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Green Berets Tackle a New Job

By RICHARD HALLORAN

FORT BRAGG, N. C.—The Army's elite Special Forces, which made their reputation in counterinsurgency operations against Vietnamese Communist guerrillas in the Vietnam War, have taken on a new job.

A task force of 96 highly trained Green Beret soldiers is on a 12-hour alert here, ready to slip out to rescue a kidnapped United States ambassador, recover a stolen nuclear weapon or free the victims of a terrorist hijacking.

The new job is in line with the changed mission of the force after the end of the Vietnam War. The Special Forces have reverted to the role assigned them when they were formed in the 1950's. They are guerrillas themselves, not just assigned to fighting guerrillas or to train others to fight them.

"As wearers of the Green Beret," says an officer here, "we are supposed to be teachers, developers, and organizers of guerrilla forces." They are also trained to take on clandestine operations such as penetrating deep into enemy territory to gather strategic intelligence.

Rendezvous With 'Revolutionaries'

As part of the training one night within the next few weeks, 12 soldiers will drop out of the sky into a thick forest in western North Carolina, roll up and bury their parachutes and move out quietly to meet a band of "civilian revolutionaries."

The soldiers will organize the civilians into a guerrilla force, train them in weapons, demolition and tactics, and then lead them on raids and ambushes against the authorities, whom the civilians consider to be oppressive.

If the soldiers are successful after a week of action, the maneuver will end and they will come back to Fort Bragg to be awarded their green berets, showing that they have entered the ranks of the Army's elite Special Forces.

The Special Forces is smaller and leaner than it was during the Vietnam War. They are authorized 3,100 qualified men, plus others for support, down from a peak of 8,000 during the war.

The Fifth and Seventh Special Forces groups are here at Fort Bragg, with the Seventh having a battalion of about 260 men developed in the Panama Canal Zone. The Tenth Special

Continued on Page 70, Column 1

Green Berets Tackle a New Job: They're Resuming Guerrilla Role

Continued from First Page,
Second Section

Forces Group is at Fort Devens, Mass., with a battalion posted in Europe. There are also four reserve groups.

The Green Berets have retained their mission of assisting threatened governments that are supported by the United States, but that mission now has a lower priority. They are also capable of helping out after a natural disaster and were the first into Guatemala after the earthquake there last February.

Pentagon planners contend that the Special Forces contribute to deterrence. "We worry about what the Russians are going to do with their seven airborne divisions," says one officer. "Our Special Forces cause the Russians to worry about what we're going to do."

Despite the new emphasis, some Green Berets wonder what their role really is. Many are envious of the Israelis who struck the Entebbe airfield in Uganda to free victims of an air hijacking. "Do you think our Government would send us on a raid like that?" a senior officer asks wistfully. He answers his own question: "Well, I don't."

Others tinker with the idea that Green Berets can be used against terrorists or should be trained in urban guerrilla warfare. Still others say they should stick to clandestine operations and training foreign guerrillas friendly to the United States and leave direct action to the Rangers.

Rangers in Black Berets

The two new Ranger Battalions, whose men wear black berets, are light infantry that can be deployed anywhere in the world. One battalion of 588 men, as against about 800 in a regular battalion, is at Fort Stewart, Ga., and the other at Fort Lewis, Wash.

The Special Forces, like any peacetime army, are training on everything, from parachute free falls from 20,000 feet over the earth to scuba dives 130 feet under the sea. "We're busy," says a staff officer. "We're not doing anything spectacular, but we're working our tail ends off."

Individual Green Berets are attending military speciality schools, and are enrolled in advanced intelligence and operations courses and in language and area training. Everyone keeps physically fit, with 48-year-old colonels and master sergeants still running at least four miles a day. "There are no fat men on this post," one said.

Those on alert are subject to "callouts," in which training officers suddenly blow the whistle and send them off for 36-to 72-hour drills that may call for parachuting into the waters off Key West, simulating an attack on the naval station there to rescue a political hostage and escape by boat to meet an airplane that will bring them home.

In addition, a contingent of Green Beret officers and sergeants have temporarily been pulled off their regular duties to train 1,000 basic recruits here. The Army took in more than planned last summer and 11 posts around the country have been ordered to train the overflow.

Only about half the 80 men who start each course make it through the first phase of training, in which recruits must survive alone in rugged terrain for 10 days and complete assigned nighttime missions. "We want a guy with some self-confidence," says a Captain. "We want a guy who can operate at night—the Viet Cong ran circles around us at night in Vietnam. And we want a guy who can follow instructions."

Third Phase of Training

The second phase of training includes intensive work on light and heavy weapons, both American and foreign, or radio communications, or engineering and demolition, or field medicine, to give a man a speciality. A few more recruits fall out here.

The third phase includes training in guerrilla tactics, intelligence gathering, sabotage and the final problem of dropping into the forest to organize the guerrilla band. The civilians are played by soldiers not in Special Forces—and by a few true civilians who join in for the fun of it.

Only about one-third of those who start the first phase make it to graduation.

For officers, the course includes the same first, or "selection," phase, followed by 13 weeks of tactics, direct-action missions and intelligence. Here, too, some do not make it. One young officer told his instructors, "Every man has his threshold of fear. Mine is being left out there alone for so long."

But a major, now in a Special Forces unit, says, "I don't want to make a career in Special Forces. But it's the thing I enjoy most. I have more variety in what I do here than I would anywhere else."