

Nation's Overall Combat Readiness Is Undiminished, McNamara Insists

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Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara insisted yesterday that the Nation's overall combat readiness is undiminished even though the only four complete Army divisions in the United States have been placed in training status.

He told a Pentagon news conference that the Administration's decision of last summer not to call the reserves and to use active divisions to train and expand the Regular Army was proving wise in hindsight.

The Pentagon chief indicated that the Vietnam buildup was now fairly well in hand, and said it was "increasingly clear that we can meet our current plans without calling up the reserves."

Letter to Stennis

McNamara made public a letter to Chairman John B. Stennis (D-Miss.) of the Senate Preparedness subcommittee—which had questioned the reduced readiness of the Army's strategic reserve at home—stating that the subcommittee's criticism lacked "factual perspective."

But the Pentagon flatly refused to comment on a charge by Stennis that McNamara had testified last Aug. 4 that all the Army's divisions were combat ready "without any qualifications whatsoever." At that time, Stennis said, the subcommittee's investigators had found that one division was at only 55 per cent of its authorized strength and another was at 70 per cent of strength.

Divisions Converted

Under repeated questioning, all McNamara would say was that he was not going to argue with Stennis and did not want "minor points" pressed to cast doubt on the "credibility" of Senators or officials. "We're

in a war and we need unity," he added.

In his letter to Stennis and at the news conference, McNamara conceded that four combat divisions had been converted into training units to provide replacements for Vietnam and assist in expanding the Army. He said they are manned about 50 per cent by men with fewer than four months training who under the law cannot be sent overseas.

While this move weakened some active divisions, McNamara said, over-all combat strength has not decreased, because the reserves are being kept intact and being built to greater readiness.

Newsmen asked why he had not explained this publicly before and avoided the present trouble. McNamara said he had told the Senate Armed Services Committee and Defense Appropriations Subcommittee of the situation in closed testimony Feb. 28. The testimony has not been made public yet.

Reiterates Statement

In his letter to Stennis, the Secretary reiterated a statement he made at a news conference March 2, when he said that the Nation could send 21 Army and Marine Corps combat battalions to Vietnam by July 1 under current conditions and nine additional division forces there at the same time if a reserve callup were issued now.

Later, Pentagon spokesmen said the nine divisions would include the 21 battalions and not be an addition.

McNamara stressed that expansion of the Army training establishment had added 68,000 trained men since September and would be turning out 30,000 trained GIs monthly hereafter, enabling the Army to ship the equivalent of one division to Vietnam beginning in July.

Meanwhile, U.S. officials said that the U.S. now has 230,000 in Vietnam, an increase of 15,000 this month.

At the same time, President Johnson was asked about reports that the North Vietnamese are infiltrating larger numbers into South Vietnam than ever before. He said they are "infiltrating in substantial numbers" apparently to offset

the "very heavy casualties" they are suffering. The President estimated the casualties at about 50,000 men since the first of January. U.S. officials said there were indications that the monthly infiltrations were exceeding 4500 a month.