

Green Berets Training For Desert Warfare

FT. BRAGG, N.C. AP) — The high-tailed U.S. Air Force jet screamed through the wintry sky with heavily armed Green Berets waiting to parachute down to their desert rendezvous.

On the ground the teams regrouped for their military-political exercise. Their orders: Join with a make-believe sheik and his band, arm them and then lead the combined force in the capture of a mock oil field and pipeline held by two "enemy sheiks."

Today's Special Forces exercise in the American Southwest could become tomorrow's headline in the Middle East.

Brig. Gen. Michael D. Healy, a combat veteran of two wars and commander of most of the 5,500 men in Special Forces, says such desert training is part of a preparedness plan that goes back years.

Besides desert training, Special Forces units also conduct exercises in jungles and on snow-covered mountains.

The Special Forces were the Army's elite of the elite in the 1960s. Now they share the spotlight with three newly formed ranger battalions — 1600 men trained in commando-type landings and raids.

The Green Berets, on the other hand, work behind enemy lines with resistance forces.

The Vietnam experience of training and supporting allied forces is a third-level mission of the Special Forces. Their primary job is just the opposite: to land in unfriendly countries, organize and arm guerrilla bands, and try to pull down governments from inside.

Everyone in authority denies that the Special Forces, the Rangers, or any other U.S. military unit are making special preparations for a Middle East war. But Green Beret teams here say they are bonding up — often at their own initiative — on antitank tactics and other techniques used in desert warfare and survival. Green Beret troops with oil field backgrounds are being singled out by some units for special attention.

Do the Special Forces have specific contingency plans to carry out in the Middle East similar to the mock oil field takeover they practice in the

American desert? "It would be foolish to think we do not," one officer said.

The Green Berets have been scaled down from their Vietnam War peak of 12,500 men to the 5,500 men today. They are divided into three groups roughly the size of streamlined regiments. Some are stationed in Germany; others in Panama. Gen. Healy, with headquarters here, commands two of the three groups.

In the Pentagon office of the Army's assistant chief of staff for operations, the Special Forces are listed as an adjunct of the regular forces, with the role of staging guerrilla raids and organizing resistance movements behind enemy lines during wartime.

Nothing is said about similar operations carried out secretly against some country during peacetime. The euphemism among military people for such missions is "destabilization."

Asked about the Green Berets' role as destabilizers, Gen. Healy said that to his knowledge the Special Forces never have carried out such operations in peace time. The watchword is preparedness rather than action, the general said, and added in an interview:

"We are as much a deterrent force as SAC [Strategic Air Command]. Our unconventional guerrilla warfare capability is vital to the United States' national interest. The other guy [potential enemy] knows that if he tries anything my people may be running around soon in his backyard.

The Special Forces operates somewhat like SAC in several respects, including access to nuclear weapons — "A very, very sensitive subject," Gen. Healy said, without elaboration.

The three 1,500-man groups are assigned responsibility for different areas of the world. Operational teams are expected to have at least one man familiar with each language that might be encountered. All must have some knowledge of the religious, political and ethnic makeup of their target countries, which the Pentagon and the Special Forces command decline to identify.