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Vietnamese paratroopers in Laos

SOUTH VIETNAM'S TROOPS SEIZE INITIATIVE IN INDO-CHINA WAR

By Ha Anh Thong

LZ KILO, Feb. 20 (MF) - In a daring seizure of military initiative, South Vietnam's army has lashed across the over-extended Ho Chi Minh trail supply lines in Southern Laos, a move which could entrap an estimated 80,000 North Vietnamese soldiers in Cambodia and the Laotian panhandle.

Under the command of Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam of the First Military Region, an assault force of the republic's best troops leap-frogged down Highway Nine. They re-opened the old Khe Sanh combat base and created a series of new bases at Lang Vei, Lao Bao and LZ Kilo. Aided by support from American ground forces, the Vietnamese side of the Route Nine valley was secured quickly.

On February 8, under heavy morning fog, an assault accross the Laotian border began, spearheaded by an armor column of the ARVN First Division. Within hours, helilift assaults captured a number of strategic hilltops athwart the Ho Chi Minh trail complex deep inside Laos.

North Vietnamese supply routes heading down this rugged terrain from the north were decisively cut.

In the assault were some of South Vietnam's finest troops: elements of the First Ranger Group, battalions from the Airborne Division, and both armour and infantry from the First Division. ARVN Marines were in reserve to protect the flanks of the thrust.

The operation erected a 30-kilometer wide barrier of checkerboarded fire (artillery) bases more than 25 kilometers deep into the Laotian panhandle.

Newsmen were surprised at the completeness of the Ho Chi Minh trails. Wide dirt roads capable of handling up to 1,000 trucks a night were found along with large stores of petrol and oil, repair facilities and spare parts.

Almost immediately ARVN troops began uncovering significant caches. One fuel dump exploded and burned for nearly three days. More than 100 Molatova (Soviet) trucks were captured or destroyed in the first few days. The enemy even attempted to bring PT-76 light Russian tanks into the protection of the trail, losing five to ARVN paratroopers.

While this huge military paw held down the supply tail of the communists, other forces began raking the trapped forces in northeast Cambodia. Some 23,000 troops of the Third Military Region swept into the Snoul-Kompong Cham region of Cambodia, hitting at NVA troops there.

Further such clawing operations are expected as enemy forces begin to feel the pinch on their supply lines.

President Nguyen Van Thieu, accompanied by Prime Minister Khiem and Defense Minister Vy, flew into General Lam's command post at LZ Kilo on the fifth day of the operation. Asked why he authorized the invasion of Laos, he noted that, among other

things, two years of negotiation at Paris had failed due to Hanoi's "stubbornness."

"They want to have a military victory over us," the President declared. "We have no choice. We are here (in Laos) because they are here."

Privately, officers of the ARVN army say they expect the enemy to fight hard to free their severed supply route. During the coming months of the dry season, North Vietnam may attempt to cut off this barrier arm or, failing that, pull its trapped troops back north.

Although diversionary assaults can be expected (such as a rumoured crossing again of the DMZ along the eastern coastal plain) the enemy appears to have lost the battlefield initiative. Now the North Vietnamese army must defend itself in open battle or face obliteration as its hoard of supplies dwindles and the angry claws of the ARVN tiger rake its defenseless flanks in Cambodia and southern Laos.

THE LAOS CAMPAIGN - SOUTH VIETNAM HITS BACK!

By Phu Si

Saigon, Feb. 20 - In a successful repeat performance of last year's surprise assault against North Vietnamese bases in Cambodia, the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam have launched a large scale operation in southern Laos with the objective to destroy the enemy's built-up against South Vietnam. Thus far, the results have been more than gratifying: the enemy has been deprived of vast quantities of materials, including arms, ammunitions, food and sizeable depots of quartermaster supplies of every description needed to equip thousands of enemy troops on their way down the Ho-Chi-Minh trail. Hanoi's pained outcry and violent protests against this ARVN Campaign stem from the fact that North Vietnam's main supply bases in southern Laos not only serve their forces in South Vietnam, but also those in Cambodia, Laos and their agents in southeastern Thailand.

The prime objective of the ARVN forces, aided and protected by an umbrella of American airpower, is to deter the enemy from carrying out new assaults on South Vietnam and Cambodia. The estimate of military experts in Saigon is that if the operation is brought to a successful conclusion, Hanoi's aggressive potential may well be curbed for at least one year. Not only South Vietnam but also Cambodia will greatly benefit from a respite of North Vietnamese attacks. It will give the hard-pressed Cambodians a chance to strengthen their forces to drive the enemy from their soil. Unlike Hanoi's strategy which is nothing but continued aggression against its neighbours, South Vietnam's President Nguyen Van Thieu made it clear that the present incursion into southern Laos would be terminated once the objective -- the destruction of North Vietnamese supply sanctuaries -- has been achieved.

Thus far, the ARVN assault against Hanoi's supply bases has been a triumph of meticulous planning and outstanding cooperation between South Vietnamese ground forces and the American air force. One year of military "Vietnamization" has left a positive mark on the ARVN soldier. Almost all foreign military attaches in Saigon are agreed that today the ARVN is a force to be reckoned with -- fighting men with high morale, sure of themselves and convinced their enemy not only can be beaten but will be defeated in due course. The ARVN High Command is increasingly aware that their adversaries in Hanoi are not "men ten feet tall" but victims of an alien political system

and misguided creatures possibly closer to the abyss of final destruction than is generally realized. Largely for this reason the leaders in Saigon are less inclined to be defensive about current military ventures against Hanoi than their American allies. Experienced and long-time American observers in Vietnam readily admit the Indochina conflict could have been successfully terminated years ago had it not been for public opinion at home and abroad, supported by a largely negative and often hostile American press, exemplified by such dailies as "The New York Times" and weekly magazines like "Newsweek". As an embittered Vietnamese journalist said recently if Hanoi ever gets around to issuing its version of the Pulitzer prize, Newsweek correspondents are sure to receive them.

ARVN leaders and officials of the Saigon government realize that the success of the current campaign is in good measure due to unlimited American logistical support and unwavering American air support of ARVN ground forces. For the Americans too stand to gain from the most valuable result of the current campaign -- the gain of time: days, weeks, months, perhaps even years during which the withdrawal of American forces can proceed on schedule and the social and economic rehabilitation of the nation may continue according to plan. We Vietnamese have been subjected for far too long to the means and methods of Hanoi's version of "pacification". It has cost us untold dead men, women and children, wholesale slaughter all over the country of which the 1968 massacre of Hue comes first to mind. Today, there is a new spirit in the land and the campaign in southern Laos is but a manifestation. If the Hanoi Politbureau remains unconvinced, they may some day wake up and find ARVN forces on their very doorstep. But more likely appears the view of a British diplomat, a veteran of the campaign against communist insurgents in Malaysia, who neatly paraphrased the poet T.S. Eliot and predicted that the enemy will just fade away and "the war in Vietnam will not end with a bang, but a whimper."

BACKGROUND ON LAOS

By Minh Tam

Saigon, Feb. 20 - Sharing thousands of kilometers of common border, Laos and Vietnam have always been close neighbours. The two countries began to share a common frontier as far back as the 14th century, and relations improved as time went by. In the 17th century, Laotian King Souvanna Vongsa married the daughter of famed Vietnamese Emperor Le Thanh Ton. Throughout history, landlocked Laos has relied more on Vietnam for its communications, trade and commerce than any of its other neighbours of China, Burma, Thailand and Cambodia. Four of the major trunk routes of Laos lead to Vietnam, but when aggression from North Vietnam severed these arteries, Laos became depended upon Thailand for transportation and communications.

In the late 19th century the French sent a delegation to the royal court at Luang Prabang, headed by Auguste Pavie. The French "persuaded" Laotian King Oum Kham to place his land under French "protection" and the territory became part of the colony of Indochina. During the colonial period thousands of Vietnamese migrated to Laos where many of them held key positions in the colonial administration and the department of education. In fact, the majority of the teaching staff in the schools of Vientiane were Vietnamese. Many of the past and present Laotian political elite were trained by Vietnamese which has contributed to the lasting friendship between these two nations.

After World War Two, when the French star in Indochina began its decline, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam remained for some time in a French Union and it wasn't until 1954 that both nations regained their sovereignty and shortly thereafter established diplomatic relations with one another. Both countries have been attacked by North Vietnam, at first indirectly through the Laotian Pathet Lao, or Laotian satellite force and in South Vietnam through the Viet Cong. When local subversion proved a failure, Hanoi sent its combat forces into both countries and, more recently, also into Cambodia.

A North Vietnamese force of 40,000 regulars hold at least half of Laos while another 100,000 occupy strategic border bases between Laos, North and South Vietnam.

The notorious Plain of Jars, in North Eastern Laos is of particular importance to both sides of the Indo China conflict because it is conducive to an all-over military effort in Laos and because of the dual accessibility to the twin capitals of Vientiane and Luang Prabang. That is why, two major North Vietnamese bases have been constructed at Xiang Khouang and Muong Soi, a short distance from the strategic plains.

Although Hanoi could probably take this region, the North Vietnamese ritualistically limit their invasions to a once-a-year sweep to collect the Laotian opium harvest which is an essential source of hard currency and to give its green uninitiated troops some combat experience before sending them into South Vietnam. The "arrangement" works out quite well for Hanoi which then sends its troops back to protect their supply lines along the Ho-Chi-Minh trail for another year while the Royal Laotian Army moves back in to fill the vacuum.

In February, 1970, however, this annual blitzkrieg took on a more ominous threat as the Royal Laotian troops which had seized the Plain of Jars in October of 1969 moved out and the North Vietnamese moved in as usual, however then proceeded to move their forces into all of Cambodia's provinces east of the Mekong. Having met with no Allied opposition and only the typical diplomatic parley of protest, the North Vietnamese continued to move their forces into some of the more isolated regions of Cambodia west of the Mekong to set up their basic political structure.

It is interesting though not surprising to note that in this 15,000 man invasion, not a single Pathet Lao -- the Laotian counterpart to the Viet Cong -- was involved.

The U.S. has 2,100 citizens and an additional 500 government "employees" in Laos, mostly special forces agents who have armed and trained the only non-communist fighting force in Laos of Meo tribesmen headed by General Vang Pao.

As in South Vietnam, the allied forces in Laos fight under severe restrictions. For example, Soviet manned planes ferry troops and supplies regularly from North Vietnam into Laos, but American reconnaissance pilots may not hit them in the air -- only after they have landed on the ground.

Since May 1970, Hanoi has been concentrating on a major drive to link up North Vietnam with Northern Laos and Thailand. This accounts for the large number of North Vietnamese generals and political officials who have been visiting these strategic border regions with increased regularity. Hanoi may attempt to blackmail the Laotian government into forbidding the Americans to bomb the Ho-Chi-Minh trail as a price for permitting the Laotian government to retain whatever control it still has over this unfortunate "neutral" land.

It should be remembered, however, that today's action by South Vietnamese forces in Southern Laos, is not the first time Vietnamese troops have come to the aid of their historical ally. Both in the early seventeen hundreds and again in 1826, Vietnamese forces have supported Laos in times of stress and strife. Once again, Laotians and Vietnamese are fighting a common enemy -- an enemy who has elected to plunge the entire Indochina peninsula into misery and bloodshed to force upon the peoples of these lands an alien form of dictatorship. The irony of it is that the North Vietnamese parade their forces as a "people's liberation army" whereas in fact, Hanoi is conducting but another form of ancient, imperialist aggression.

NEWS IN BRIEF

TCHEPONE SEIZED

Saigon, March 8. - At 1300 Saturday, RVNAF units taking part in operation Lam Son took control of Tchepone city, Vietnamese military sources said.

RVNAF units inflicted significant casualties to the enemy in the attacks against Tchepone city.

Initial reports indicated more than 200 enemy killed Saturday and 13 prisoners captured.

In addition, fifteen 12.7mm anti-aircraft machine guns, two anti-craft 37mm cannons, three 120mm mortars, two 82mm mortars, 47 light machine guns, 17 B40 rocket launchers, 170 individual weapons, 2000 Chicom gas protective masks, five Molotova trucks, 1000 tons of rice and food and 300 tons of munitions were destroyed or captured.

Friendly casualties were termed light.

The same sources said at 1315 an element from the 1st Infantry Division found bodies of 79 enemy previously killed by bombing in an area one mile northeast of Tchepone.

The infantrymen also seized five machine guns and 24 individual weapons.

At 1550, the same day an Infantry element found bodies of another 31 enemy and discovered an enemy cache in an area 2,5 miles northeast of Tchepone. The infantrymen seized 2,000 Chicom gas protective masks, 1,000 tons of rice, nine B40 rocket launchers, seven light machine guns and 11 AK47 assault rifles.

LAM SON OPERATION TALLIED

Saigon, March 8. - Since the beginning of operation Lam Son 719 on February 8, 5,274 communists have been killed including nearly 1,350 killed by artillery and air strikes, Vietnamese military sources said.

Fourteen other enemy were taken prisoners, two enemy defectors were received, 1,785 individual weapons, 385 crew served weapons and 25 tons of rice were captured.

Meanwhile the same sources said ground forces along with artillery and air strikes destroyed 75 enemy tanks, 144 Molotova trucks, two 3-4 ton trucks, 400 bicycles, 550 houses, four tons of assorted tools, three generators, three water pumps, 528,600 liters of fuel, 12,703 tons of munitions, 30 122mm rockets, 1,400 meters of pipeline and a great number of foods and other equipment.

Friendly casualties were 441 killed, 1,473 wounded and 99 missing in action.

NORTH VIETNAMESE COLLAPSE

Saigon, March 4 - President Nguyen Van Thieu has just predicted the collapse of the Communist regime in Hanoi "in the foreseeable future...when the people of North Vietnam themselves decide the time has come to overthrow it." The Presidential prediction was made at a military ceremony in the highland resort of Dalat in the course of which the South Vietnamese leader also proudly declared "the South Vietnamese nation will accomplish things nobody has really thought we are capable of."

President Thieu also said on this occasion that "this is no dream springing from an unwarranted sense of optimism. If we should be able to initiate the search for a peace formula that serves the nation's true interests and if we should be able to do it as soon as possible, we would have time to develop our country into a powerful nation. We have the human and material resources for preparing this future prospect."

According to the Chief Executive, the Communist strategy for Indochina has failed. The enemy "has failed not only in the field but also in his rear, unable as he is now to mobilize the North Vietnamese people for continuing the war." The President refused to be more specific but declared that "this psychological verity will bring us total victory and national reunification."

JAPANESE AID

Saigon, March 4. - A modern hospital with over one thousand beds, the largest of its type in Viet-Nam, will be built shortly on the site of the existing Cho Ray hospital in Saigon. The cost will be covered by a Japanese aid agreement amounting to US \$ 12,300,000. Local cost of 250 million piasters (about US \$ 800,000) will be defrayed by the Government of Vietnam. Last Friday February 19, 1971 an 8-man Japanese Government team led by Doctor Yoshitake formally made a presentation of the new hospital project at the Ministry of Health.

The construction of this new medical care unit which will also serve as a training center for medical students will start in September this year and is scheduled for completion in three years. Since 1964 the Japanese Government has given some US \$ 4.2 million to help the Republic of Vietnam improve its medical care facilities including a new twin wing neurological center at Cho Ray Hospital completed in 1969 and substantial contributions of medical equipment, drugs etc. for Saigon hospitals.

Document

U.S. DEFENSE DEPARTMENT FACT SHEET, HO CHI MINH TRAIL

In view of the importance of the current military operation in the Tchepone area, the Vietnam Bulletin deems it of interest to the readers to reproduce the text of the U.S. Defense Department fact sheet, released on February 5, on the Ho Chi Minh Trail:

Laos, a landlocked nation of some 2.6 million inhabitants, is located in the heart of the Indochina peninsula. It borders on North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, and China. The use of this territory by the North Vietnamese to infiltrate men and supplies into South Vietnam and Cambodia to support their military efforts there has long been established.

In 1954, the ICC (International Control Commission) authorities found that the North Vietnamese had specifically violated four provisions of the Geneva Accords of 1954. There was "... sufficient evidence to show beyond a reasonable doubt" that North Vietnam had sent arms and men to South Vietnam to carry out subversion with the aim of overthrowing the legal government there.

The hard-core communist attacking forces in South Vietnam were trained in North Vietnamese special camps which provided political and military training to infiltrators. A special infiltration unit, the 70th Transportation Group, was responsible for moving men from North Vietnam to South Vietnam via infiltration through Laos.

Between 1959 and 1960, more than 4,600 of the "regroupees" who had gone into North Vietnam in 1955-56 had been trained and had been reinfilitrated into South Vietnam. By 1964 young North Vietnamese combat cadre and soldiers had been sent in increasing numbers into South Vietnam. Before the end of 1964 the infiltration network through Laos had been sufficiently developed to accommodate regional size North Vietnamese combat units into South Vietnam. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was prepared in advance for this growing infiltration.

Among the training camps in North Vietnam was Xuan Mai near Hanoi and Thanh Hoa. Also a staging area with additional training facilities was located at Dong Hoi.

Way stations were built about one day's march apart in 1964. Food, shelter and medical facilities were provided. Local guides were used to assist infiltrators. The area, under North Vietnamese army control, is virtually uninhabited.

The ever-increasing enemy efforts to use Laotian territory (in violation of the 1962 Geneva Accords on Laos) to infiltrate men and materials through the Ho Chi Minh Trail caused the Laotian government to request air assistance from the U.S. A program of aerial reconnaissance was begun in May 1964. At the end of the year this included a few armed reconnaissance sorties.

As the enemy expanded this transportation network and increased its use, America's effort to inhibit the flow correspondingly increased.

Nearly all USAF, Marine and Navy aircraft types previously identified in Southeast Asia have been used in Laos in the interdiction program. These include AC-119, AC-123 and AC-130 gunships. These gunships, particularly the AC-130, have been very

effective in hunting down and destroying trucks along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Their ability to loiter, detect and bring to bear tremendous firepower provided them with a unique capability in this interdiction campaign.

The road network currently covers more than 1,550 miles of seasonable, motorable roads encompassing the entire eastern portion of the Laos Panhandle. In addition the enemy has expanded the use of at least 10 waterways which supplement the road network. Since the allied effort to clean out the enemy's border sanctuaries in Cambodia, the North Vietnamese have widened the trail and waterway network westward in Laos to try to accommodate the logistical needs of its forces spread out in Cambodia.

Since the bombing halt in North Vietnam on 1 November 1968, the North Vietnamese experience little difficulty in moving men and materials southward through North Vietnam by rail, trucks or boats. After reaching staging areas around Vinh, Dong Hoi and Quang Khe, the supplies are introduced into the Lao Panhandle through these primary ingress routes: Mu Gia Pass (Rt. 15), Ban Karai Pass (Rt. 137) and a road complex west of the DMZ (Rts. 1036, 1039 and 92). Nape Pass and Barthelemy Pass further north, have also been used but mainly to support the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces in the Plain of Jars area.

Historically, the major communist logistics effort in support of the war in the Republic of Vietnam takes place during the dry season (November through April). Normally, the buildup begins in the North Vietnamese Panhandle along the ingress routes in September and October. The shuttling of supplies in the Laos Panhandle normally gets underway in late October or early November. As routes conditions improve the infiltration increases with the flow into the Republic of Vietnam reaching its highest levels during the months of February through April.

During the rainy season, supplies to support local requirements are moved and an effort is made to maintain only the principal roads.

Supplies moving the infiltration system cover a wide variety of materials including food, weapons, ammunitions, POL, medical supplies, communications equipment, and administrative supplies. Movement may be accomplished by porters, animals, bicycles, trucks or boats.

Enemy personnel and logistics flow through the mountainous, multi-canopied jungle trails is very difficult to estimate as is their destination.

Interdicting this flow of supplies is equally difficult to accomplish. Not only is there the difficulty of locating the targets and knocking them out but the buildup of enemy anti-aircraft defenses has provided an increasing threat to American airmen. The North Vietnamese have emplaced automatic weapons, 23mm, 37mm, 57mm and 100mm anti-aircraft guns to protect this supply corridor in Laos. In terms of air defense threat area of the enemy in the Laos Panhandle, there are approximately 150 gun battery complexes.¹ In addition, the range of some SAM sites in North Vietnam extends into Laos.

I - South Vietnam intelligence estimates reveal ten times more such complexes.

The use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail is now the only route of infiltration effectively available to the enemy. The coastal surveillance of South Vietnam and the patrolling of the coastal waters of Cambodia prevents movement of men and supplies by sea. The closing of the Port of Sihanoukville (now Kompong Som) by the Republic of Cambodia to communist shipping seriously curtailed the flow of supplies through the South.

Maintenance of the road networks is performed by hand and by earthmoving equipment such as bulldozers. The North Vietnamese manpower in the Laotian Panhandle is such that they can quickly repair cratered roadbeds by committing the resources needed to do the job.

Many of the roads are similar to the backwood trails leading to some isolated fishing spot in the U.S. While they are almost impassable in the early spring they are somehow usable during the fishing season.

The drivers appear to be experienced and very familiar with the portion of the road over which they do their driving. Their trucks are camouflaged and they know the trails. They quickly drive through the open areas and pull off the road into the trees upon first warning of approaching aircraft. The presence of tactical air during the daytime has caused most of the truck traffic to attempt their movements mostly at night.

When the drivers reach their destination they unload their cargoes and rapidly return to their starting point. The delivered cargo may remain in that spot one day, one month or longer until the system moves it along to the final depot. Any successful interdiction of these supplies and personnel directly related to the effectiveness of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in South Vietnam.

Sorties rates and bomb tonnage in Laos are classified. However, in January 1971, U.S. aircraft flew approximately 25 percent fewer sorties than in January 1970. From month to month the number of interdiction sorties ranges in proportion to the size of the enemy effort to move men and materials southward.

To follow a single type of quantity of material to its destination is extremely difficult. Some goes to the North Vietnamese troops in Cambodia supply dumps; others work their way into South Vietnam. A quantity remains in Lao supply depots for further distribution. The B-52 missions are usually targeted on these supply storage areas during the dry season.

Recently, one such area was uncovered by a tactical air strike. Additional strikes were called in over a period of several days. The result was measured by some 7,000 secondary explosions and the destruction of a large quantity of enemy supplies, ammunition and POL products.

The use of the waterways, extensive in the 1968-1969 dry season, but less extensive last year, has shown a sharp increase this year. The simple, free flow of drums or waterproof bags is an inexpensive and well-hidden method of moving supplies. At night their identification is a most difficult task.

One final note. About all -- more than 90 percent -- of the movement along the Ho Chi Minh Trail is performed at night. The driver must reach his destination and return to his starting point at night. In the daytime he sleeps the roads are repaired and truck maintenance is performed. On top of all this cover the darkness aids him in his effort to move men and materials down the trail. To locate such targets at night a number of night vision devices in conjunction with ground sensors are used.

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