

U.S. Copters Fly --Saigon's Sit Idle

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Lai Khe, South Vietnam

Communist pressure on An Loc has been eased, but American helicopters still fly nearly all missions into the town while large numbers of South Vietnamese helicopters sit idle their crews lounging and sleeping.

The reason the Vietnamese helicopters are not flying, American advisers here say, is because their crews have panicked under fire and suffered from an inferiority complex and low morale. As a result, Vietnamese army commanders do not feel safe with them and have requested American helicopters for difficult missions.

Most of the American helicopters crewmen are furious about this and said so in blunt terms yesterday in interviews here at Lai Khe, a military base town 30 miles north of Saigon which is the takeoff point for the helicopter missions.

FIRE

"Look at them sitting down there doing nothing," said one American crewman, pointing down the airstrip, "and look who's flying for them. We're taking fire and they're sleeping."

During the day, 21 American helicopters were in constant operation — bringing battle-weary South Vietnamese troops out of shattered An Loc, carrying fresh ones in — as more than 20 South Vietnamese helicopters sat on the same airfield after running a few supply missions with food into the town.

MORTAR

All the American missions flew into mortar and anti-aircraft fire every time they set down in An Loc.

In the support and relief of An Loc in the past two weeks, several American helicopters have been shot down and their crews killed.

A few Vietnamese helicopters have also been shot down, but their casualties have been lower.

This is an unusual reversal of roles in a war that is supposed to have been "Vietnamized," with American participation phased out.

ROLES

One of the commanders of the American helicopter group, who asked to remain unidentified, explained the situation this way:

"We've been doing this a lot longer than they have. You don't develop a force overnight."

"It makes no sense at all to me," said Warrant Officer David Freeman, a 24-year-old pilot from Oxford, Miss. "It's their war, and they're only using 50 per cent of their helicopter assets while we're pushing up to 90 per cent of ours."

"They have tremendous lack of motivation," said Warrant Officer Richard Grant, 24, commander of a medical evacuation helicopter. "We deal with human lives, so when we get a call, we go. When they get a call, they go only if it's no sweat, no fire on the ground, and then maybe no sense of urgency. They don't seem to care about human lives the way we do."