

NOV 29 1971

THE NEW YORK TIMES, MONDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 1971

# Navy's Commandos Quitting Vietnam

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Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Nov. 28—The last members of a special group of United States Navy commandos, whose intelligence operations in the Mekong Delta have included kidnappings of suspected Vietcong agents and many unreported clashes with guerrillas, are being pulled out of Vietnam.

The official reason for the presence in Vietnam of the commandos, called Seals—an acronym for Sea, Air, Land—has been "intelligence collection." But, according to sources closely connected to the program, the most important reason for their remaining over the last few months was their role as a contingency force for rescuing American prisoners of war, an operation with the code name Bright Light.

"The combat role of the Seals has ended," the Navy commander in Saigon, Rear Adm. Robert S. Salzer, said in a recent interview. Other military sources confirmed that most of the 30 or so men left would be pulled out early next month.

Seal combat operations in the placid, supposedly pacified Mekong Delta ended last month. Seal officers say they were stopped because of the political sensitivity of the Navy command here and because some members of the commando teams in the field have become afraid that their activities might bring down on them the kind of prosecution that convicted First Lieut. William L. Calley Jr. in the massacre of civilians at My Lai.

The Seals have never found any American prisoners of war, but they liberated 48 South Vietnamese soldiers in raids on

enemy base camps in the delta swamps last year.

The commando teams can operate from high-speed river boats, from helicopters, by parachute, or by swimming under water. They are all volunteers.

The first Seal teams came to Vietnam in 1966, and at the height of American participation in the war there were 150 of them here.

In the delta last year, the Seals, brought in by helicopter, killed 50 of the enemy in encounters that were never mentioned by the United States command in Saigon. Last July, in one four-hour exchange of fire, 30 Vietcong were killed by a combination of Seal machine-gun bullets and air strikes from Navy helicopter gunships operating with the commandos.

The commandos asked a reporter not to identify the province where these operations had taken place for fear that they would be punished for talking to the press. The province has been rated 98 per cent pacified.

For more than a year now, apart from these commandos, there have been no American combat units in the delta. Most of what the Seals did until last July was in support of the Phoenix program.

Phoenix was started by the Central Intelligence Agency late in 1967 to neutralize the Communist underground by persuading its members to defect, by capturing them, or by assassinating them. The Seals helped the South Vietnamese secret police, the Police Special Branch, in many operations connected with the program.

"But in June," one officer said, "a message came out say-

ing that in effect we were going after civilians, and they wanted us to stop."

In mid-July, all Seal operations but Bright Light were stopped until a special team from Navy headquarters could visit the teams to give them written tests on their understanding of when they could attack or return fire and when they could not—the rules of engagement.

"We stopped most of our combat operations by ourselves," one team member said, "because the rules were so strict we had to even announce that we were coming before we could shoot, and then we could shoot only when we were shot at."

Another man said: "Those guys we were after may have been dressed like civilians, but they were just as much the enemy as the North Vietnamese Army is."

The handful of commandos staying behind is training some South Vietnamese Navy men in their techniques.

A typical mission in past years, according to one authoritative source, was "to go out and abduct a VCI"—meaning Vietcong infrastructure, the usual word for an enemy agent, "bring him out of the jungle and turn him over to the Police Special Branch for interrogation."

"The primary mission of the Seals was not going out and assassinating people; it was intelligence collection," the source added. "But we were the only outfit that could go out, gather intelligence, conduct a combat operation based on it, and then analyze the results."