

# Vietnam Reporters Complain of News Lid

## Saigon

Many senior military men in Saigon, acutely sensitive to what they regard as the image problems of the United States Army, appear to be instituting tighter controls on the flow of information to the public.

These restrictions have mainly taken the form of limiting reporters' access to GIs and, in some cases, flatly refusing to release material routinely made available in the past.

The resulting outcries from the press have become so insistent that American civilian officials in Saigon have alerted the Defense Department in Washington, informed sources said today.

## EASE

The Army has never been entirely at ease with reporters poking around in operation of the Vietnam war and at least once before, 18 months ago, a petition was drawn up by newsmen protesting information policies.

Veteran journalists, however, say the situation is decidedly worse, largely because the Army has been stung by a series of embarrassing stories starting with the disclosure in November, 1969, of the My Lai massacre.

The First Air Cavalry (Airmobile) for example, was felt to be relatively relaxed about the press until a CBS television crew filmed a group of soldiers holding a "pot party" at a remote combat base last month.

## BAD

When General George Putnam, the division commander, heard about the film, an information officer recalled last week, "he went through the roof. It's no secret that pot is smoked. It's just that it made the First Cav look so

damned bad."

Now escort officers are assigned to all reporters who visit the First Air Cavalry. One reporter who went to a fire support base recently found himself being followed by three first lieutenants wherever he turned.

As the reporter attempted to interview GIs, one of the lieutenants wrote down the questions.

## STORIES

The First Brigade headquarters of the Fifth Infantry Division (Mechanized), also concerned about the marijuana stories, recently issued a directive to its information officer warning against reporters who might write un-

favorable stories about the unit.

At the 101st Airborne Division, Major Edwin Smith, the division information chief, acknowledged earlier this month that he conducts "general inquiries" into the background of journalists who propose to visit the unit.

These inquiries, Smith told the Associated Press, include whether other military commands have regarded the reporter's past stories as favorable or unfavorable. However, the major said, the rating had no effect on how the reporter was treated.

## ESCORTS

When newsmen descended on the 101st headquarters at Camp Eagle to see the Bob Hope show on December 22, Smith and his aides all but ordered reporters to stay away from GIs. Several who refused were promptly assigned escorts.

As far as the release of material is concerned, non-journalist civilians have been told by high-ranking information officers in the Military Assistance Command Vietnam that it is harder and harder to get data on anything that is remotely touchy.

"The press is just going to use anything we give them against us anyway," is the reasoning ascribed to officers who simply turn away the requests passed along by the information people.

This applies not only to the gamier subjects such as race and drug problems, but also apparently to such basic questions about the war's progress as Vietnamization and success of the bombing of supply and infiltration routes in Laos.

While suspicion of the press is far from novel among the military, long-time mediators between the two say it is getting worse.

"Let's face it," one know-

ledgeable civilian said, "the military is in a stage of retreat here and they are bound to be hyper-precautious."

On another note, a general who performed a heroic rescue of some of his men, dissuaded reporters from recounting the story earlier this month, with the explanation, according to those who heard it, that "any publicity about a general these days is bad publicity."

The relationship between the press and the military is further strained, in the view of the civilian mediators, by the fact that war news is harder to come by as the scale of the conflict and the American presence in Vietnam diminishes.

The daily briefing known as the "5 o'clock follies," have become perfunctory affairs, consisting of a few curt questions. Frequently they last less than five minutes.

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