

U.S. 'Cambodian Widows' Lose Out on Tax Break



WASHINGTON — The widows and children of 253 American servicemen killed in Cambodia will lose the major tax breaks they would have received if their loved ones had died on the other side of the Vietnam border. The White House, which confidently said it had examined every aspect of the Cambodian problem, forgot to make Cambodia a combat zone. Result: The estates of servicemen who were killed in Cambodia or who died of wounds received there cannot claim a tax break.

Special tax benefits have been granted to GIs, airmen and sailors in the combat zone, which President Johnson defined in 1965 as "Vietnam and adjacent waters." Enlisted men pay no taxes at all on their salaries, and officers are exempted up to the first \$500 a month.

For the heirs of those killed in Vietnam, all income taxes on service pay are waived. Most back taxes on income of any kind are written off the books. Under certain conditions, even stock dividends, rentals, interest and other income are tax free.

Outside Combat Zone

But for tax purposes, Cambodia is outside the combat zone. The GIs who have crossed into Cambodia will continue to collect combat pay, because they are stationed in Vietnam. But they may be required to pay taxes on the salaries they have accrued while cleaning out the Communist sanctuaries. For those who have fallen in action, their estates are ineligible for tax exemptions.

At Internal Revenue headquarters, a spokesman confirmed that for tax purposes "Cambodia is not now within the area designated as a combat zone" and said the income taxes against the dead GIs would be assessed.

Loss of Tax Breaks

Footnote: The same loss of tax breaks applies to the 400 servicemen, mostly pilots, who have been killed or are missing in Laos.

Internal Revenue was unable to determine how many of their families had been hit with taxes that would not have been required if the men had died in Vietnam.

Of course, President Nixon could still extend the tax benefits belatedly to veterans of the Cambodian and Laos operations by issuing a special executive order.

LAOS REVELATIONS COMING

The State Department, after trying to keep Ambassador to Laos G. McMurtrie Godley under wraps, has reluctantly agreed to let him testify next month about the strange, secret war in Laos.

Sen. Stuart Symington, D-Mo., has sought since February to get Godley's testimony about the Central Intelligence Agency's private army of 14,000 Meo tribesmen who constitute the only effective non-Communist ground force in Laos.

Symington also wants to know more about U.S. aid to Prince Souvanna Phouma's

Wizard-of-Oz army and Model-T air force. The senator would like to ask Godley, too, about the U.S. bombing of Lao villages.

My associate Les Whitten made tapes in Laos of refugees telling in their own simple, inarticulate language how U.S. jets bombed and napalmed their villages.

'Too Busy' At First

At first, the State Department told Symington that Godley was "too busy" to testify. But Symington is as stubborn as the mules in his home state of Missouri. He persisted until the State Department unhappily yielded.

Godley is expected to testify before Symington's Security Agreement subcommittee in early July.

Footnote: Symington held his first hearings on Laos last fall but had to fight for six months to get the Nixon Administration to release a censored version of the testimony.

The hearings disclosed for the first time that the U.S. has been subsidizing Prince Souvanna Phouma's side in the Laotian fighting.