

Allied Bases In Danger

Out To Cut Red Supply Lines

SAIGON (AP) — More than 3,000 U. S. Marines and South Vietnamese infantrymen backed by an American armored column are pushing another major counter offensive south of the demilitarized zone.

Operation Maine Crag is aimed at a growing North Vietnamese threat to allied bases along the northern frontier. Marine officers at Da Nang said in the past month patrols have sighted as many as 50 enemy tracked vehicles and trucks carrying war materials toward allied bases. Some were believed to be big artillery guns.

It was the second big American drive announced in the past two days and the third within a week, as the Viet Cong's spring offensive rolled into its fifth week.

Maine Crag was launched March 6 but has been slowed down frequently by bad weather. The U.S. Command did not announce it until today for security reasons.

The Marines said the allied force had killed 43 enemy troops so far and captured two prisoners and 129 rifles. Ten Americans were reported killed and 64 wounded. But the allies' main purpose is to cut North Vietnamese supply lines from Laos into South Vietnam.

Maine Crag is taking place along the Laotian border about 25 miles south of the western flank of the DMZ and just south of the old Khe Sanh combat base, where U.S. forces held off a North Vietnamese siege for 2½ months last year.

One of the Marines' objective is to cut Highway 926 from Laos into South Vietnam. U.S. patrols have sighted North Vietnamese self-propelled artillery guns

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from which he could mount attacks on those two provincial capitals.

On Sunday, the U.S. Command took the security wraps off another offensive, Massachusetts striker, which sent more than 2,000 American paratroopers into the A Shau Valley, 35 to 40 miles south of the Maine Crag operational area. The valley is the biggest North Vietnamese supply base and staging area in South Vietnam's northern quarter.

Helicopters landed troops of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division in the valley on March 1 for the third major allied invasion of the area in less than a year.

But contact has been light and sporadic since the offensive kicked off, indicating that the paratroopers have encountered only rear guard and supply troops. U.S. headquarters reported that 61 North Vietnamese soldiers and 23 American paratroopers have been killed so far and 53 paratroopers wounded.

U.S. headquarters also indicated a North Vietnamese build-up in the extreme northwest corner of South Vietnam, 2½ to 3 miles south of the DMZ and within three miles of the Laotian border. It said U.S. B52s dropped nearly 400 tons of bombs on North Vietnamese troop concentrations, base camps and bunkers in that area.

South Vietnamese headquarters reported a ground fight below the eastern end of the DMZ Sunday and said 43 North Vietnamese were killed. Seven South Vietnamese soldiers were wounded.

In the third big American operation which has been announced, in the area of the Michelin rubber plantation 45 miles northwest of Saigon, U.S. spokesmen said 400 enemy troops had been killed during the past week. Only scattered fighting was reported over the weekend. The sweep by 10,000 American soldiers is aimed at keeping troops of the North Vietnamese 1st and 7th divisions from pushing down the Saigon River toward the capital.

Sunday night and early today, more than 40 B52s pounded positions around Saigon with over 1,200 tons of bombs in the continuing campaign to ward off an attack on the capital. Some of the raids were 19 miles from the city, the closest in three weeks.

Three sharp fights were reported Sunday in the Mekong Delta, 18 to 70 miles southwest of Saigon. In one, U.S. infantrymen from the 9th Division reported 132 Viet Cong killed, most of them by air strikes and artillery. U.S. headquarters said American casualties were four killed and 19 wounded.

The Allied commands said the enemy made about 25 rocket and mortar attacks overnight on allied bases and towns, but total casualties and damage were light.

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along the highway which leads toward the Marines' Vandegrift combat base, the major allied operations base on the northern frontier.

Field commanders think these big guns could be used to turn Vandegrift base into another Khe Sanh which was pounded daily with enemy artillery until the siege was lifted. Khe Sanh was later abandoned a policy of greater mobility was announced and Vandegrift 20 miles from the Laotian border and out of range of North Vietnamese artillery inside Laos, became the major Marine combat base along the frontier.

Maj. Gen. Raymond Davis, commander of the 3rd Marine Division, said that Highway 926 was particularly important now because the Marines had cut off other enemy access routes in Operation Dewey Canyon, a two-month drive that has just ended.

Davis said that in Dewey Canyon the Marines cut off the road going into the northern end of the A Shau Valley, but the enemy is "still determined somehow to get into his base areas west of Quang Tri and Hue."

The targets included air bases at Da Nang, Ban Me Thuot and Kontum. South Vietnamese headquarters said five mortar shells landed on a Buddhist orphanage near Quang Ngai City, killing one child and wounding 2 others.

The U.S. Command announced that four more American helicopters were shot down over the weekend, killing seven Americans and wounding eight. This raised to 2,457 the number of U.S. helicopters reported lost in the war.