

Copters' Wreckage Moved By Reds, U.S. Officials Say

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SAIGON — United States officials believe that the Communists have secretly moved the wreckage of the two international peacekeeping commission helicopters they shot down last week to confirm their own explanation of the incident.

The officials say this removal accounts for the reason that the International Commission of Control and Supervision investigative team found the wreckage three days ago more than 25 miles from where the survivors reported they crashed.

According to the U.S. officials, the Communists used a large Soviet-made "hook" helicopter to move the wrecks.

The location of the wreckage has become a critical issue, because the Viet Cong has claimed that the incident occurred because the ICCS helicopters had deviated from their prearranged course and had strayed into a dangerous area.

The two helicopters, which were marked ICCS in large white letters with distinctive green fluorescent stripes, were flying to an ICCS post at Lao Bao on the Laos border in Quang Tri Province.

NINE PERSONS, including a Viet Cong navigator and two American pilots, were killed in the lead helicopter, which was apparently hit by a heat-seeking Strella missile. The 10 people in the second craft crash-landed safely after being hit by ground fire.

The American officials who charged that the wreckage had been deliberately moved in an effort to provide an excuse for the incident base their belief on the account given by the survivors and on certain intelligence data which they say is "too sensitive to disclose."

One senior intelligence analyst, who insisted that he knew as a certainty that the helicopters had been moved, said "there has been more than a little hankypanky here."

In their first interview with reporters, the two surviving pilots from the second craft said last night that they would never believe the Communist claim that they were 15 miles south of their prearranged course and flying southeast instead of west when they were hit.

"NO MATTER what they say, I know we were in the

right place," said Mark Hotchkiss, one co-pilot, who like the other pilots works for Air America, on charter to the ICCS. Hotchkiss, 24, from Butte, Mont., and his co-pilot, Hank De Voll 24, from the Panama Canal Zone, are both former U.S. Army helicopter pilots in Vietnam.

De Voll said that he and the lead helicopter had precisely followed the fixed flight plan given them by the Viet Cong, flying from Gio Linh in eastern Quang Tri westward along Route 9 to Lao Bao. It was a "beautiful, clear day, with no clouds or haze," he recalled.

Neither De Voll nor Hotchkiss had ever flown to Lao Bao before, but they reported that a Canadian officer in the lead helicopter had made the trip previously and, in any case, the lead helicopter was being navigated by a Viet Cong captain who had boarded in Gio Linh for that purpose.

BOTH PILOTS emphatically denied the Viet Cong assertion that they had mistakenly turned off Route 9 onto a new road that the Communists are constructing and which runs southeast back toward the coast, away from Lao Bao. The men said they saw the junction in the road and continued to fly west.

As proof, the pilots noted that they had passed over the former U.S. Marine base at Khe Sanh and its large airstrip, which lies on route nine beyond the junction in the roads. They had radioed their position over Khe Sanh back to the ICC team in Gio Linh, according to ICCS officials. There is no other airstrip in the area.

About eight minutes later, after they had radioed they were about to begin their descent to Lao Bao, 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 Strella missile, De Voll insists, and it

caused a large explosion sending the first helicopter to the ground in flames.

The two pilots said that after they landed the Communists who met them offered them no explanation of where they were or what had happened for five hours and only then began saying that they were off course.

AFTER THAT, Hotchkiss said, the Communist officers "kept urging us to fly our chopper out of there, they wanted to get rid of it." However, the Americans said they were afraid to fly it again, and later discovered that it had been too badly damaged to fly.

The next day, the Communists drove the 10 survivors back to Gio Linh, but did not begin the journey until nightfall, saying "it was cooler to travel at night," De Voll said.

During the first five hours of the journey, he recalled, the Communists continually drove off the road over hills, through stream beds and then doubled 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," De Voll said.

(Indonesia indicated yesterday that it may withdraw from the four-power ICCS in South Vietnam unless its members can be guaranteed safety against attack, United Press International reported from Jakarta.

(An Indonesian delegate to the ICCS was one of the nine persons killed when one of the commission's helicopters was downed.

(Defense Minister Gen. Maraden Panggabean said the present situation in South Vietnam "does not enable our contingent to work effectively in the ICCS.")