

# 'Hapless' Troops Different View of Vietnamization

By Ed Rasen  
Pacific News Service

## Landing Zone Kala, South Vietnam

After two years of intensive training and aid, it is said that South Vietnamese forces, through steady, gradual progress, have achieved military standards that will enable United States troops to be withdrawn and transfer the bulk of the fighting.

U.S. Defense Secretary Melvin Laird recently spoke about the "success of Vietnamization," and Military Assistance Command Vietnam spokesmen now speak about how last spring's Cambodian operations dramatically instilled new morale throughout all South Vietnamese units.

### AREA

However, during an eight-day excursion in the jungle with troops of the South Vietnamese Sixth Regiment, Second Infantry Division, operating near the Laotian border prior to the official announcement of the invasion of Laos, this reporter saw a quite different situation around Kham Duc, in northwestern Vietnam.

According to Vietnamese commanders and U.S. advisers, each infantry battalion inserted into the area had only 300 to 330 men, which means that the units were initially starting at half-strength.

After three weeks of operating, the regiment had suffered just nine killed in action and 40 wounded in action, yet the total manpower strength of the four battalions had dropped to under 1000, representing a loss of more than 250 men.

U.S. Army personnel working at the Kham Duc airstrip, where eight - to - ten U.S. Air Force C-123s and C-130s land every day, said that groups of South Vietnamese soldiers quietly appear, board the empty planes and head back to secure

areas. Since there are no flight manifests used, and all the flights are unscheduled, it is a simple matter to leave the area without official orders.

But even the above figures for desertion do not reflect the actual condition of Sixth regiment morale.

Many casualties are induced by "accidents." Among these incidents: five men were wounded by a grenade detonated by one of them in the First battalion; one man shot himself through the hand with an M-16 so he would be sent back to a safe area; one man was killed and two wounded when a South Vietnamese gunship attacked the Fourth battalion; the Second battalion reported three incidents of self-inflicted wounds and casualties from U.S. gunships.

### JUNGLE

Traveling with Vietnamese infantry in the jungle along the Laotian border, one gets

a clear picture of how this situation affects "combat readiness." The Vietnamese troops didn't want to engage the enemy, and when they did the results were not good.

For example, the entire Second battalion was held up for a day by an estimated force of 20 North Vietnamese soldiers. The Sixth reconnaissance company (70 men) was trapped by six Montagnards who never fired a shot. The Fourth battalion was being confronted and halted by enemy probes of two or three men.

The commander of the Third battalion, located at landing zone Dak Rose, two miles from the Laotian border, would never send his men more than several hundred meters off the mountain for fear of making contact with the enemy and losing more men.

Any significant combat action taken is almost always under the initiative of U.S. advisers. After three weeks of combat in the area, it was clear that even pressure from the advisers couldn't force the South Vietnamese to take any action for the total operations figures listed only 94 enemy killed, 23 individual and six crew-served weapons captured.

Strangely, intelligence reports indicate large numbers of enemy troops in the area.

### SUPPORT

The entire brunt of the airwar in support of this operation was being borne by the U.S. because commanders of the South Vietnamese gunships and fighter bombers were unwilling to accept any responsibility for air cover.

Most Vietnamese helicop-

## Hanoi Claims U.S. Plane

Tokyo

North Vietnam said an unmanned U.S. reconnaissance plane was shot down yesterday over Haiphong, the country's principal port city.

The official Vietnam News Agency, in a transmission monitored here, said the plane was "shot down on the spot by local armed forces." It raised to 3375 the number of American aircraft shot down over North Vietnam, the agency said.

United Press

ter pilots will fly missions only when the weather is good.

The Vietnamese gunships never arrive in the Kham Duc area before 9 a.m. and always depart by 4 p.m., in order to be home for dinner.

The Vietnamese ground commanders don't condemn this behavior, for they feel that it is the responsibility of the United States to provide air support, despite the fact that the Vietnamese have sufficient planes and pilots for the job.

Numerous military spokesmen talk of "the success of Vietnamization," but senior U.S. advisers to the Sixth regiment explain how pathetic and hapless the South Vietnamese are on all levels.

They speak in private about the complete incompetence of Lieutenant Colonel Nghin, commander of the Sixth, and how his position is a political appointment.

There is apprehension among most old-time U.S. advisers about the ability of the South Vietnamese to hold their own in Vietnam and the areas of Cambodia to which they are now committed, let alone new regions deep in heavily jungled central Laos.