

## Fighting continues in Laos; advance still bogged down

SAIGON (AP) — Sharp fighting was reported Wednesday at two South Vietnamese bases inside Laos, where the U. S. Command said air strikes have knocked holes in the enemy supply lines on the Ho Chi Minh trail.

Field reports said six more U. S. helicopters were shot down or damaged in the fighting around the bases.

Officers in the field on the northern front told correspondents that the two bases had come under heavy rocket and mortar fire.

Ground fighting was reported around the bases, but no details were available. Both bases were said to be about 10 miles inside Laos, one on the north side and the other to the south of Highway 9, the main route into southern Laos.

Field reports said four American helicopters were hit Tuesday and two more Wednesday at one of the bases, a new installation that was being set up.

These reports, from helicopter pilots, said the six aircraft were shot down or damaged, but it was not clear how many were lost.

Since the South Vietnamese drive into Laos began Feb. 8, the U. S. Command has acknowledged the loss of 18 helicopters in Laos with 25 Americans killed, 11 missing and 16 wounded.

Headquarters has reported 11 more destroyed on the Vietnamese side of the border with 15 Americans killed, 10 wounded and 4 missing.

Command spokesman said Wednesday they had no information on the reports of six more helicopters hit Tuesday and Wednesday in Laos.

Spokesmen for the South Vietnamese command again reported no forward movement by the main body of the 16,000-man government force pushing into Laos. They said forward elements remained about 16 miles inside the country.

On the northern front, Brig. Gen. Pham Van Phu, commander of the 1st Infantry Division, told Associated Press correspondent William Barton that Highway 9 still is not open inside Laos for supply missions because of North Vietnamese ambushes.

The U.S. Command said American air strikes against the Ho Chi Minh trail network had resulted in major destruction to enemy supply facilities.

Spokesmen estimated that 800 tons of ammunition, more than 120 supply and weapons caches, 330 vehicles and four fuel pipelines had been destroyed.

The United States has been providing full air support to the South Vietnamese drive, and has mounted some of the major raids of the war in its strikes against the Ho Chi Minh trail.

U. S. authorities have maintained that no American ground combat forces would enter Laos. About 9,000 American troops in support and blocking positions on the Vietnamese side of the border have come under increased, although so far small, enemy pressure.

The big U. S. Army combat base at Quang Tri was hit Wednesday night by an enemy rocket attack. Seventeen 122mm rockets crashed into the base, but damage and casualties were reported light with no fatalities. It was the first time Quang Tri had been shelled since last June.

While no major fighting was reported in South Vietnam or in a push by South Vietnamese troops into Cambodia, there were the usual sporadic engagements.

South Vietnamese headquarters said a government marine battalion killed 32 enemy in an area six miles southeast of Phnom Penh, the Cambodian capital. Twelve more enemy were said to have been killed near the Cambodian town of Kampong Trach, and 15 near Kandol Chrum. Cambodian and South Vietnamese were given as one killed and four wounded.

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AN AMERICAN GI makes himself comfortable as he plays cards with a buddy at the Khe Sanh base in South Vietnam near the Laotian border. Related story, page 1. (AP Wirephoto)

## 19-year-old in Vietnam describes what it's like

THE ROCKPILE, Vietnam (AP) — Pfc. Terry J. Johnson killed his first North Vietnamese soldier in the shadow of the rockpile, a mountain of stone inhabited by the ghosts of GIs who died while Johnson was in high school.

"I saw movement and went toward it," said the 19-year-old forward observer from Chicago. "I found myself face to face with this little guy pointing an RPG — rocket-propelled grenade launcher — right at me, and I heard a click."

"That Dink would have blown me away if he hadn't had a misfire. Instead I cut him in half with my machine gun."

In the next hour Johnson's

buddies in the 2nd Platoon, C troop, 3rd Battalion of the 5th Armored Cavalry killed three more enemy, captured a weapons cache and took some incoming mortar rounds.

"More action than we've seen in months," enthused Lt. Joe Megginson, 23, of Appomattox, Va.

Others aren't so enthusiastic about this "new" war near the Laotian border.

"They're chewing us up out there," said a platoon sergeant whose outfit was ambushed north of Khe Sanh. "I came out here with 38 men three weeks ago and I'm going back to Quang Tri with 16."

Most of his casualties were wounded. "Charlie's running circles around us," he said "Our officers just don't know how to fight these guys."

"They put us out there 25 clicks (kilometers) from nowhere and when we get hit and ask for air support or artillery they say 'What's your situation out there?' And a lot of other stupid questions."

The 9,500 American troops supporting the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos on this side of the border have not been involved in any big-unit battles. But small, sharp firefight, ambushes and harassing attacks have frayed tempers and nerves.

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