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# U.S. Newsmen Find VC Camp Inside Cambodian 'Sanctuary'

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ON THE CAMBODIAN BORDER (AP) — The carefully camouflaged Viet Cong camp was hidden beneath lush jungle about four miles inside neutral Cambodia.

The signs were unmistakable, despite Cambodian denials, that many hundreds of men and tons of supplies had crossed this jungle site and gone on to the war in South Vietnam. It of-

fered hard evidence from the Cambodian side of the frontier that such camps exist.

The camp had sheltered several hundred men, probably from a major headquarters command group. The occupants had left barely days before. Some had been in the area the previous night, as shown by fresh footprints. One soldier had left behind a khaki mosquito net, still rigged over a hammock.

From the camp and stretching toward the unmarked frontier with Vietnam was a heavily traveled military road, running through virtually uninhabited jungle. Monsoon rains had turned stretches of it into a bog. Engineers had laid down a carpet of neatly trimmed logs. The corduroy surface was capable of supporting heavy trucks, and countless tracks indicated many

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AP newsman George McArthur stoops to pick up a scrap of paper near one of several roofed huts at the suspected Communist camp. A khaki mosquito net is draped over the crossbar above his head.

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had passed that way.

The road crossed the border barely nine miles from the South Vietnamese district town of Loc Ninh, scene of a bitter battle this month when the Viet Cong kept up an assault by two regiments, perhaps 5,000 men, for a full week.

American commanders said that battlefield was selected by the Viet Cong because of its nearness to the sanctuary of the border — a sanctuary denied by Cambodia's neutralist ruler Prince Norodom Sihanouk. The prince has recently qualified his position by saying his 34,000-man army could not possibly seal the 500-mile border.

Cambodian military officers on the frontier indicated little effort at sealing the border had been made. They claimed, however, that there were no permanent Viet Cong camps and no serious incursions.

Prince Sihanouk has been informed of our discovery of the camp. His reaction has not been disclosed.

But Premier Son Sann said Cambodian officials will investigate the matter.

"It is impossible that the camp was used for any long period of time," the premier said. "It was not a sanctuary."

He acknowledged that some communists had crossed the frontier, but he said the Cambodian government has always demanded withdrawal as soon as the intrusions were discovered.

Reporters visited the frontier at the invitation of the prince. Diplomats in Phnom Penh felt that despite his stated sympathies with the Viet Cong he did not believe the Communists were seriously using Cambodian territory as a staging area.

The prince did not qualify his invitation to the frontier. He offered military escorts and ordered provincial officials to cooperate. They did.

When we drove to the district capital of Mimot, about 15 miles from the Vietnamese frontier, and pointed out precisely where we wanted to go, no difficulties were raised. On a map, we pinpointed a jungled area of the border within a hundred miles of Saigon. The district administrator, Oung Hong Cheng Hor, an affable 39-year-old career civil servant, laughed and said we would find nothing. Then he hospitably laid out a three-hour

lunch.

Our preselected site, on the basis of information from qualified sources, was a thin track branching off National Route 7 and barely marked even on detailed maps. From the paved highway which parallels the border north of War Zone C, the track was barely noticeable — the entrance thickly shrouded by trees.

On each side were ordinary signs warning against smoking, forest fires or the unauthorized cutting of timber. Walking down the twisting trail, there was nothing out of the ordinary save the unusual number of fire and cart trucks on a small dirt road that ostensibly led nowhere.

Then, a few hundred yards into the heavy woods, the corduroy road burst into view — a road totally unnecessary in this wildly deserted area. To one side was a small camouflaged clearing surrounded by a shallow drainage ditch.

It was late afternoon and the small military escort was embarrassed. A young lieutenant said perhaps the road was used by timber thieves. Another suggested it was built by the forestry department.

We asked to come back the next day, with a bigger military escort to go deeper into the jungle. The army major in charge of our escort agreed but the friendliness shown earlier in the day was gone. Prince Sisavath, a cousin of Prince Norodom who was along, remarked somewhat bitterly: "I suppose you will write about the Sihanouk Trail."

Next morning, when we started back into the jungle with a larger escort, the prince was absent but there was a full escort including an army truck with a 20-mm cannon which stayed on the paved road to protect us, it was explained, from possible attack by intruding American planes.

Back in the jungle, with troops deployed on all sides, a little path off the corduroy road led within half a mile to the Viet Cong campsite.

There was no mistaking the neat military order, the shelter, the little bamboo desks and tables.

Drainage ditches were dug around each shelter. Everything was camouflaged. Some shelters also contained the little bamboo pens used by the Viet Cong to house pigs or chickens. A khaki

mosquito net dangled in one palmetto-roofed shelter.

Although the Communist forces always police their camps thoroughly, there were incriminating bits and pieces. In what was evidently a dispensary, a little pasteboard container for Japanese-made hypodermic needles was found. Other medical labels — from Cambodia and South Vietnam — turned up. There was also a little plastic North Vietnamese medical supply bag. A soap container made in Saigon was located.

Beneath some leaves was buried a page from an old notebook — written in Vietnamese and the evident record of the camp's supply department. It was dated Oct. 1, 1967 and listed such items as sugar, vegetables, cloth, tea, pigs, chickens and kerosene.

Another slip of paper in Vietnamese was the receipt for a pig, dated Nov. 3, 1967.

Qualified sources in Cambodia

said the Cambodian army never sets up such camp sites. Neither would the small forestry service. Furthermore, no Cambodian military operations had been conducted in this area and, in fact, Cambodian regular army forces do not normally even patrol within five miles of the Vietnamese frontier.

The road, however, was heavily traveled. The tracks included those of big double-wheeled trucks as well as countless bicycles and oxcarts — both favored means of transportation by the Viet Cong.

The location of the camp indicates that the Viet Cong is regularly using Cambodian Route 7 which runs east from the capital of Phnom Penh and roughly parallels the South Vietnamese border for about 40 miles above War Zone C where much of the fighting in Vietnam has taken place in the past year.

Checkpoints along Route 7 are virtually nonexistent. Any ordinary civilian truck coming down from the north would pass unnoticed.

Parking areas along the corduroy jungle road we located could easily handle 20 trucks without danger of discovery. Loads were evidently taken off the trucks here and placed on oxcarts or bicycles for onward transport.

There were 20 or more log platforms which could serve to keep rice or other stores off the damp earth. All platforms were constructed in precisely the same manner, 12 inches from the ground and with five log cross-members.

One such Viet Cong camp, of course, does not prove the American contention that the Viet Cong systematically violate the Cambodian frontier and use Cambodian territory as a sanctuary. The Americans say, however, that such camps are numerous along the northern half of the 500-mile Cambodian-Vietnamese frontier. It takes a week or more on foot to get to areas where such camps might be located. The Cambodian army has almost no troops there.



Cambodian soldiers accompanying western newsmen peer into the jungle along a corduroy road in the wilderness west of the Vietnamese border. The road led to what is believed to be a Viet Cong camp. (AP Photos)