

Some Vietnamese Copter Pilots Find Jobs

By JAMES P. STERBA
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MORGAN CITY, La., Dec. 14.—Every time Phan Van Dung takes a helicopter over the rice fields and swampland of the Louisiana delta country, an old feeling spreads through his insides.

Sometimes he imagines himself back in Vietnam, his chopper laden with Special Forces soldiers going to secret missions in Laos and Cambodia. But always he is reminded of his last look at his country on April 29 when he flew over the Mekong Delta toward the aircraft carrier Midway to escape the Communist takeover of Saigon.

"The landscape here is so much like my country," he said. "It makes me very, very homesick."

It also makes him feel lucky, for unlike thousands of Vietnamese war refugees who are facing their first alien American winter, Mr. Dung is in a relatively warm climate in a part of the United States remarkably similar to his homeland. And, unlike thousands of Vietnamese professionals and skilled workers who have had to take menial jobs at low pay to survive in this country, Mr. Dung is doing what he did in Vietnam—flying helicopters.

Company Hires 8

He is one of eight former South Vietnamese Air Force

helicopters pilots hired by Petroleum Helicopters, Inc., to fly charter missions for the off-shore oil industry in the Gulf of Mexico. Five of them have acquired flight status with the company and the three others are in training.

But it was not easy for any of them, even though they had flown thousands of hours in Vietnam. Mr. Dung, who is 32 years old, had 6,000 hours of helicopter flying. He was a major and was trained at Fort Rucker, Ala. But after arriving in the United States by way of Subic Bay and Wake Island, he found that he could not fly commercially without a certificate from the Federal Aviation Administration.

So in July, Mr. Dung took his wife and two sons to Fort Worth, Tex., and found a job baking for a bread company. He worked days and studied nights for three months, took the F.A.A. tests—which cost him about \$600—and received his certificate on Sept. 15. Petroleum Helicopters hired him 15 days later on a provisional basis.

Lately, he has been flying on a standby charter for the Kerr-McGee Oil Company.

"The flying is easy and landing on oil rigs is simple compared to some of the places we landed in the jungles and mountains in Vietnam," he said.

Tran Que Lam, a 34-year-

old former lieutenant colonel and helicopter squadron commander, is a trainee here. He has flown helicopters since 1962. He also trained at Fort Rucker, Ala., but when he asked the base to forward his training records to potential employers, the army told him they did not have any records on him.

"So I said to them to check with the carrier Midway because I commanded my whole squadron—47 helicopters from Can Tho—out there on April 30," he said. "But they said the Midway didn't keep records either. So nobody can prove that I was really a helicopter pilot."

While he was trying to convince people of that fact and while he was studying for F.A.A. tests, he had to work as a gardener at a Ramada Inn in Florida.

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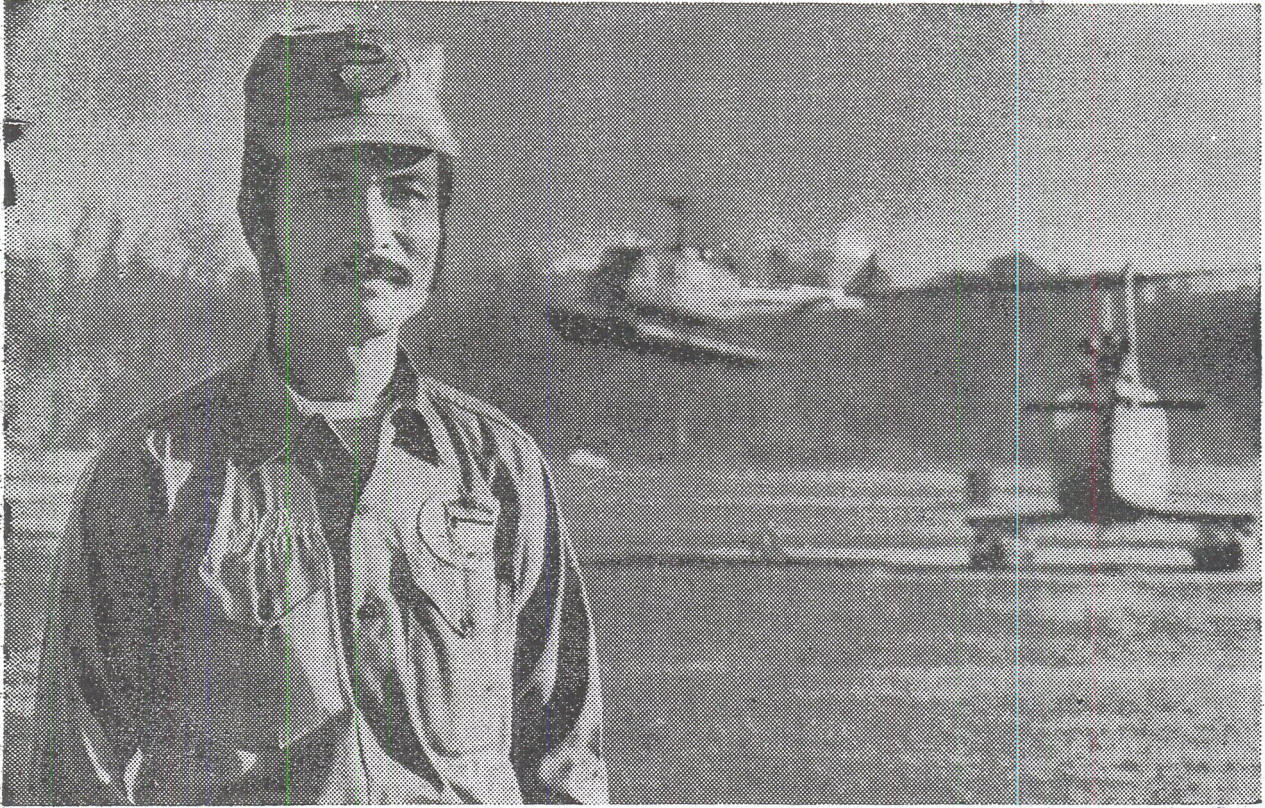
chief instructor for Petroleum Helicopters, said his Vietnamese pilots learned quickly but fluent command of the English language remained a problem for some of them.

"When you're on the radio, you have to speak clear English in order to be understood, and some of these guys still have problems," said Donald Rea, who is in charge of the company's operations base here. "But they're learning."

Mr. Dung said he had been told that 300 Vietnamese helicopter pilots escaped from Vietnam. Few have gotten jobs.

"Many of them want to join the United States Army but they can't get in," he said. "I don't want to. I like this job. It's just like home except no fighting, no door gunners, and nobody is shooting at you."

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Phan Van Dung on Petroleum Helicopters Inc. flightline in Morgan City, La. He had flown in South Vietnam's air force.