

Last Laotian Stronghold on Plateau Is Said to Fall

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VIENTIANE, Laos, May 19 (Agence France - Presse)—The town of Houei Kong, the last stronghold of Government forces on the Boloven Plateau, reportedly fell to enemy forces today.

This development marked the third major defeat for Laotian troops in the country's southern panhandle. The plateau town of Paksong fell to the enemy on Sunday, and Dong Hene, about 115 miles to the northwest, fell yesterday.

According to first reports, the battle for Houei Kong was short. The town has an airstrip and a civilian population regroupment center run by Americans.

Also based there was a 1,500-man garrison, which was said to be under the control of the United States Central Intelligence Agency.

Meanwhile, the Government reported the reoccupation of a deserted enemy position in northern Laos 12 miles north of the royal capital at Luang Prabang. The position, at Paksong, had been held by enemy forces since March 20.

Ashau Battle Reported

SAIGON, South Vietnam, May 19 (UPI)—Thousands of South

Vietnamese troops moving in the Ashau Valley reportedly fought a six-hour battle today with large enemy forces entrenched there.

Reports from a base near the valley, which has long been a major North Vietnamese infiltration corridor from nearby Laos into the northern quarter of South Vietnam, said an American helicopter was shot

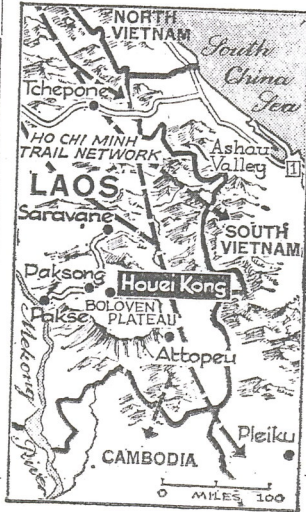
down and two other helicopters and a reconnaissance plane were damaged by intensive ground fire.

Military sources at the base were quoted as having said that a United States fighter-bomber destroyed an emplacement of heavy machine guns.

Initial battle reports were said to list 14 enemy soldiers killed and four South Vietnamese marines wounded.

Lieut. Col. Nguyen Quang, commander of the Third Regiment of the South Vietnamese First Infantry Division, said at a command post six miles southeast of the valley: "We expect a lot more fighting in the next few days. Our men are fighting well and our morale is good."

The Government troops reportedly were flown to positions in the mountains surrounding the valley on Sunday to begin their long-delayed sweep to clear the enemy stronghold. Clearing the valley is the primary objective of the American-backed South Vietnamese operation, known as Lamson 720, which began in mid-April.



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