

U.S. Pushing Retraining Of Saigon's Entire Army

OCT 25 1972

NYTimes

By JOSEPH B. TREASTER

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Oct. 24—United States Army instructors are putting the entire South Vietnamese Army through a brief but intensive retraining program in a tacit acknowledgment that Vietnamization has not worked as American officials had hoped.

Most of the instruction in the course, which runs 14 days, is elementary, beginning with how to aim and fire the M-16 rifle, the basic weapon for most regular South Vietnamese units since late 1968.

Senior American officers try to gloss over the shortcomings of the South Vietnamese soldiers, but the junior officers and sergeants who are doing the training—mainly men with Special Forces experience and previous tours in Vietnam—readily concede that there is a wide range of basic and critical deficiencies.

In general, according to the instructors, the deficiencies are these:

¶The troops do not know how to shoot accurately and they drain off ammunition at a dangerously high rate.

¶They seem to have virtually no concept of even the simplest infantry tactics.

¶They do not know how to use their mortars and recoilless rifles.

¶They cannot maintain their relatively simple machine guns.

The senior American officers

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say the reason for the poor showing in these and other areas is that many of the units being retained suffered heavy casualties during the North Vietnamese offensive this year and have been flooded with fresh recruits.

However, this only points up the weakness of South Vietnam's preparation of its soldiers, for the recruits have just completed nine weeks basic training.

Until the spring of 1971 there was no comprehensive training program. Even afterwards, South Vietnamese officers say, troops seldom received any formal military instruction after basic training.

The North Vietnamese offensive which began at the end of March, was the first real test of Vietnamization, President Nixon's program of turning responsibility for ground combat over to Saigon. In many instances the Government troops performed abysmally and, in the end, high-ranking South Vietnamese and American officers conceded that the troops had probably managed to survive only because of the tremendous bombardment by American planes and naval guns.

The new retraining program, which the Americans refer to as a refresher and which was a direct outgrowth of the offensive, was begun quietly in May and has never been made public officially.

The first assignment for the American trainers, who wear green berets and camouflage fatigues, was to reconstitute the Third Division, which had abandoned Quangtri City to the Communists without a fight and disintegrated into a rabble. The Americans were also asked to rebuild the 20th Tank Battalion, the only medium tank unit, which lost all 54 of its tanks, plus seven replacements, in confused fighting in the northern provinces.

The American training unit had been organized in the fall of 1970 to work with Cambodians in Vietnam because, as an American colonel explained, "Congress has imposed limitations on us being in their country." As the Communist offensive developed in South Vietnam, things got worse in Cambodia too, and many of the trainees had to go home to combat duty, leaving some of the instructors free to work with the South Vietnamese.

Tuning Up the Entire Army

Eventually, the American command and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff decided that the whole army could use some tuning up.

In June the original American group of about 400 men was reinforced by about 100 from Special Forces units on Okinawa and was training 10 battalions of Cambodians and 14 battalions of South Vietnamese, with roughly 500 men in each. In addition, 29 Australian soldiers and 19 New Zealanders were helping with the Cambodians.

More than 40 per cent of the South Vietnamese Army, including 11 regular divisions, an airborne division and seven ranger groups, has been through the retraining program.

The training is geared to the battalion level and all the officers and men are supposed to go through together. There are no days off during the two-week cycle. The officers meet for two extra hours after class for review of the day's instructions, a preview of the next day's and some talk about leadership.

Senior American officers, emphasizing that the program is a joint effort, point out that each of the six training teams consists of 20 Americans and 20 Vietnamese. In practice, however, the Americans clearly dominate. An administrator said that the attendance of Vietnamese instructors fluctuated greatly.

As the training continues the Vietnamese are supposed to replace the Americans, gradually

following the concept that the United States has tried to make work in South Vietnam since the earliest days of its involvement.

"What we're trying to do," said an American officer, recalling statements by American advisers here in the early sixties, "is teach ourselves out of a job."

The South Vietnamese appear to be responsive to the training and their instructors say they come out of the program vastly improved. How long the training will stick is anybody's guess.

Talks with American instructors around the country provide an extraordinarily candid view of the capabilities of the South Vietnamese soldier. They say they have seen some officers and a few units that could hold their own alongside Americans, but by and large they have been appalled by what they have seen.

When the troops begin the retraining, the instructors say, they often fire their rifles in a general direction without taking aim. When they do aim they frequently do not align the sights properly and do not close one eye, as recommended.

Few soldiers, many whom have at least two or three years' experience, seem to be aware that the rifle has an effective range of more than 450 yards and many pass up targets farther than 100 yards away.

Lack of Fire Discipline

The instructors also say the South Vietnamese units generally lack what American soldiers call fire discipline.

In field exercises, the Americans say, the soldiers tend to concentrate their rifle fire on one spot, instead of each firing into a particular zone of a wide field. In addition, they tend to fire at the same time; then they all stop to reload, giving the enemy an opportunity to recover and counterattack. They also seem to like to fire their rifles on full automatic, which is usually inaccurate except at close range and drains off ammunition, the instructors say.

In the tactics segment of the program, the Americans teach four basic offensive formations. The only one the South Vietnamese really know, they say, is single file. They prefer to walk one behind the other, an American explained, because they are "deathly afraid of booby traps."

The Americans teach them to fan out on a long, broad front or in a "V" or, when there is danger of an attack from the rear or either side, a diamond formation.

The basic technique for advancing in any of the configurations is for one group to move as another is laying down fire. "Normally," the American said, "what they do is get down in their holes and call in an air strike. They don't like to move at all if there's any enemy fire up front."

Uninformed Junior Officers

As with all untrained soldiers, the instructors have to shout repeatedly at the South Vietnamese to stop bunching up so that in combat a single artillery round would not knock out a dozen of them.

The unit training begins with an explanation of how the unit and the key individuals in it are supposed to function.

"We find that a lot of junior leaders, especially sergeants, don't really know what their job is," a young officer said. "In the past they just kept track of the men and left the leading to the officers."

Many mortar and recoilless rifles crews have dismayed their instructors by their lack of knowledge of their weapons.

"Most crews have fired their mortars before," an officer related, "but most of them don't know how they should be properly employed. It's usually been a long time since they've used them."