

Saigon to Get More U.S. Jets to Take Over Air War

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The Nixon Administration, working to equip South Vietnam to take over full responsibility for the air war within its boundaries once American air power has been removed, has decided on another substantial increase in the size of Saigon's air force.

Two years ago, the United States decided to double the Vietnamese air arm. Now, senior Pentagon planners say, the new increase will be 50 per cent larger still.

Most of this build-up will be completed by the summer of 1973. But one element—up to three squadrons of fighters designed to maintain air availability—will not become available until 1974 or 1975, officials say.

Thus, according to the Deputy Secretary of Defense, David Packard, the United States will probably have to keep some fighters in the region, either on aircraft carriers or in Thailand, to provide emergency protection over an interim period after American ground and air forces have left Vietnam.

Deterrent Factor

This stand-by protection, Mr. Packard said in an interview, would be aimed at deterring Hanoi from introducing large numbers of fighter-bombers over South Vietnam after the departure of the United States force.

But, he added, as soon as the so-called International Fighter now in an advanced stage of development, rolls off the as-

sembly line, Saigon will be expected to acquire it and become fully self-sufficient in both offensive and defensive air roles.

Military analysts say the fledgling Vietnamese air force has come a long way from the days of its establishment by the French after World War II. When France pulled out of Vietnam in 1954, that air force consisted of 32 old transports and close-support fighters.

The first move to modernity came in 1966 when the United States decided to build a 20-squadron force. Two years later, it was decided to double the force to 40 squadrons.

This expansion is not yet complete. Officials say the Vietnamese now have 32 squadrons comprising more than 600 aircraft; this will rise to about 800 planes when the 40-squadron program is completed over the next year or two.

1,200 Plane Force

The latest expansion decision will raise the number of aircraft to more than 1,200 and the number of squadrons to 50, Pentagon sources say.

But because of a shortage of experienced majors and colonels in the Vietnamese air force, Saigon will not add more units, but will expand many of its 18-plane squadrons to 24 to 32 aircraft.

Vietnamese pilots and maintenance men, military men say, compare favorably with their American counterparts.

"Our pilots fly 100 missions, or spend a year in Vietnam, and they go home," one officer said. "But Vietnamese are behind a desk. Some of or promoted out of the cockpit

pilots fly until they are killed. They have flown 1,000 combat missions; they are good enough to fly in any air force in the world."

Better Than U.S. Standards

Maintenance is so good, he added, that the Vietnamese generally exceed the American standard for the number of hours flown each month by each aircraft.

"As we continue to expand and dilute the base of experienced people," one man said, "this record may drop for a time. But by and large, the Vietnamese Air Force is first rate. Vietnamese ground units—and this is a new development—now often prefer to receive support from their own boys, not ours."

The focus to date has been on stressing close air support, transport and tactical reconnaissance. The Vietnamese have been provided with only one squadron of 18 F-5 aircraft that could be used to defend against air attack.

Officials explain this short supply in two ways. They say American planners felt the air threat was rather remote and that the major need over the next couple of years would be the support of Vietnamese combat units at home.

But in recent months, planners have become concerned about the possibility that North Vietnam, after the United States pulled out, might try to move several divisions of troops into the northern provinces of South Vietnam and support them for the first time with jet fighters.

Until recently, the F-5 unit has been trained only to provide strafing and bombing support for combat ground units. But now its pilots are also being trained in fighter tactics. South Vietnamese radar analysts are being trained in air defense tactics and coordination.

Plan to Best MIG-21

And with the selection in November of the Northrop Corporation to build a relatively inexpensive new fighter designed expressly for the job of besting the MIG-21, a decision was made to provide up to three squadrons of the planes to Saigon.

Until now, most of the aircraft turned over to Saigon have been from Air Force and Army stocks, rather than factory new.

North Vietnam has about 91 MIG-21's, along with 166 older MIG-17's and 19's.

"Given the limitation on resources, it would be foolish to match, on a one-for-one basis, North Vietnam's air force," said one official. "Besides, most of us still think the prospects of a big air threat are remote. But if we don't provide Vietnam with a reasonable defensive capability, Hanoi could be tempted."

And once some self-sufficiency is achieved, other analysts point out, the United States should ultimately be able to disengage entirely from combat support of Vietnam.

But the bulk of the newest air force expansion is in the area of helicopters and attack aircraft. In virtually every pitched battle in the Vietnam war, whenever North Vietnamese of Vietcong units stood and fought for any period of time, the tide was turned by the extensive use of bombing and artillery fire.