

Green Berets, Home From Vietnam,

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FORT BRAGG, N. C., March 5 — The Green Berets have come home from Vietnam with their colors and decorations, a checkered reputation and an uncertain future.

The over-all global strength of the elite corps is to be cut from a peak of 9,000, reached in 1969, to 6,000. The reduction is consistent with the over-all rate for the armed forces.

The Green Berets' status as a crack unit, which owed much to the patronage of President Kennedy, has diminished in the public mind after a series of scandals and mishaps in Vietnam.

Now, senior Army officers want to reassess past performance and future value of the Special Forces.

The lowering clouds and driving rain that met the last unit of the Green Berets to return from Vietnam, a 94-man contingent of the Fifth Special Forces group that arrived here last week, suited the outfits present circumstances. The future seems less assured than it did five years ago when people sang the Ballad of the Green Berets and thrilled to tales of their heroism.

The cuts in strength worry enthusiastic officers who believe the future will offer new opportunities for the Special Forces' particular talents.

Usefulness Stressed

"I can't think of a single situation in which we wouldn't be damn useful," one young lieutenant said.

Like most serving officers, especially those in a controversial unit, he did not wish his name to be used. In a period when the Army is under heavy fire from critics in politics and the news media, officers tend to talk freely when critical comments are not attributed.

Many senior Army commanders want to forget the unconventional war in Vietnam, which offered great scope for the Green Berets, and concentrate on the conventional defense of Western Europe and the Middle East against the mounting strength of Soviet land, sea and air forces.

Some feel that the Special Forces' usefulness in that theater would be minimal. Others are prejudiced against the corps because of their role as an elite unit, independent of Army routine.

"A special corps of this kind raises questions of morale among regular troops," a major general said recently, "the goal should be the training of every combat unit in some, perhaps all, of the special skills of the Green Berets."

An infantry major with three years service in Vietnam recalled that "the boys in my rifle company didn't like all the fuss made about the Green Berets. Hell, they were laying

it on the line every day—without headlines."

Scandal and notoriety tarnished the Green Berets' image in Vietnam.

In September, 1969, Col. Robert Rheault, commander of the Special Forces there, and seven other members of his unit were charged with the murder of a Vietnamese national, Thai Khac Chuyen.

The Army later dropped the charges. The dead man's wife was paid \$6,472 by the United States Government.

Early in the war, in June, 1965, Lieut. Richard R. Steinke was convicted by a court-martial of refusing to obey orders and expose himself to "hazardous conditions" and "hostile elements" when ordered to join a Special Forces unit in a Vietnamese village.

Despite such unsavory incidents and the present chilly military atmosphere, officers and men of the Green Berets at the John F. Kennedy Center for Military Assistance here retain their optimism about the corps' future.

Col. Ray B. Durst, who commands the Fifth Group, sees the Special Forces as "indispensable" for nation-building in underdeveloped countries and in training local armed forces in such countries in the techniques of counter-insurgency.

Military Assistance Training Teams are sent to countries to teach local forces how to fight insurgency and how to win respect for the government by helping backward areas to improve agriculture, education and sanitation.

An immediate reason for optimism is the continued popularity of the Special Forces among young soldiers of all ranks in American and foreign armies.

The center trains about 10,000 men a year in the Green Berets' special skills. In the last fiscal year, 561 students from Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia graduated from the center, which is a school for unconventional warfare.

A long-term reason for optimism is the conviction of senior Special Forces officers that unconventional wars like those in Vietnam and Malaya are likely to be the conventional wars of the future. In such wars, they emphasize, the Green Berets' roles in counter-insurgency, sabotage, special operations, reconnaissance and strategic intelligence are vitally necessary.

A Little-Known Role

Brig. Gen. Henry E. Emerson, who commands the center and the Special Forces here, believes the Special Forces play "a very important role" in helping friendly countries prepare to resist aggression or subversion. But he emphasizes that the forces must be used early when the danger is latent.

Discussing the Special Forces' performance in Vietnam, General Emerson empha-

sized that "the record of valor in battle is much better known than the truly great job the Green Berets have done in improving the lot of some very deprived people."

Special Forces camps in Vietnam, he said, housed not only allied irregulars, like the Montagnards, "but their wives and families as well.

"Many received medical care and a good diet for the first time," he went on. "They were taught improved farming methods, hygiene and many crafts. Things were definitely better for them because of the Green Berets."

The Special Forces were organized 19 years ago. At the time they consisted largely of

Face an Uncertain Future

emigrés trained to drop behind enemy lines, in the event of Soviet aggression in Europe, and there form guerrilla and sabotage teams with friendly elements of the population.

That role was abandoned in the sixties and the forces concentrated on counter-guerrilla operations in Vietnam and Laos. At the height of the Vietnam war, the Green Berets maintained more than 50 camps along the Cambodian and Laotian frontiers.

In and around these jungle fortifications, the Special Forces' teams trained and led more than 20,000 Montagnards, Cambodians and Nungs, a tribe of Chinese descent.

The teams were small, 10 or

12 men, but each soldier was highly trained in one specialty such as communications, intelligence, demolition, first aid or ordnance, and had extensive secondary training in another.

"I just can't believe," a sergeant said, "that there won't be a need for exactly this sort of job in the future. People can't fight subversion without help and training."

Green Beret units are now stationed in the Panama Canal Zone, Okinawa, Bad Toeltz, south of Munich in West Germany and in Thailand. Their numbers are never large—a group averages about 1,200 men—but the Forces' boast is that the impact is.