

A MAJOR BATTLE SEEN DEVELOPING NEAR LAOS BORDER

5,000 Enemy Soldiers Are
Reported in Area Around
Besieged Fire Base 6

RELIEF FORCES BLOCKED

Saigon Defenders Say Clash
Could Equal the Intensity
of Earlier Incursion

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TAN CANH, South Vietnam, April 11—The defenders of a South Vietnamese artillery position called Fire Base 6 in the mountains eight miles southwest of here, besieged since the beginning of this month, are now said to expect a battle equal in intensity to the fighting in Laos in February and March.

Fire Base 6 — a misnomer, since the artillery pieces that provided the fire were destroyed when North Vietnamese regulars overran the post on March 31 and were not replaced when the South Vietnamese fled back in — is now protected by a South Vietnamese force of 16 battalions, or about 5,000 to 6,000 men.

But it is also surrounded by parts of four North Vietnamese regiments—about 5,000 men—who have kept the main part of Saigon's ground forces from getting to the hilltop base, which depends on America and South Vietnamese helicopters for food, water, and ammunition.

U. S. Copter Shot Down

The North Vietnamese have been firing rockets and mortars at the base every day and sending up a heavy barrage of anti-aircraft fire at helicopters whenever they come in.

Late this afternoon an American helicopter was shot down while dropping supplies. Eleven other aircraft had to turn back even though advance air strikes by helicopter gunships and fighter-bombers and artillery bombardments had been made against suspected enemy positions.

The battle for Fire Base 6, according to South Vietnamese military commanders at Pleiku, could be the start of a spring-

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long enemy campaign. It could be directed against the Laotian border camp of Benhet, six miles to the northwest, and the provincial capital of Kontum to the southeast.

There have been no major American ground combat units in the area since the Fourth Infantry Division was withdrawn last year. But there is still a large United States helicopter base at Pleiku and all the South Vietnamese units have American advisers serving with them in the field.

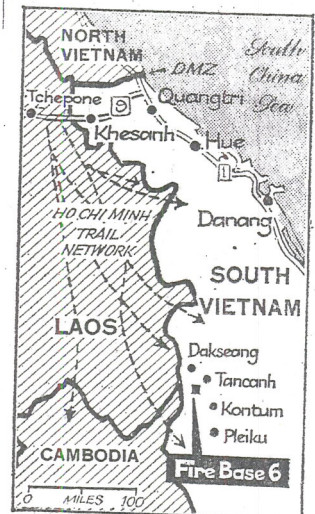
An enemy offensive in this area of the Central Highlands—a sparsely settled area of Montagnard tribesmen living in Government resettlement hamlets along Route 14—is an annual affair, but this year it has been coordinated with a campaign against the Phunhon District about 80 miles to the South, below Pleiku.

Reinforcements Brought In

The South Vietnamese, engaged in sporadic contact with the enemy here since Feb. 14, have brought heavy reinforcements into the area since April 1, and have established the forward headquarters of the 22d Division here at Tancah.

And three battalions—more than 1,000 men—of the elite Airborne Division, who were fighting to the north in Laos less than a month ago, have been rushed to Pleiku in the last two days to bolster the forces of infantry.

The North Vietnamese started coming out of a large base area where the borders of South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos meet, named 609 by allied intelligence officers, early in February. The recent South Vietnamese operations against a similar North Vietnamese base area in Laos called 604 farther north along the Ho Chi Minh Trail network have had little effect so far on base area 609 and the enemy here is, as one American adviser said yes-



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terday, "damned well supplied and dug in." For a week now, 122-mm. rockets from enemy positions in the hills west of Tancah are whistling in and crashing on the base.

South Vietnamese officers and American advisers here were not available for interviews and the tactical operations center was in a state of frantic activity. There was speculation that the Airborne Division and the infantry, under the command of Maj. Gen. Le Ngoc Trien, might be planning new and extensive operations against Base Area 609, which extends beyond the South Vietnamese border into Cambodia and Laos.

American helicopter gunships from the Seventh Squadron, 17th Cavalry Division (Airmobile) and from the 52d Combat Aviation Battalion at Pleiku raked the area west of Fire Base 6 as far as the Laotian border and two B-52 strikes were called in just to the northwest of the fire base.

Warrant Officer Larry Dietz of Gothenburg, Neb., a helicopter pilot, said, there are a lot of North Vietnamese out there and they have a lot of anti-aircraft weapons."

The 42d South Vietnamese

Infantry Regiment of the 22d Division made a sweep into North Vietnamese strongholds south of the fire base in February but, according to an American intelligence officer advising the Military Region II commander in Pleiku, Maj. Gen. Ngo Dzu, "They were getting smeared."

According to this officer, a battalion and a half—more than 500 men—of the 42d Regiment were overrun after they had penetrated about a mile into the base area early in March. "They just split and ran," he said. They just abandoned two American advisers who were with them."

The highlands areas of Kontum and Pleiku provinces constitute part of what the North Vietnamese call their B-3 front. Its battlegrounds—Benhet Dakseang and Dakto—have cost the lives of many North Vietnamese, Vietcong, French, American and South Vietnamese soldiers who have fought here over the past quarter of a century.