

300,000 G.I.'s in Vietnam Await Nixon's Speech on

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SAIGON, South Vietnam April 6—When President Nixon makes his announcement on troop withdrawals, some of the most attentive listeners will be the 300,000 G.I.'s at positions from the demilitarized zone to the Mekong River delta.

United States troop strength here is considerably reduced from its peak of nearly 550,000 men in mid-1969 and there have been some major changes in the American role since President Nixon began announcing troop withdrawals two years ago. But the American force is still big enough that almost any significant combat, involves it, even if only in the use of advisers or helicopters.

In the first three months of this year alone, 551 United States soldiers have been killed and 3,589 have been wounded. To reduce the number of casualties would take more than a reduction in the number of troops in Vietnam. It would take a downward scaling of both American and Vietnamese combat operations, and much of that depends on what the enemy does.

Of the total number of United States soldiers here now, military officials say, about 100,000 are still actual combat troops.

50,000 in the North

Sixty-thousand other troops—artillerymen, engineers, communication personnel and the like—are described as "combat support" troops but they, too, end up at the front lines more often than not. Ninety thousand more are described by the command as "service support" personnel: they man the desks and occupy the rear-area bases around Saigon and Danang. And about 50,000 fly or support Air Force and Marine transports, bombers and fighters from a string of air bases along the Vietnamese coast.

About half the ground combat troops are in the northern five provinces of South Vietnam, a mostly mountainous area that is so hotly contested that the South Vietnamese call it their northern military region.

The American G.I.'s who are farthest north are the 5,000 men of the First Brigade of the Fifth Infantry Division (Mechanized), which is based in a sprawling camp at Quangtri that is either deeply mired in red mud or hovering in clouds of red dust.

Many of the combat soldiers of the brigade have been out in the mountains around Khesanh since the end of last January, supporting the Vietnamese operations in Laos by keeping the rear area secure. They have not been at the front but many of them have been killed or wounded.

Their presence so far north was not generally known before the Laos operations began. "Bob Hope came up to Camp Eagle for Christmas and said he was in the farthest north base in Vietnam" said one G.I., Richard Arguelles, of West 17th Street, New York City, as he prepared to go on a combat operation last week.

"All of us who went down for the show started booing and we straightened him out on that one," one of his friends added.

Camp Eagle, outside of Hue, is the headquarters of the 101st Airborne Division, many of whose 20,000 men have also

been involved in support of the operations in Laos.

Though the name Camp Eagle suggests that the men of the 101st might seldom touch ground, it isn't so. The airborne troops have seen heavy fighting in the mountains west of Hue and in their operational area in the Laos operation between Quangtri and Khesanh.

All of the region between the DMZ and Danang used to be the operational area of the United States Marines of the First and Third Divisions, but nearly all of them have gone.

There are still about 6,000 men of the First Marine Regimental Landing Team providing security in the "rocket belt" around Danang, but the rest of the Marine units have either pulled out or are in the process of doing so.

New Pullouts

Marines Pull Out

The third major American fighting unit in the Northern Military Region is the Americal Division, based at Chulai, with about 20,000 ground combat troops.

One of its three brigades of about 5,000 men was sent north to support the operations in Laos, but even those who were left behind have not been spared the rigors of combat. Thirty-three Americans were killed and 75 were wounded a week ago Sunday in an attack on Firebase Marianne, one of their artillery bases in the mountains south of Chulai.

In Military Region II, the biggest one, the only major American unit is the 173d Airborne Brigade, which at present has fewer than 5,000 men. It is based at Landing Zone English, just north of Bongson.

There, too, the combat is little noticed outside Vietnam. On April 3, a North Vietnamese force of unknown size attacked a unit of the 173d Airborne 19 miles south of Bongson and killed seven G.I.'s and wounded 23 in a 10-hour battle.

Many of the helicopters that flew the South Vietnamese troops into Laos in February and March came from far to the south, from the First Cavalry Division (Airmobile), which has a mobile base outside Saigon.

The division has one brigade of about 5,000 troops operating in the area to the east both of Saigon and the large army support and headquarters base at Longbinh. Its commanders turned down a recent request to visit one of its field locations because the brigade was in the process of moving its headquarters back to Bienhoa, just across a four lane highway from Longbinh.

There are no ground combat



Associated Press

U.S. SOLDIERS AT THE FRONT aiming howitzer at enemy positions near base overlooking Route 9, about 12 miles east of Khesanh, South Vietnam. Americans man many outposts near buffer zone and many have been killed or wounded since Laos incursion.

units in military region IV, which consists of the Mekong River delta, according to the command.

But there are helicopter units there—mainly engaged in providing air support for Vietnamese base areas across the border in Cambodia—and there are American advisers, as there are practically everywhere in Vietnam.

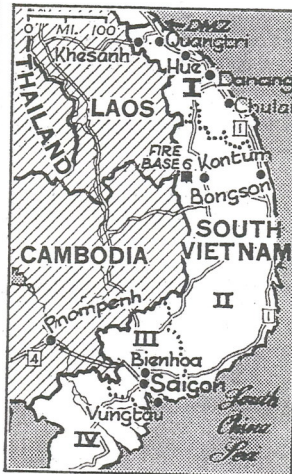
“There are 5,000, maybe 6,000 advisers in Vietnam,” a spokesman for the United States military command in Saigon said recently. “Nobody knows.”

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Besides all of this, there are between 3,000 and 4,000 helicopters scattered throughout the country.

Besides all of this, there are about 12,000 artillerymen operating in bases sometimes far from any main force. These bases are seldom heard about except when an attack is made against them.

Americans man artillery bases near the demilitarized zone, west of Khesanh, and along the Laotian border in Kontum Province. A South



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Half of the remaining American ground combat troops are in the north in Military Region I.

Vietnamese artillery base was overrun there last Wednesday and five American advisers were either killed or declared missing.

There are also more than a score of American artillery bases in Military Region III,

which includes the area around Saigon, but most of the bases are near the Cambodian border in the vicinity of Tay Ninh.

One of these, called blue, was overrun last Feb. 22 by a Vietcong commando squad that killed two Americans, wounded nine, and blew up an oil storage area. Thirty-five of the 135 Americans at the base were army engineers, a fact that illustrates another far-flung but little known American military presence in Vietnam.

Air cover and transportation for South Vietnamese operations in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia come from air bases at Danang, Phucut, Nhatrang, Camranh Bay, Phanrang, Bienhoa, Tansonnhut near Saigon, and Vungtau. Each of these bases also has a large support detachment.

In addition, there are 23,000 Navy men on aircraft carriers, cruisers and destroyers off the coast of Vietnam. They are not included in the figures of troop strength for Vietnam and neither are the Air Force men at bases in Thailand. They fly many of the bombing runs, including all the B-52 missions in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.