

S. Viet Advisers Would Go Home

By Bill Richards

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FT. CHAFFEE, Ark.— Among the thousands of Vietnamese who are rapidly filling up this military base-turned-refugee camp, there is a handful who want to go back to Vietnam.

They are members of what once was the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and were brought to the United States for specialized military training months before the fall of their country. They are serving as advisers to U.S. military and civilian officials who are trying to cope with a steadily enlarging number of refugees here, a gathering expected to hit 20,000 or more by the end of the month.

On duty here, the 23 Vietnamese officers and three enlisted personnel wear sharply pressed uniforms with accompanying brass and shining shoes. But they are soldiers without a war or an army and some of them say they want to go home.

For two Vietnamese captains who sat talking at dinner recently, going home means an end to a war they feel they are technically still engaged in.

"I'm still a soldier for my country," said one, who has spent 13 of his 38 years in a military uniform. "As long as I am here, I am in the Vietnamese army."

Both officers emphatically rejected any suggestion that they would maintain their military status if they go home. "I want to go home and help my country," said one. "My family is there. It is a better place for me to be. There I can meet my family and do something for my country."

The two officers said that other members of their small advisory group felt the same way. After years of fighting, they said they felt the most important thing now is not who won the war but to rebuild their country. "Now is the time to rebuild and grow, not fight," said

HERE? The Vietnamese officers and enlisted personnel there are advisers to the U.S. military staff. They are paid in U.S. dollars from military assistance funds at the same level they would receive in the Vietnamese army with added bonuses.

Unlike the refugees now filling up the camp, they are not confined to the barracks areas of the base and they live separated from the refugee encampment, moving on or off the base at will. An Army spokesman here said the Vietnamese soldiers are granted the privileges and courtesies of their rank. The highest-ranking member of the group is a major.

The two captains, like other members of the group interviewed, asked that their names not be used to protect their families in Vietnam. Most of the Vietnamese soldiers here were brought from a heavy artillery school at Ft. Sill, Okla., or flown in from the Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland when the refugee airlift began last week in Vietnam.

Maj. Gen. David E. Ott, commander of Ft. Sill and Ft. Chaffee, said he did not know what would happen to the Vietnamese when their military allotments run out and they are finished here.

Ott said there were requests from Cambodian troops training here to go home after their country fell to the Khmer Rouge. Thus far, he said, none of the Vietnamese has formally requested to be sent home.

Not all the Vietnamese soldiers here want to go home to lay down their arms. One lieutenant said he wanted to go back to fight as a guerrilla against the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam.

"We talk about this," he said of the Vietnamese advisor group, "and some don't feel my way. But I am a soldier and I must go back. I would fight as a guerrilla. If I die, I die for my country."

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One of the captains said they fought as long as they did because they had no choice. "I was a school teacher once," he said. "Then I was drafted and after that we were told we have to fight until this war ended. You were in the army until the war is over or you are dead."

Meanwhile, the officers and enlisted personnel must wait. Some said they had made informal inquiries about going home but had received no help. Others said they were worried because they have not heard from their families since the fall of Saigon.