

Americans in South Vietnam Attribute the Setback

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 29—United States Army advisers and other observers in the field are ascribing the South Vietnamese Army's performance in Laos to difficulties the allies had failed to anticipate and to tactical challenges it had not been trained to meet.

American officers in the field point out that despite the South Vietnamese commanders' insistence that their tactics were mobile, their supply, troop-lift and artillery-support system required them to establish bases that fixed them—however temporary—in static positions that the enemy soon began to harass and attack.

Along with the burden of manpower required to protect the bases, the Communists added the important psychological burden of forcing the South Vietnamese onto the defensive almost from the start in terrain they had supposedly gone to conquer.

Moreover, according to American tacticians, little in the South Vietnamese Army's experience and training had prepared it for fighting the pitched battles against equal and often superior forces.

In South Vietnam the allied tactic has been to use ground troops to flush out the small enemy bands that operate there and then pull the foot soldiers back so that withering air and artillery fire could be poured in.

In the Laotian panhandle the North Vietnamese outnumbered the Government troops by better than 3 to 2, and the effectiveness of air support was greatly reduced by the mountainous terrain, frequent spells of poor visibility and the difficulty the American pilots had in communicating with the South Vietnamese.

The American advisers also report that the Communists pressed their numerical advantage fiercely. Instead of melting away on contact, they engaged the South Vietnamese in close combat and, as one American officer put it, hugged their positions closely enough to avoid allied bombing and shelling.

The accidental United States bombings of South Vietnamese positions in Laos—there were at least five—were seen as the inevitable result of the fighter-bomber pilots' attempts to drive off the tenacious North Vietnamese.

Both American and South Vietnamese officers have also conceded that poor planning and a lack of intelligence coordination contributed to the South Vietnamese problems. They confessed early that they had not allowed for the enemy's use of tanks, against which antipersonnel rockets fired from rockets were ineffective.

The lack of sound intelligence about the enemy's movements and assets was compounded, the American advisers say, by the traditional rivalries between the South Vietnamese infantry, ranger, marine and airborne units, which often failed to share what they knew.

A United States helicopter commander at Khesanh, the rear base, said, "The airborne at Hill 31 never told anyone back here that the enemy was

using tanks until one of our forward air controllers flew over and saw them. By the time the jets came on station, it was too late—the tanks were already on top of the airborne's bunkers."

The magnitude of the enemy's antiaircraft firepower also caught the allies by surprise. While United States commanders tried at first to put a good face on the situation, they soon began to hint that the 600 helicopters assigned to the operation could not keep up with the heavy workload and the devastating, interlock-

ing enemy system of antiaircraft artillery, heavy machine guns and small arms.

Indeed, rumors circulated among American helicopter pilots that the operation had been curtailed in part because the American command decided that the loss of aircraft and the strain on those still flying had become too great.

The helicopter problem was intensified, allied officers say, by the failure of three armored battalions and three airborne battalions to fulfill their mission of keeping Route 9 open from the border to the opera-

tional area. If they had done so, the officers believe, surface transportation might have taken some of the strain off the helicopters and, more important, permitted resupply of the task force during bad weather.

As it is, commanders of the South Vietnamese armored forces refused to say just what their men and machines did in Laos, except for a small tank force sent into action too late to be of use on Hill 31, one of the hotly contested strongpoints.

Another problem faced by

the South Vietnamese was the uncertainty of the mission. Neither the South Vietnamese nor the American command ever declared what the objectives, were, except in the general terms—disrupting traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and destroying enemy supplies. At the outset the American advisers stressed that the program was tentative with each phase depending on the success of the preceding one.

Whatever Saigon officials' ultimate hopes for the operation, it appears clear that they had more in mind than a drive

into Laos, a brief occupation of the eastern edge of the trail and then withdrawal.

American officers and observers in the field also believe that the South Vietnamese soldiers were not eager for the fight and that their leadership, which has long been cited as the principal obstacles to successful Vietnamization, was uninspired and often incompetent.

American helicopter pilots reported frequent instances of South Vietnamese officers abandoning or failing to control their men. One reason the troops often broke ranks under

fire and ran for the helicopters, the pilots said, was that their officers had already left. But it often happened, some pilots pointed out, that the officers were among the first to die in battle.

Most public knowledge of the operation concerns only a few thousand of the over 20,000 troops involved. A Government military spokesman here said recently that 15 or 16 of the battalions did not engage the enemy in significant numbers.

As for the four to six battalions that did get into heavy

fighting, the spokesman added, all of them retreated under hot pursuit.

President Nixon said last Monday of the Government troops in Laos: "Some of their units have not done so well, but 18 out of the 22 battalions, as General Abrams has pointed out, are doing extremely well and he says will come out with greater confidence and greater morale than before."

Presumably the battalions praised by the President were those that, according to the Government spokesman here, did no heavy fighting.