

LAOTIANS DRIVEN FROM VITAL BASE

Lose Post Used for Actions Against Foe's Supply Trail

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The Laotian military command announced today the loss of a base that is vital for harassment and surveillance of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network in the southern panhandle.

Laotian troops were driven last night from a post known as Position 22 and from three smaller posts on the eastern edge of the Boloven Plateau after two days of bombardment by rockets, mortars and recoilless rifles and ground attacks.

The plateau is 80 miles south of the Tchepone area, where South Vietnamese troops are operating.

[Reports from Saigon said heavy fog was hampering United States helicopter support of the South Vietnamese attack on the enemy supply-trail complex and also was cutting down on ground fighting.]

Military sources reported that the defenders of the Boloven Plateau positions — three battalions of so-called strategic guerrilla units — had retreated in relatively good order, taking about 50 wounded with them.

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No reports were available on the number of Laotian troops killed because enemy fire destroyed the base communication center before the withdrawal.

Strategic guerrilla units — which normally have about 300 men to a battalion — are part of the irregular army sponsored by the United States. In addition, the United States underwrites the budget of the regular military force, the Royal Laotian Army.

The fall of Position 22 leaves the Government without a base on the eastern edge of the strategic plateau. From there, surveillance and raids could be carried out by the guerrilla units against Route 16, the principal western branch of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The loss of the base presumably reduces the amount of intelligence on trail traffic that has guided the United States Air Force in its missions against the trail.

Control of Plateau Threatened

Position 22 had been the strongest Laotian base in the area, and its loss is a threat to the Government's hold over the plateau, which is the dominant terrain feature in the southern panhandle.

The base had been under heavy pressure since last December, but a strong ground attack then was beaten off.

American and Laotian planes were reported in action during the last battle.

The deteriorating Government position in the south may be a result of a North Vietnamese reaction to South Vietnam's operation in the Tchepone region. Meanwhile, Government fortunes in northern Laos appeared to be more

stable.

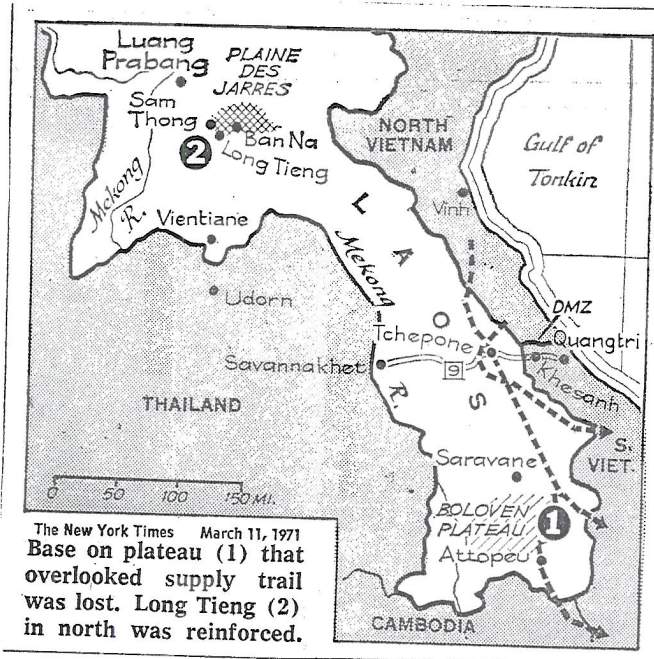
Despite heavy enemy pressure in the area of Long Tieng, the principal base of the irregular army of mountain tribesmen commanded by Maj. Gen. Vang Pao, optimism is growing that the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces can be held off there until the monsoon rains starting in May or June halt enemy offensive activities.

Thai Troops in Action

At least four battalions of Thai troops, in addition to three battalions from the northern panhandle, have augmented General Vang Pao's battle-weary forces of Meo and Lao Theung (Mountain Lao) tribesmen.

The Thai troops, whose presence in Laos is officially denied, are occupying strong defensive positions around Long Tieng, notably at Ban Na and Sam Thong to the northeast.

The Thai troops are reliably reported to be under the operational command of General Vang Pao but are led by their own officers, reportedly including two generals.



participation in the war in Laos as it does in South Vietnam. Thai artillery units have been reported active in northern Laos for some time. The infantry battalions were said to have been rushed in about a year ago, after heavy enemy pressure brought about the evacuation of the civilian population center of Sam Thong. Long Tieng appeared to be most heavily menaced last month. The base remains vulnerable to an estimated total of 12 North Vietnamese battalions in the area.

The soldiers are wearing their normal uniforms but without insignia or other identifying markings. The Thai troops are supplied separately from the Laotian units from the Thai Air Force base at Udorn, which is operated by the United States Air Force. Their supplies reach the Thais daily by planes operated

by Air America and Continental Air Services, companies under contract to the Central Intelligence Agency for the transport and supply of the United States-sponsored Laotian irregulars. Thai supplies are distributed from a separate supply facility at Long Tieng. It is believed that the United States is financing the Thai