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U.S. Thinks Communists Moved Crashed Copters

By FOX BUTTERFIELD

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, April 14—American officials believe that the Communists secretly moved two truce commission helicopters that they shot down last week, in order to back their explanation of the incident.

The officials say that the moving of the two helicopters by the International Commission of Control and Supervision would account for why a commission investigative team found three days ago more than 25 miles from where those who survived saw the aircraft crashed.

According to the United States officials, the Communists used a large, Soviet-made MI-6 "hook" helicopter to pick up the downed copters, one of them in a dozen charred fragments, the other with bullet holes in it but relatively intact. The two aircraft were downed last Saturday.

The location of the wreckage has become a critical issue because the Vietcong's Provisional Revolutionary Government says that the reason for the incident was that the commission's helicopter had deviated far from their prearranged course and strayed into a dangerous area.

The two helicopters, painted with the large white letters "ICCS" and distinctive green reflective stripes, were flying to a commission post at Lao Bao, on the Laotian border in far north western Quang Tri Province.

Stress Survivors' Accounts

Nine men, including a Vietcong navigator and two American pilots, were killed in the lead helicopter, apparently hit by a heat-seeking missile. The second craft, with 10 men aboard, was struck by ground fire, but crash-landed safely.

The American officials who charged that the machines had been moved base their belief on the account given by the survivors and on certain intelligence data that they have refused to disclose because it is "too sensitive."

A senior intelligence analyst, who said that he was certain that the downed copters had been shifted, said that "there has been more than a little hanky-panky here."

In their first interview with newsmen, the two pilots the second craft said tonight that they would never believe the

Communist assertion. That they were 15 miles south of their course and flying southeast instead of west when they were fired on.

"No matter what they say, I know we were in the right place," said Mark Hotchkiss, the co-pilot. Mr. Hotchkiss, who is 24 years old and is from Butte, Mont. and the pilot, Hank de Voll, also 24, who is from the Panama Canal Zone, had been United States Army Helicopter pilots in Vietnam. They work for Air American, the charter airline used by the international commission.

Mr. de Voll, a slender, boyish-looking man with a mustache, said that he and the lead helicopter had followed precisely the fixed flight plan given them by the Provisional Revolutionary Government—from Gio Linh in eastern Quang Tri west along Route 9 to Lao Bao. It was a "beautiful, clear day,

with no clouds or haze," Mr. de Voll said.

Neither Mr. de Voll nor Mr. Hotchkiss had ever flown to Lao Bao before, but they reported that a Canadian officer in the lead helicopter had made the trip previously. In any case, they said, the lead helicopter was being navigated by a Vietcong captain who had boarded it at Gio Linh to guide it to Lao Bao.

Tell of Spotting New Road

Both pilots emphatically denied the assertion of the Provisional Revolutionary Government that they had mistakenly stopped following Route 9 and had followed a road that the Communists are constructing, which runs southeast back toward the coast away from Lao Bao. The fliers said they had seen the junction in the road and had continued to head west, "without any confusion," Mr. de Voll recalled.

As proof, the pilots noted that they had passed over the former United States Marine base at Khe Sanh and its large airstrip, which ties into route 9 beyond the junction. They had radioed their position over Khe Sanh back to the commission team at Gio Linh, according to commission officials. There is no other airstrip in the area.

About eight minutes later, after they had radioed that they were about to begin their descent to Lao Bao, Mr. de Voll said he heard ground fire and then saw a "dark, dart-like object right at the side of the lead chopper." It was a heat-seeking Strella missile, Mr. de Voll said, and it brought the lead helicopter to the ground in flames.

Met by Communists

The other machine landed on the road—for five hours, the pilots said, the Communist who met them offered them no explanation where they were or what had happened. Then the Communists began saying that the fliers had been off course. "They kept urging us to fly our chopper out of there—they wanted to get rid of it," Mr. Hotchkiss said. But it had been too badly damaged by bullets to fly, the Americans said.

The Communists drove the survivors back to Gio Linh the next day but did not begin the trip until dark, saying that "it was cooler to travel at night," Mr. de Voll said.

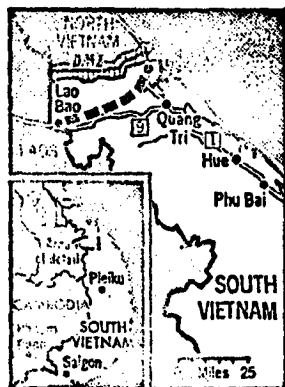
He said they kept driving off the road over hills, and then doubling back along the road, "trying to confuse us, I think."

When they reached the spot where the Communists said their new road joined Route 9,

"they made a big production of telling us this is the spot where we went wrong," Mr. de Voll said.

According to officials of the international commission at Can Tho, in the Mekong Delta, captured North Vietnamese troops interrogated recently said that they had never received any orders not to fire on commission aircraft. They were quoted as saying that they did not think that the cease-fire applied to them.

A spokesman for the Provisional Revolutionary Government in Saigon said that the "accident" was still under investigation by local Communist commanders.



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Route of the helicopters from Gio Linh to Lao Bao is center of dispute.

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