

# How Laos Invasion Ruined Saigon Soldiers' Morale

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The morale of many soldiers in South Vietnam's finest military units, who fought the North Vietnamese in Laos, is shattered.

Men in the crack First Infantry Division, in the Marines and in their airborne battalions say that the Laos invasion was a nightmare for them, and for other soldiers.

They spoke through an interpreter of how the North

Vietnamese outnumbered them and advanced in wave after wave, running over the bodies of comrades and never stopping.

In low strained voices, the South Vietnamese spoke of what they termed the enemy's terrifying ability to survive American air attacks and B-52 bombings, which they themselves feared so much.

While none of these men claimed to speak for all the 20,000 South Vietnamese soldiers who took part in the Laotian campaign, they said

that the morale of their comrades is low.

Those interviewed were in the state of dejected fatigue that is common to men coming out of a long retreat under heavy enemy fire, and perhaps their views will be less gloomy after some rest.

For many of these South Vietnamese soldiers, the Laos campaign was their first fierce encounter with North Vietnamese ground forces: there has been no major fighting in South Vietnam to compare with the Laos operation in years.

It was a test, and now most South Vietnamese veterans frankly admit that their forces failed. They had no chance, these men said.

What dramatically demoralized many of the South Vietnamese troops is the large number of their own wounded who were left behind, begging for their friends to shoot them or to

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leave hand grenades so they could commit suicide before the North Vietnamese or the B-52 raids killed them.

Some soldiers who had been in the drive into Cambodia last year said they had never dreamed that the Laos operation would not be as simple. Because there was no significant fighting in Cambodia, these South Vietnamese felt that the enemy was no longer a threat. They learned differently in Laos

and they will not soon forget it.

They came out of Laos last week in American helicopters without their combat packs, their rations or their steel helmets — and sometimes without their weapons. Nothing mattered, they said, except getting out.

**MARINE**

One of them was a 22-year-old Marine who came back to South Vietnam on Wednesday after walking through the jungle for two nights and a day before the airlift.

His version of the fighting near a fire base called Delta on Hill 547, about eight miles inside Laos, told how the South Vietnamese troops ran for their lives, each man struggling for himself only.

"The last attack came at about 8 p.m.," Private Moc, the Marine said, in Vietnamese. "They shelled us first and then came the tanks moving up into our positions. The whole brigade ran down the hill like ants. We jumped on each other to get out of that place. No man had time to look for his commanding

officer. It was quick, quick, quick or we would die. Oh God, now I know for sure that I am really still alive."

Private Moc asked, as did other men, that his full name and unit be withheld.

**LIEUTENANT**

"When I was far from the hill, with about 20 other Marines, there was a first lieutenant with us," he continued. "We moved like ghosts, terrified of being ambushed by the North Vietnamese. We stopped many times when there was firing — not daring

to breathe. How terrible those minutes were.

"Only last Tuesday our group bumped into a North Vietnamese unit, and we ran again like ants." And the lieutenant, he whispered to us, "Disperse! Disperse! don't stick together or we will all be killed." After each firing, there were fewer and fewer of us. Nobody cared for anybody else at all."

What really frightened him, Moc said, was how the North Vietnamese kept coming and coming, running over

the bodies of their own men, and not stopping.

"They were everywhere and they were so daring," he said. "Their firepower was so enormous, and their shelling was so accurate, that what could we do except run for our lives?"

**SERGEANT**

Hearing the shouts of the North Vietnamese will long haunt one man, Sergeant Nguyen Minh. He fought with Battery A Second Marine Artillery Battalion.

The entire battery ran away, he said. Its position in

Laos was south of Highway 9, the east-west axis of the drive about seven miles inside the border. The battery arrived there March 5 and stayed for two weeks before it retreated.

"For days," he relates, "we had been made desperate by their constant shellings and assaults, by their strange attitude of ignoring death and always moving closer and closer to us. Never were the Marines in such trouble, and we were never so afraid."

As for the effect these ex-

periences will have on the soldiers, a 38-year-old sergeant major, has seen combat with the infantry many times in the last 11 years, is worried.

"I am afraid that we will have a lot of deserters," said the sergeant, who did not want to give his name. "When many of the men get back to the rear, and think back of what they have been through, and hear the other soldiers talk, then their fear will get worse. It can happen. I know this kind of thing all too well."