

Well-Armed South Vietnamese Gain Confidence as Americans Withdraw

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FIRE BASE BALDY, South Vietnam—"The North Vietnamese are good fighters," the South Vietnamese Army private said as he shouldered his rucksack and headed for an assault helicopter.

"But," he added, "they are not better than us."

Further down the runway at his former United States Marine base in the northern province of Quangtin, other soldiers waiting to be airlifted into combat against the North Vietnamese talked through an interpreter about the enemy.

"Our morale is better than theirs," said Pvt. Nguyen Phuc.

"I feel we are superior to the North Vietnamese Army," said Capt. Thuy Ngoc Thu.

Such talk used to be heard only from senior career officers in the South Vietnamese Army — men who themselves rarely faced the enemy on the ground and who believed they should try to encourage their troops by whatever means possible.

But interviews in recent weeks have revealed a new confidence among junior officers and their front-line lighting men, not only here in the South Vietnamese Army's Second Infantry Division but in many other units throughout the country.

Whether this confidence can be translated into battlefield victory is impossible to say, but military observers regard it as a hopeful sign for the South Vietnamese Army.

The change in attitude seems in large part to be a result of the improved weapons that the South Vietnamese have received from the United States in the last four years, along with increased air and artillery support.

With the rapid withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam, the artillery support recently has diminished sharply. But the bombing of enemy installations has been intensified.

It seems apparent that at some point the American bombers will have to leave, and that is a matter of concern to some military observers.

Others, however, are confident that the legacy of automatic rifles, howitzers, helicopters and jet aircraft left to the South Vietnamese will sustain them.

Advantage in Fire Power

They argue that with their M-16 rifles, light machine guns and howitzers, the South Vietnamese soldiers have more firepower than the North Viet-

namese. And even though the South Vietnamese have fewer helicopters and jet planes than when the Americans were here in full force, the North Vietnamese have no such equipment available to them in South Vietnam.

Nevertheless, the need to face the North Vietnamese without the Americans has led to some changes in tactics that were evident in the operation that was launched from this base in late February and is still under way. The base is 15 miles northwest of Tamky, about 30 miles southeast of Danang and about 10 miles from the Pacific coast.

Instead of dozens of helicopters, in the American fashion, the South Vietnamese officers had only eight craft to lift their 3,000 men into battle.

So an airlift that might have taken the Americans about an hour took the Vietnamese more than three hours. Furthermore, one battalion of about 500 men had to wait until the next day to go into action because by the time the helicopters were available to transport them, clouds had moved in and made flying too risky.

Landing Is Unopposed

The landing went smoothly. But if some of the South Vietnamese had needed quick reinforcements then would have been out of luck.

In preparing for the operation, Americans would have ferried their artillery into forward positions with huge Chinook helicopters. Not having any Chinooks, the South Vietnamese started a little earlier, towing their big guns behind trucks.

"The VC didn't mine the road, there were no ambushes and no problems," said Col. Tran Van Cam, the deputy commander of the Second Division.

He acknowledged, though, that without the helicopters the potential for problems had been multiplied and he was relieved that the guns had reached their destination without incident.

The Americans would seldom have fired fewer than 1,000 rounds of artillery to "prep" — that is, prepare — each landing zone for the helicopter landings. But the Vietnamese fired fewer than 300 rounds before their troops attacked.

C rations are in short supply for the South Vietnamese and some of the soldiers toted large bundles of rice. Two men even carried live chickens.

Casualties Are Relatively Light

The results of the continuing Second Division effort so far have not been spectacular. But nearly every day the troops have killed a few North Vietnamese while reporting relatively light casualties themselves.

As the operation progressed, the American advisers, who had once worked hand in hand with the South Vietnamese, were almost invisible.

A few days before the start of the operation, Col. Frank Athanason, the senior adviser to the division, pointed out that the helicopters would probably require about 20,000 gallons of fuel instead of the 5,000 originally estimated by the South Vietnamese.

And as the action got under way, the American suggested that the South Vietnamese might train all their howitzers on a single target to maximize impact rather than firing on several targets at once.

That was all Colonel Athanason could remember having contributed.

Few U.S. Advisers Remain

In the Second Division, as well as elsewhere in the northern military region, the majority of the American advisers have been sent home. The Americans who have remained work only at the division head-

quarters level and no longer accompany South Vietnamese troops into combat.

From the point of view of Colonel Athanason and many of the other remaining American advisers, the war in Vietnam is now truly a Vietnamese problem.

"I don't want my people putting their noses in any more," Colonel Athanason said "If I see something going wrong, I'll tell them about it, but I may not tell them what to do about it."

Colonel Athanason first served in South Vietnam in the mid-nineteen-sixties.

"The South Vietnamese have got a lot more confidence now," he said, "and they can do almost anything."