

U.S. Downgrades 2 More Vietnam Command

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SAIGON, April 13—The United States command soon will downgrade its command system in South Vietnam's two middle military regions to reflect the United States Army's transition from a combat role to a support and advisory function, military sources disclosed today.

The move will abolish the two Field Force—or combat force—commands that direct American combat operations and military assistance programs in Military Region III, which takes in the provinces around Saigon, and Military Region II, which embraces the Central Highlands to the north.

The Field Force commands will be replaced by "regional assistance commands," the sources said. The new commands will control what remain of the United States combat forces in the two military regions, and, as these are withdrawn, will direct the many thousands of American servicemen that will still be needed to train, supply, support, maintain and transport the South Vietnamese troops carrying on the fight.

Withdrawals Not Affected

The new structure will not affect the rate of troop withdrawals and does not represent a change in the Army's disengagement policy, the sources said.

An essentially similar system is already being used in Military Region IV, which takes in the Mekong delta.

The Delta Military Assistance command oversees the work of more than 19,000 American support troops still in the delta almost two years after the last United States combat troops were withdrawn.

When the new commands are established in Military Regions II and III, only Military Region I in the north, commonly known as "I Corps," will retain a United States combat command structure.

One of the functions of the new regional assistance commands will be to "maintain a workable command structure" for the approximately 16,000 American ground troops still in

combat roles in Military Regions II and III, the sources said.

The Field Force structure that is soon to be abolished was designed to command divisions and brigades and not the diminishing and constantly shifting smaller units that are now being assembled from the remnants of the American forces there, they said.

The sources conceded that one reason for the new system was to avoid a breakdown of the command structure if the enemy should launch a sudden

offensive against the remaining United States troops.

"You've got to plan ahead the troops withdrawals," a Army officer explained. "But the command has got to maintain its flexibility—you've got to be concerned with the safety of your troops right to the end."

Many Support Troops

The American combat role will be ended first in Military Region III, it is believed here. Just five battalion-sized units—at most 5,000 men—remain of the more than 50,000 United States ground combat troops who were in the region in 1969, according to official Army sources.

But there are 100,000 or so additional American soldiers who man the artillery and fly and maintain the warplanes and helicopters that support the South Vietnamese troops, and work in the United States command's sprawling rear-area headquarters and supply depots just north of Saigon.



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Combat commands have been or will be downgraded in three regions (shaded). In the north, the old system stands.