

13 APR 1973

Care

INQUIRY REPORTS COPTERS STRAYED

Truce Unit Says 2 Downed Craft Were Off Course

Special to The New York Times

HUE, South Vietnam, April 12 — The two truce-supervision helicopters that were downed by the Vietcong near the Laos border last week had strayed more than 15 miles from their prearranged course, a team of investigators who returned from the crash site reported today. The investigators represented the International Commission of Control and Supervision.

According to Col. Dedy Karsono of Indonesia, who headed the investigative team, the remains of the two helicopters were almost exactly where the Vietcong had said they were.

The Vietcong's Provisional Revolutionary Government has said that the two helicopters—one of which was hit by a Strella surface-to-air missile, killing all nine persons aboard—were downed by accident because they had deviated from their prescribed course. The second helicopter, hit by small-arms fire, was able to land without fatalities.

The findings of the investigation team, which have not yet been made public, conflict sharply with the account reportedly given to United States officials in Saigon by the two surviving American pilots of the second helicopter.

New Road Is Key Factor

The surviving pilots, who like the pilots killed on the first helicopter worked for the charter airline Air America, are said to have insisted that they were precisely on course over Route 9 just west of the former United States Marine base at Khe Sanh when they were hit by Communist ground fire Saturday. They safely crash-landed their helicopter on Route 9, the pilots have reportedly said.

However, according to the investigators who went to the two crash sites by car, the helicopters actually came down near a new road being built by the Communists that leads southeast off Route 9. In the view of the investigators, this new road, which the Communists call Route 14 and which is unmarked on maps, apparently confused the pilots and a Vietcong officer aboard the first helicopter who was acting as guide.

The two surviving pilots said that they had been specifically warned about the new road, and that they had carefully followed the old one, United States officials reported.

Colonel Karsono, who is also head of the Indonesian delegation in Hue, said tonight after his return that he had "no doubt" in his mind that the two sites shown to the investigative team were the actual ones where the helicopters had come down. The sites were about two miles apart, he said. The helicopter hit by the missile, he reported, had left only a scorched patch of jungle. The other helicopter, he said, was intact on the new road but unable to fly.

The investigative team gave local Vietcong officials a written statement confirming that the helicopters were far off their prearranged course when they were hit, according to officers of the control commission here.

The pilots and the five surviving control commission officers in the second helicopter also reportedly signed statements admitting they had been off course. But they are said to have signed only because of fear, after being held in the jungle overnight, that they would not be released unless they signed.

Shooting Remains a Puzzle

The helicopters were headed for Lao Bao, a former French customs post on Route 9 at the Laos border, which the Communists are using as one of their designated points of entry for war materials under the Paris truce agreement.

According to the investigators, the pilots must have flown unknowingly for 10 minutes in the wrong direction after coming to the new road, heading southeast over heavily jungled mountains.

Whichever account is correct, there is still no explanation of why the Communists shot down the helicopters, which were clearly marked with the large white letters I.C.C.S. and fluorescent green stripes. According to the version of several survivors from the second helicopter, the Communists continued to fire on them for several minutes even after they landed and taken cover in a ditch.

The Vietcong stated that the helicopters had strayed into an area where South Vietnamese forces had frequently conducted reconnaissance and commando activities.

APPROVED FOR
RELEASE DATE:
29-Oct-2009