

# NEW SAIGON DRIVE REPORTED OPENED IN ASHAU VALLEY

Large Force Is Said to Be  
Heading West Toward  
Major Enemy Area

## SITE OF EARLIER BATTLE

South Vietnamese Also Fly  
Fresh Troops to Bolster  
Fire Base Near Laos

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 16 — A large force of South Vietnamese infantrymen who came out of Laos last month has reportedly begun moving west again into the Ashau Valley, a major enemy base area near the Laotian border southwest of Hue.

The operation was described by military officers here as a delayed sequel to the earlier and larger American-supported incursion against parts of the Ho Chi Minh supply trail network, about 60 miles to the north.

The troops are said to be from the South Vietnamese First Infantry Division, which is based in Hue. President Nguyen Van Thieu is going to Hue tomorrow to decorate veterans of the fighting in Laos and is expected to make a speech announcing the new operation, which is said to involve several thousand men.

The South Vietnamese also flew 400 fresh troops to Fire Base 6 to strengthen their forces battling North Vietnamese troops that have besieged the strategic position near the Cambodian and Laotian borders in the Central Highlands.

The Ashau Valley, which is bisected by Route 548 from north to south, has been the scene of bitter fighting in the past but United States ground troops have not been there in force for two years.

### Earlier Battle Recalled

In May of 1969, the 101st Airborne Division fought North Vietnamese forces at Apbia Mountain on the northern end of the valley in a clash that became known as the Battle of Hamburger Hill. Both sides suffered heavy losses. The battle provoked intense political reaction in the United States.

While the Vietnamese military command here has not yet announced the current operation, the official spokesman obliquely acknowledged it this afternoon when he said, "We have no comment on operations that have not made contact with the enemy yet."

There has also been no report of fighting between enemy forces and several hundred American soldiers of the 101st

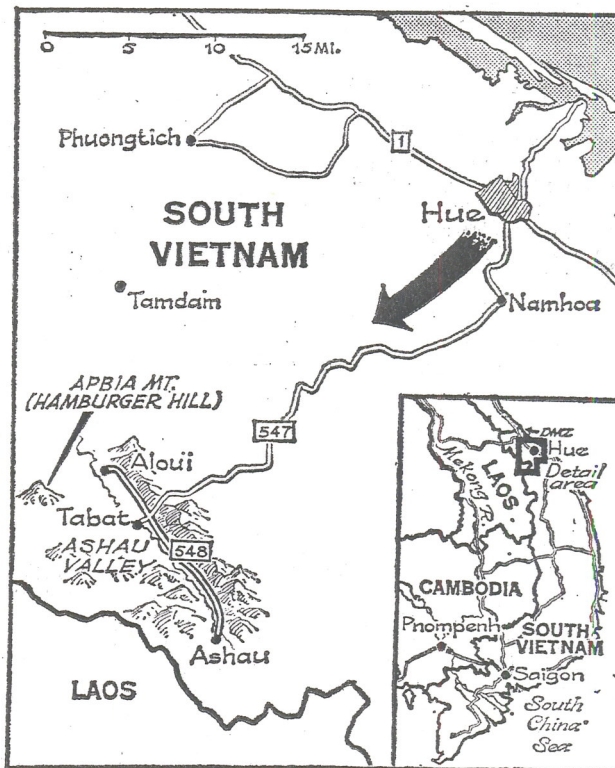
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Airborne, which flew in on helicopters and reopened an old artillery post, Fire Base Fury, at the southern end of the Ashau Valley, on Wednesday.

The United States command spokesman said that the Americans who reopened the base, presumably for the Vietnamese, left it today. But he said he had "no report" of American helicopter activity in support of the Vietnamese operation.

At the beginning of the 23,000-man Vietnamese operations farther north against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in February, American military sources said



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Arrow indicates drive by South Vietnamese infantrymen from the area of Hue westward toward the Ashau Valley.

that the plan called for the Vietnamese to end their incursion by sweeping southeast from Tchepone, down part of the trail system that leads into the northern end of the Ashau.

Instead, an intense North Vietnamese counterattack forced Saigon's troops to beat a hasty and disorderly retreat directly back to South Vietnam.

Soon after, on March 31, President Thieu visited a rear base at Dongha to decorate troops that had been in the fighting and announced that a South Vietnamese unit had been airlifted back into Laos that day for a small raid. There was another raid on April 6.

Both seemed to be designed for their political effect and to combat the appearance of a defeat in Laos.

It is possible, some sources here say, that the Ashau operation could spread across the Laotian border.

Air Force officers here said that there has been no upsurge in bombing in the Ashau Valley, and that no B-52 raids had been conducted there in recent days. Such bombardments often precede extensive allied ground operations.

#### Key Enemy Stronghold

A narrow ribbon of riverbed about 30 miles long, the Ashau Valley has been one of the enemy's most important strongholds since March, 1966, when a United States Special Forces team was forced to abandon the long allied post in the region.

Situated about 350 miles north of Saigon, the valley is ideally suited to its use as a

supply dump and staging round for attacks on the cities of Hue and Danang. One American general described it as "a great big ditch among a whole bunch of hills" that was "one of the most important pieces of real estate the enemy has occupied in the I Corps area."

In January of 1968, when allied intelligence estimated that as many as 6,000 enemy soldiers were based in the valley, the force was used for the Tet offensive against Hue, 30 miles to the east.

Between April, 1968, and May, 1969, the allied command staged four attacks in the valley in an attempt to drive the enemy from it. North Vietnamese troops returned to the area each time.

During the first three sweeps, the allies found tons of enemy equipment and supplies hidden in the thickly forested area, but relatively few soldiers.