

Officer Began WXPost Laos Forays, Marines Say

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A series of 1969 forays into Laos by U.S. ground combat troops were actually begun by a Marine regimental commander acting on his own, senior participants said yesterday.

Veterans of the attack said Col. Robert H. Barrow ordered the initial cross-border raid himself and then requested and received authorization for other raids in connection with Operation Dewey Canyon along the Vietnam-Laos border in early 1969.

The cross-border forays into officially neutral but war-divided Laos were publicly acknowledged for the first time last Thursday by Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff when he testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee investigating falsification of B-52 strikes into Cambodia.

Moorer said that Ninth Marine Regiment elements had been authorized by "higher authority" to go more than a mile inside southeastern Laos to protect the flanks of the Dewey Canyon operation.

"This was the first and only time when U.S. ground combat forces went into Laos," the admiral said.

He was presumably excluding from his definition of "ground combat forces" the small commando-type units (10 to 100 men) of U.S. Special Forces and native mercenaries engaged in cross-border reconnaissance and raids in Laos and Cambodia since the mid-60s.

Operation Dewey Canyon began with Marine helicopter-borne assaults Jan. 22 into the rugged Dakrong Valley area, site of Hanoi's Base Area 611 in the remote western

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mountains of Quangtri Province. Base Area 611 was supplied by Route 922, which came in from Laos and paralleled the Laos-South Vietnam border, where that boundary bulged into South Vietnam.

Base Area 611 was seen by the Marines as a conduit for supplies into the Ashau Valley, itself a funnel for an expected North Vietnamese attack eastward against the old imperial capital of Hue on the coast.

The Marines' target was not the neighboring Ho Chi Minh trail complex in Laos but the reported supply buildup in Base Area 611, in South Vietnam, a more realistic objective for Barrow's 3,500-man force.

After initial successes, senior veterans recalled yesterday, the Ninth Marines ran into bad helicopter weather, then unusually heavy 122-mm. artillery fire and stiff North Vietnamese Army reaction. The foe's artillery fire was coming from both sides of the border. Moreover, enemy ammunition convoys were running nightly along Route 922, just across the border, despite Marine bombardment.

On Feb. 21, Barrow ordered the Second Battalion, Ninth Marines, then on high ground in South Vietnam a few hundred yards from the road, to go in with half a company and ambush the North Vietnamese convoys.

Led by a Capt. Winecoff, a 150-man Marine company carried out the order, achieved "total surprise" at 2:30 a.m. Feb. 22, inflicted heavy losses and lost no Marines.

Later in the spring, the Second Battalion newspaper "The Helmet" published Winecoff's full account of the "Laos ambush," which many battalion members sent home to their families.

However, neither the Feb. 22 ambush nor subsequent forays into Laos were identified in official communiques as being in Laos, although the overall operation itself was officially

discussed, if not heavily covered by U.S. newsmen.

Indeed, administration statements were consistent: no U.S. "ground combat troops" were in "neutral" Laos, or would go there. When 20,000 South Vietnamese troops made an effort to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail in early 1971—in a variant of the major effort long vainly urged on President Johnson by the U.S. military—U.S. ground troops stayed on the South Vietnamese side of the border.

In February, 1969, according to Marine veterans Col. Barrow did not ask permission from his immediate superiors for the Laos ambush—feeling it would be refused. But he did inform the next highest commander, Brig. Gen. Frank Garrettson, of the parent organization, "Task Force Hotel," after the ambush was over.

The reaction from Garrettson's headquarters, Marine sources recall, was sharp: "You must be out of your mind. Get those people out of Laos."

However, several days later, as the North Vietnamese buildup on his flank continued, Barrow asked permission to re-enter Laos on a "case-by-case" basis as much as 2,000 meters (1.5 miles) as the tactical situation developed, primarily to shield his regiment's exposed western flank and seize more supply caches. Without such permission, Barrow wrote, there was no point in keeping Marines out on Dewey Canyon.

Although Marine veterans said they did not know how far up the long chain of command the request was considered, Pentagon sources surmised yesterday that the request went all the way to the White House. In any event, Barrow got a go-ahead in two days.

Thereafter, Barrow sent units of the 900-man Battalion in and out of Laos to search out caches along Route 922 and occasionally to engage enemy troops. But the two

other battalions of the 3,000-man regiment ran into far heavier fighting—inside South Vietnam—as they advanced south.

Seldom, if ever, did the Second Battalion get more than a mile into Laos, these sources said, in a mountainous, jungle area, deserted except for Hanoi's well-knit network of caches and roads.

With the end of the operation on March 19, 1969, the Ninth Marines went back to base, feeling it had triumphed over bad helicopter weather, occasionally intense enemy re-

sistance and mountainous terrain.

Marine historians cite "Dewey Canyon" Marine losses—on both sides of the border—as 121 killed, 803 wounded, and North Vietnamese losses as 1,617 dead and four prisoners, plus 1,461 weapons.

Other Third Marine Division operations in western Quangtri Province close to the Laotian border ensued—"Purple Martin," "Maine Crag"—in 1969, but Marine sources said none involved any deliberate forays into Laos, such as those ordered in "Dewey Canyon."