

U.S. Faked Reports on Secret Ground Missions



Cambodia and Laos were the targets

Washington

More details on clandestine U.S. military activities in Southeast Asia emerged yesterday as the Pentagon disclosed that 81 American servicemen had been killed in Laos and Cambodia since 1965 on secret intelligence-gathering missions.

However, because of the sensitive nature of these ground missions into countries with which the U.S. was not at war, the deaths

were reported to the families of the men, to Congress, and in official announcements as having taken place inside South Vietnam.

Defense Department spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim, in revealing for the first time the location of these combat fatalities, said that the false reports were discovered Monday in a continuing review of Vietnam war statistics that had been provided to Congress in May and June.

These reports to Congress, which included inaccurate information about U.S. air operations and concealed a massive secret air war in Cambodia during 1969-70, have touched off concern among many lawmakers about the validity of official information being provided to Congress.

As in the case of the false bombing information, Friedheim indicated that the secrecy of the ground intelligence operations dictated

that precautions be taken to prevent public disclosure.

Pentagon officials, as in the case of the publicly unreported Cambodian bombing, indicated the missions by small teams of Americans — mostly Army Green Berets, with some marines and Air Force personnel — and South Vietnamese were authorized by top civilian administration officials.

Friedheim said that Congress was told yesterday that the Vietnam casualty figures it had also were in error.

He also indicated that at least some "selected" lawmakers on Capitol Hill knew about these "covert military reconnaissance activities," but he did not identify them.

The missions in Laos began in the fall of 1965, Friedheim said, and officials said later they ended early in February, 1971, and cost 5 American lives.

The major South Vietnamese invasion of Laos began Jan. 30, 1971. The missions in Cambodia reportedly ran from 1967 to the end of June, 1970, and took an additional 26 lives.

MISSIONS

Friedheim described the missions as primarily aimed at watching Communist troops and supply movement along the Ho Chi Minh trail, gathering information on North Vietnamese base areas inside Cambodia and assessing the results of then-secret U.S. bombing raids into Laos and Cambodia.

Legislation passed in December, 1969, prohibits U.S. ground combat troops from entering Laos, and the Cooper-Church amendment, approved Jan. 5, 1971, forbids such troops from being committed in Cambodia.

The Pentagon officially has always stated that there were no U.S. "ground combat troops" in these countries when they were not supposed to be, but has consistently said "no comment" when asked over the years whether there were any other types of ground units such as intelligence teams.

The existence of such teams has been an open secret. However, President Nixon on March 6, 1970, sought to quell what he viewed as "intense public speculation to the effect that U.S. involvement in Laos has substantially increased in violation of the Geneva accords; that American ground forces are engaged in combat in Laos; and that our air activity has had the effect of escalating the conflict.

SUBJECT

"Because these reports are grossly inaccurate," the President said, "I have concluded that our national interest will be served by putting the subject into perspective through a precise description of our current activities in Laos."

Mr. Nixon went on to make several points, including, "there are no American ground troops in Laos . . . and no American stationed in Laos has ever been killed in a ground combat operation."

The Pentagon, which does not consider these teams as combat units but rather as observation units, did not say what the total number of such U.S. personnel in Laos and Cambodia was.