

Just How Important Are Those Caches?

WE'RE getting all the feathers," said a frustrated U.S. army officer in Cambodia's jungled Fishhook sanctuary last week, "but we still haven't got the bird." The elusive bird is COSVN, the Communists' celebrated Central Office for South Viet Nam, and it has flown the coop every time the allies have gotten close. Pressed for the latest news on the hunt, an Administration aide wryly told reporters: "We found something that looks like this, but we aren't sure what it is." Then, deadpan, he picked up a writing pad and sketched a large five-sided building that strikingly resembled the Pentagon.

Despite the impression that the Communists run their war from some sort of E-Ring in the jungles, COSVN is actually a staff of some 2,400 people who are widely dispersed and highly mobile—too mobile to please a U.S. brigade that has been toiling in fruitless quest of COSVN for three weeks. Says a weary intelligence analyst: "We're still looking for the guy in the COSVN T shirt."

If any COSVN Communist were to wear that T shirt, it would be a somewhat arid fellow code-named "R." Pham Hung, as he is otherwise known, is a Ho Chi Minh protégé who has been headman at COSVN since 1967. It is no surprise that "R" is hard to find; he is said to travel constantly between COSVN's different units by motor bike. Two weeks ago, U.S. troops came close to capturing an important element of the headquarters. Acting on a tip, two infantry battalions raced to a bunker complex near Mimot, only to find the place all but deserted. One wounded Communist who had been left behind told about the staff's "getting on their bi-

cycles and Hondas and riding off" the day before. Left behind were five mimeograph machines, six typewriters and two rubber stamps, one of which bore the seal of the chairman of the National Liberation Front.

If COSVN has proved maddeningly miragelike, the Communist caches sprinkled throughout the sanctuaries have been very real. The question is: What is the true value of the mounds of supplies being unearthed in the sanctuaries? Officials from Washington to Saigon argue persuasively that the allies have set back the Communists by six months to a year. Certainly, a case can be made that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong have suffered a severe re-

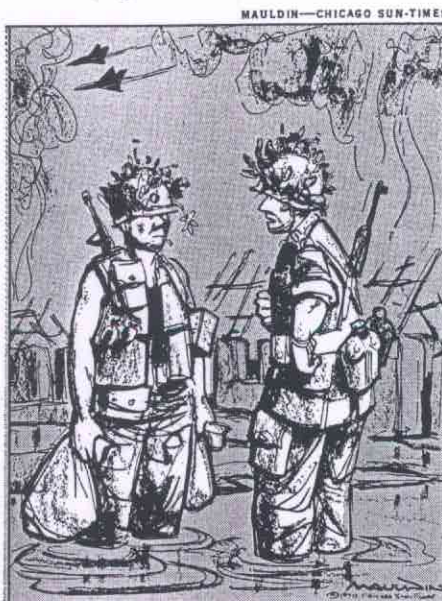
versal merely because they know that their sanctuaries are no longer immune. But as for the statistics being churned out by the clipboard-toting cache counters now roaming the sanctuaries, their importance is clouded by two facts: 1) nobody knows how much the Communists had stashed away to begin with; 2) as yet, the allies have managed to search only 5% of the 7,000 sq. mi. of borderlands. In some cases, the numbers are downright misleading. Items:

► The 11,805 rifles, pistols and sub-machine guns captured so far could equip 33 Communist battalions, as the military says. But the 126 battalions in the lower half of South Viet Nam that rely on the caches are already fully equipped. Also, most of the rifles are dated SKS models that were replaced by the AK-47 two years ago.

► The 3,334 tons of captured rice could feed 90,000 troops for 50 days. But much more than that has been captured in each of the last three years with no apparent effect on the enemy.

► The 1,700 tons of captured ammunition is a huge haul. Yet two-thirds of it is .51-cal. ammunition used for antiaircraft purposes; the small-arms ammunition used by the average paddyfield-variety Viet Cong totals only 75 tons.

The first official intelligence estimate, moreover, was that the captured ammo amounted to a week's supply, based on a use rate of 17 tons per battalion per month. A few days later, as if by magic, the estimated use rate was said to be one ton of such ammunition per battalion per month. By such judicious juggling, intelligence analysts overnight increased the value of the haul to an admirable 4½ month supply.



"NO, HANSON, YOU DIDN'T FIND A BOX OF BULLETS AND TWO BAGS OF RICE. YOU CAPTURED AN AMMO DUMP AND A SUPPLY DEPOT."