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Navy's 'Seals,' Super-Secret Commandos, Are Quitting Vietnam

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Nov. 28—The last members of a special group of United States Navy commandos, whose intelligence operations in the Mekong Delta have included kidnappings of suspected Vietcong agents and many unreported clashes with guerrillas, are being pulled out of Vietnam.

The official reason for the presence in Vietnam of the commandos, called Seals—an acronym for Sea, Air, Land—has been "intelligence collection." But, according to sources closely connected to the program, the most important reason for their remaining over the last few months was their role as a contingency force for rescuing American prisoners of war, an operation with the code name Bright Light.

"The combat role of the Seals has ended," the Navy commander in Saigon, Rear Adm. Robert S. Salzer, said in a recent interview. Other military sources confirmed that most of the 30 or so men left would be pulled out early next month.

Seal combat operations in the placid, supposedly pacified Mekong Delta ended last month. Seal officers say they were stopped because of the political sensitivity of the Navy command here and because some members of the commando teams in the field have become afraid that their activities might bring down on them the kind of prosecution that convicted First Lieut. William L. Calley Jr. in the massacre of civilians at Mylai.

The Seals have never found any American prisoners of war, but they liberated 48 South Vietnamese soldiers in raids on enemy base camps in the delta swamps last year.

The commando teams can operate from high-speed river boats, from helicopters, by parachute, or by swimming under water. They are all volunteers.

The first Seal teams came to Vietnam in 1966, and at the height of American participation in the war there were 150 of them here.

In the delta last year, the Seals, brought in by helicopter, killed 50 of the enemy in encounters that were never mentioned by the United States command in Saigon. Last July, in one four-hour exchange of fire, 30 Vietcong were killed by a combination of Seal machine-gun bullets and air strikes from Navy helicopter gunships operating with the commandos.

The commandos asked a reporter not to identify the province where these operations had taken place for fear that they would be punished for talking to the press. The province has been rated 98 per cent pacified.

For more than a year now, apart from these commandos, there have been no American combat units in the delta. Most of what the Seals did until last July was in support of the Phoenix program.

Phoenix was started by the Central Intelligence Agency late in 1967 to neutralize the Communist underground by persuading its members to defect, by capturing them, or by assassinating them. The Seals helped the South Vietnamese secret police, the Police Special Branch, in many operations connected with the program.

"But in June," one officer said, "a message came out saying that in effect we were going after civilians, and they wanted us to stop."

In mid-July, all Seal operations but Bright Light were stopped until a special team from Navy headquarters could visit the teams to give them written tests on their understanding of when they could attack or return fire and when they could not—the rules of engagement.

"We stopped most of our combat operations by ourselves," one team member said, "because the rules were so strict we had to even announce that we were coming before we could shoot, and then we could shoot only when we were shot at."

Another man said: "Those guys we were after may have been dressed like civilians, but they were just as much the enemy as the North Vietnamese Army is."

The handful of commandos staying behind is training some South Vietnamese Navy men in their techniques.

A typical mission in past years, according to one authoritative source, was "to go out and abduct a VCI"—meaning Vietcong infrastructure, the usual word for an enemy agent—"bring him out of the jungle and turn him over to the Police Special Branch for interrogation."

"The primary mission of the Seals was not going out and assassinating people; it was intelligence collection," the source added. "But we were the only outfit that could go out, gather intelligence, conduct a combat operation based on it, and then analyze the results."

A Navy officer in Saigon said: "Even though no other U. S. units were going out on combat operations in the delta, it was useful for us to have the Seals around as a check on the intelligence that we had, and to do things like verifying the location of intelligence reports on enemy units by dropping down in their midst and seeing if they were there."

The Seals, like most intelligence units, often did their work under a cover. The classic cover was to send two or three men into a village posing as a medical assistance team.

One member of such a team was actually a Navy hospital corpsman. While he dispensed pills, another man collected information from agents in the Seals' pay. Often, the pills were placebo.

The Seals, an élite organization with about 250 officers and men at bases here, in Coronado, Calif., and at Little Creek, Va., have always been a matter of curiosity and slight distrust to the rest of the Navy, whose white-linen-tablecloth traditions do not easily accommodate hand-to-hand combat. The commandos look like the Army's Green Berets, not like sailors.

A barracks at one of their two camps in the Mekong delta bristled with machine guns, hand grenades and explosive charges. A sign they had put up in the bar said: "People who kill for money are professionals. People who kill for fun are sadists. People who kill for money and fun are Seals."