with the enemy in pursuit, withdrew across the hills into South Vietnam, The Associated Press reported. The base was two and a half miles from the border, near a ridge still held by the marines.]

G.I.'s at Khesanh Shelled

North Vietnamese troops also continued to put heavy pressure yesterday on allied positions inside South Vietnam.

American artillery units were digging in at Khesanh, which has been pounded daily by enemy gunners since early last week. Early yesterday 82 enemy rockets and artillery shells reportedly landed around the American helicopter airstrip there, and other shells fell sporadically through the day on South Vietnamese forward command posts nearby.

American helicopter gunships attacked three Soviet-made PT-76 tanks of the enemy yesterday morning only half a mile west of the border crossing point of Laobao. Spokesmen reported that one tank had been destroyed and two damaged.

20,000 Troops Took Part

At the height of the drive against the Ho Chi Minh Trail network, the South Vietnamese had more than 20,000 troops in Laos. They raided supply and ammunition caches and occupied parts of the trail complex as far west as the road junction of Tchepone, 25 miles inside Laos. The withdrawal eastward began two weeks ago under increasing enemy attack.

In the closing phase of the drive, the South Vietnamese were said to have been outnumbered about 2 to 1.

By the South Vietnamese command's own count, the operation was a costly one. It said the task force in Laos suffered 1,146 killed, 245 missing

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and 4,235 wounded in action.

But the command said 13,668 enemy troops were killed during the operation, many of them by American B-52 air strikes that Saigon's commanders called in as close as 300 yards to their own positions when the Communists intensified ground attacks in the last week.

Some American officers regard the South Vietnamese report of enemy losses as exaggerated.

The United States command reported that 89 American helicopters had been destroyed while supporting the South Vietnamese operation and that 51 Americans had been killed and 78 wounded, with 28 missing. Many other helicopters were damaged or shot down and recovered.

American helicopters took the South Vietnamese forces to their fire bases around the enemy supply trails in the Loatian mountains, provided much of the air cover for them, transported most of their ammunition, food and heavy weapons and took them out under heavy enemy attack. While the South Vietnamese troops on the ground encountered little enemy resistance in the opening phase of the operation, which began Feb. 8, the helicopters encountered unexpectedly heavy antiaircraft fire as early as the third day.

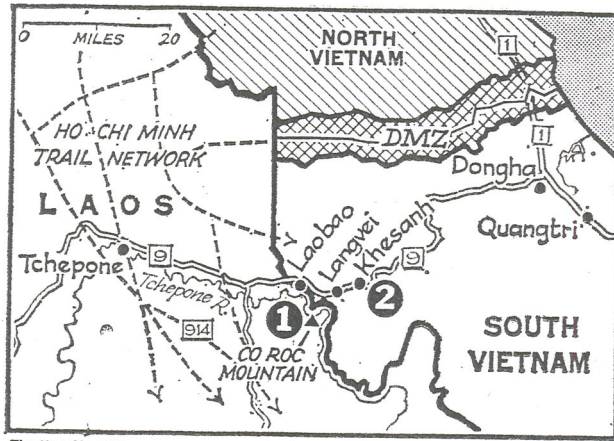
9,000 U.S. Troops Involved

In all, 9,000 American troops were committed as a back-up force in the northern part of South Vietnam. American troops also played a key role in the preparatory phase of the operation, which began in the last two days of January.

Americans reoccupied the Khesanh base, which United States Marines had abandoned after a lengthy enemy siege early in 1968. American troops also reopened the cratered Route 9 to the Loatian border. This east-west roadway was the axis of the South Vietnamese push westward.

Because of the intense enemy attacks, the South Vietnamese operation ended somewhat earlier than had been planned. The sweep had been expected to end shortly before the onset of the rainy season early in May.

"According to the plan," an official South Vietnamese spokesman said here yesterday, "there would be a phase in which the Vietnamese units would withdraw from the battlefield, and we thought it



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With sweep ended, 500 marines were left on mountain (1) inside Laos to help in defense of Khesanh (2).

better to withdraw now rather than to stay longer."

Most Objectives Held Attained

SAIGON, March 24 (AP) — Lieut. Col. Tran Van Am, chief spokesman for the South Vietnamese command, said today that Government forces had accomplished 80 to 90 per cent of their objectives in the Laos operation.

United States intelligence sources meanwhile, said the North Vietnamese were repairing parts of the Ho Chi Minh Trail cut by the South Vietnamese and were rebuilding at Tchepone.

Threat to Capital Eased

VIENTIANE, Laos, March 24 (AP) — Military sources said today that the enemy threat to Luang Prabang, the Laotian royal capital, had been eased by three battalions of Govern-

ment reinforcement. These troops reportedly pushed Communist forces back from the edge of the city.

The Defense Ministry said, however, that Government troops had suffered serious casualties a mile from the northern Laotian city's airport and warned that the newly recaptured positions could be lost in night fighting.

With the area reported quiet, the Pathet Lao said in a broadcast that they did not intend to capture King Savang Vatthana's capital as long as the Premier, Prince Souvanna Phouma, retained some semblance of neutrality. This was taken as a warning to rightists not to attempt a coup.

While fighting against the Souvanna Phouma Government, the Pathet Lao have continued to recognize Savang Vatthana as King.