

Report From Neak Luong

Bombing Mistake Victims

By Sydney H. Schanberg
New York Times

Neak Luong, Cambodia

The destruction in this town from the accidental bombing on Monday is extensive.

Big chunks of the center of town have been demolished, including some two-story concrete buildings reinforced with steel. Large clusters of wood and thatch huts where soldiers lived with their families have been erased, so that the compounds where they once stood look like empty fields strewn with rubbish.

On Monday evening the U.S. embassy described the damage as "minimal."

"I saw one stick of bombs through the town, but it was no great disaster," said Colonel David H. E. Opfer, the air attache at the embassy, who briefed the press then. "The destruction was minimal."

VICTIMS

The nearly 400 casualties from Monday's bombing, the Americans say was carried out by a lone B-52 with a 20-ton-plus load, make it the worst accidental bombing of the Indochina war. Official figures show 137 killed and

268 wounded, most of them soldiers and their families.

The bombs went right down the middle of the town from north to south as it lay sleeping shortly after 4:30 a.m. more than 30 craters can be seen on a line nearly a mile long, and people reported others in jungle areas outside the town that this correspondent could not reach.

Some witnesses said the bombs exploded above the ground, indicating that they might have been anti-personnel devices.

A large part of the market area in the center of town is smashed flat and many of the two-story concrete shop and apartment buildings on either side are shattered and uninhabitable, with walls and roofs reduced to rubble. Other buildings still usable have large holes.

HOSPITAL

A third of the hospital is demolished, with the rest badly damaged and unusable until major repairs are made. Several patients were wounded and some are believed killed. A bomb fell on the northeast corner of the hospital, blowing some walls down and scattering concrete, beds and cabinets.

Some townspeople say they believe a few bodies remain in the wreckage. The smell of decaying flesh is still prevalent in parts of town.

The atmosphere in Neak Luong, on the east bank of the Mekong river 38 miles southeast of Phnom Penh, is silent and sad — and bewildered at being bombed by an ally. Everyone has lost either relatives or friends; in some cases entire large families were wiped out.

SFChronicle AUG 9 1973 U.S. Embassy Tried To Stop Reporter

Phnom Penh

United States Embassy officials intervened Tuesday to prevent a correspondent of the New York Times from flying to Neak Luong, the scene of an accidental American bombing, on a Cambodian air force helicopter.

The correspondent, Sydney H. Schanberg, obtained transportation by boat to the town, 38 miles southeast of Phnom Penh.

When Colonel H.E. Opfer learned that the correspondent had been cleared for the trip by Cambodian officers at Phnom Penh's military airport, he telephoned someone in the Cambodian high command and got the

correspondent removed from the flight.

After the correspondent spent a day and night in Neak Luong, the local authorities put him under confinement yesterday on the ground that he had entered illegally and had taken pictures of "military secrets." He was released late in the morning.

The U.S. Embassy and the Cambodian government arranged a hasty helicopter trip to the town yesterday for five foreign journalists on a pool arrangement under which they briefed the rest of the press. They were allowed to stay less than 30 minutes and could speak with few people.

New York Times

of wood, half of a straw mat, a scrap of metal. Much of the damage is not apparent simply because the things destroyed no longer show on the face of the earth. Because the bombs made only one swath through the town, there are streets and vantage points from which little damage is visible.

But these vantage points are fleeting.

Opfer referred to the soldiers' shacks as "hootches," suggesting that not much of value had been destroyed. The attache said further that the bombing "took place in what is essentially a small village." Actually, by Cambodian standards it is a big town; about 10,000 people live in and around Neak Luong, half of them in the town proper.

Asked the reaction of the people when he walked through Neak Luong, Opfer said, "They were sad, but they understand that this is war and that in war these things happen."

QUESTIONS

"I do not understand why it happened," said Chea Salan, a 21-year-old soldier who lost relatives and several army buddies. "Before, every time we saw the planes coming we were happy because we knew the planes came to help us. Now I have lost heart."

Another soldier asked, "Did the government capture the pilot yet?"

"Why did this happen to us?" said Keo Sakhoun Tha, also a soldier. "I want world opinion to judge what happened here." He added, almost as an afterthought, "I am frightened at night now when the planes come."

Local people, in their confusion over the reason for the bombing, continually stressed that there had been no enemy activity in the vicinity recently.

my family is dead! Take my picture, Take my picture Let the Americans see me!"

His name is Keo Chan and his wife and ten of his 11 children were killed. All he has left is the youngest—an eight-month old son. The 43-year-old soldier escaped death because he was on sentry duty a few miles away when the bombs fell.

BRIEFING

At his press briefing, Colonel Opfer, who visited Neak Luong within a few hours of the bombing, said that there was "a little bit of damage to the northeast corner of the hospital" and talked about some "structural cracks" in a wall.

The bombs also hit a compound for marines, which had a large field full of flimsy shacks in the back. The

shacks were leveled and the main building, a two-story concrete structure, was turned into a stark shell, with only some walls left standing, and those badly cracked and tilted. The shacks, of thatch and wood and corrugated metal, where the marines lived with their families, is a rubbish heap crisscrossed with fallen coconut trees.

Ammunition also exploded in this compound and many people died. A woman's scalp sways on a clump of tall grass. A bloody pillow here, a shred of a sarong caught on barbed wire there. A large bloodstain on the brown earth. A pair of infant's rubber sandals among some unexploded artillery shells.

Grim-faced people pick through the debris for any salvageable shard — pieces

Tuesday afternoon a soldier could be seen sobbing uncontrollably on the riverbank. "All my family is dead!" he cried, beating his hand on the wooden bench where he had collapsed. "All