

# Saigon's Armed Forces Improving, but Big

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— The South Vietnamese armed forces are rapidly assuming the major part of the ground fighting in Vietnam. They are doing by far the most killing and dying, and they are doing it with better-trained men, more modern equipment and greater mobility than ever.

While South Vietnamese leaders and their American advisers are cheered by how far the forces have come, they are also chastened by the knowledge that the war is far from over and that serious problems persist.

Nevertheless, there is no question among American and South Vietnamese military experts that the basic facts of Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird's recent "heartening" assessment of the army are valid.

Eighteen months ago the

Vietnamese Army was a still largely inexperienced, static defense force around major population centers; the Americans did most of the bloody fighting in the jungles and border areas. Today the South Vietnamese have a well-equipped and more seasoned army, which has taken over the most dangerous and far-flung missions while many of the Americans pack their gear and leave for home.

When United States troop strength was at its high of 534,000 men a year and a half ago, Americans accounted for two out of three enemy killed and deaths ran at over 200 a week.

### Reversal in Statistics

Today, with 200,000 fewer Americans in the war, United States losses run below 30 combat deaths a week and four-fifths of the enemy dead, according to official Saigon figures, are accounted for by the South Vietnamese.

## Test Is Still Ahead

They have assumed almost full responsibility for guarding the border areas and have won praise for branching out to provide grudging but effective help to the Cambodians against the North Vietnamese.

"Can they hack it?" an American general exclaimed recently when asked if the South Vietnamese could fight on alone. "They're doing all of the fighting right damn now, aren't they?"

Other American experts are more cautious. To them the big question is not whether the South Vietnamese are doing well now, with the war at a lull, but how they will do in the future, when the American ground troops are gone and they are alone in the field with a skilled enemy that shows no sign of wanting to quit.

### Still Largely Untested

Most of the anxieties of those who look ahead turn on unanswered questions about shaky morale, low pay—\$40 a month for a private with one child—climbing desertion rates, social and class distinctions, and the ultimate effect of the United States withdrawal of most of the supply system.

The point that emerges most consistently in discussions of

the so-called Vietnamization program is that despite its notable progress, the South Vietnamese forces are still largely untested. They have performed well, although not very strenuously, in Cambodia, but no one knows what would happen if new enemy pressure should catch them with lines overextended.

Another important point is that the army is still made up of laborers and peasants commanded by urban-educated middle-class officers who understand the importance of family connections and politics in the awarding of promotions.

The heavily populated Mekong Delta area suggests the future pattern of Vietnamization. The troops will be Vietnamese but the tasks requiring special skill and special machinery will remain American responsibilities, as will the long-range supply system.

Vietnamese air power has expanded, but the burden of tactical air strikes in support of troops will also be an American responsibility as long as the United States command does not trust the air force with big jets capable of reaching Hanoi.

Officials in Saigon and Wash-

ington do not like to guess how many Americans will be needed to perform the remaining tasks, but estimates here range from 100,000 to 200,000 support troops, plus their security forces, for the indefinite future.

Many of the issues still facing the South Vietnamese cannot be overcome by allied help alone.

The increasing desertions, for example, now top the list of problems, as far as the United States Military Assistance Command is concerned. During 1969 South Vietnamese soldiers deserted at the rate of 8,000 a month, or nearly 10 per cent a year, according to the Saigon figures. Last year the numbers jumped by 50 per cent.



Recruits running during a session at the training center



Vietnamese and American officers quickly add that most of the deserters go home for a while and eventually join other units or the local militia. There is no evidence that they are joining the enemy.

The strong family ties that encourage desertion are reflected in the fact that civilians spend a lot of time thinking of ways to keep their sons out of the army. An effective dodge is a matter of pride.

Draft-exemption certificates cost about \$500, or a soldier may arrange with his commander to drop out, while his commander pockets his pay.

Despite the progress made since the days of the French, when a private would have been disrespectful if he looked his battalion commander in the eye, the armed forces are also plagued by a class-consciousness that impedes fair promotions and prevents the kind of solidarity that American soldiers are so proud of.

With American prodding, a number of senior noncommissioned officers were recently admitted to officer training school, but it is seems unlikely that prestige-conscious officers will encourage the process.

Lacking a pool of qualified platoon and company commanders, the army has not been able to mount the kind of small-unit operations necessary to chase bands of enemy troops as the war increasingly turns to brief clashes instead of large-scale battles.

Those problems that offer some solution are being vigorously dealt with. The army has been expanded to more than a million men, with 450,000 in 10 regular infantry divisions, the marines and the rangers, and 550,000 in the militia that provide local security.

Training is being improved and made more consistent throughout the country. Two years ago soldiers were still being trained to scale walls and crawl under barbed wire as though they would be attacking their own outposts. Now the emphasis is on maneuvers and ambush techniques.

The air force and the navy have doubled in size, to about 40,000 men each over the last two years, although the expansion has been plagued by growing pains, primarily a lack of trained maintenance men.

The American command is hopeful that as the forces expand pride and patriotism will spark renewed determination to carry on the fight.



Photographs for the New York Times by NANCY MORAN  
South Vietnamese soldiers during a pause in their training at a military center near Hue

#### Wide Role for the Militia

According to the current strategy, the militias will play an increasingly important role as the main-force North Vietnamese are eliminated. The Regional and Popular Forces, with their close familiarity with the areas where they serve, will be expected to ferret out the remaining guerrillas.

Having troops living and fighting near their homes can have an adverse effect, however. Militiamen have found that their families become targets of terrorism if they become too aggressive, and province chiefs concede that in many cases the local garrisons have reached hands-off accommodations with the enemy.

Both American and Vietnamese officers caution that now is not the best time to peer into the future because of the lull. Since no one believes the North Vietnamese are giving up, there is fear that the smoothness of Vietnamization so far may not hold up if another Communist offensive is launched.

"What happens if the North Vietnamese are just waiting for us to go home before they come streaming out of the hills?" a senior American adviser asked.

The same question has been put to President Nixon and Secretary Laird and neither has answered it directly. It is the final imponderable of Vietnamization.

If American withdrawals continue at the present rate, the answer to whether the South Vietnamese will be able to stand alone will be given over the next two years.