

Saigon Is Over - Equipped in Planes

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Jan. 25—Racing against the time when a cease-fire goes into effect, the United States has swamped the South Vietnamese Air Force with hundreds of warplanes it can neither fly nor maintain.

The new planes and thousands of tons of supplies and equipment started flowing into South Vietnam late last year after American military officers learned that the draft cease-fire agreement stipulated that the replacement of war materiel after a formal cessation of combat would be on an item-for-item basis.

Anticipating that the final agreement would contain the same stipulation—and it does—the United States has sent South Vietnam 350 new fighter-bombers and transport planes.

Most of the new aircraft are in storage hangars, and some South Vietnamese officers say that it may take as long as two years to recruit and train enough pilots and ground technicians to put all of the planes into full operation.

Expansion Accelerated

The United States had accelerated its program to expand the South Vietnamese Air Force as American troops were being rapidly sent home in 1971 and 1972.

By the end of last summer the air force had reached the size that the United States had expected it to be by 1974. The air force had 50,000 men and 1,000 to 1,200 aircraft—a combination of propeller and jet bombers, propeller and jet-assisted transports and roughly 500 helicopters.

One well-placed South Vietnamese officer said that in order to handle the latest aircraft and supplies—as well as some additional planes that are expected to be turned over by departing American units—the air force will need a 30 per cent increase in personnel—to about 65,000 men.

The officer said that 1,000 pilots were needed immediately and that several thousand men must undergo basic and advanced training in maintenance and supply-handling techniques.

Most of the training is now done in the United States. It takes a minimum of 14 months for the basic jet fighter program for pilots and nine to 10 months to learn to fly a helicopter. Technicians and mechanics must spend nearly a year in school.

There are only a couple of hundred South Vietnamese airmen training in the United States now. Training programs in South Vietnam are being stepped up, but even so, the already greatly overextended air



Photographs for The New York Times by BARBARA GLUCK TREASTER

Many Vietnamese pilots dress like their former commander, Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky, sporting the mustache, scarf, black flight suit and cowboy-style pistol belt that made him their hero.

force seems unlikely to meet its immediate manpower needs.

To fill the gap, American civilian technicians have been hired by the United States Government and groups of about 500 are believed to have been assigned to the principal bases in South Vietnam.

Some of the civilians are running classes in aircraft maintenance while others are carrying out complicated repairs themselves and also assembling the new aircraft that have recently arrived.

Other American civilians have been teaching Vietnamese airmen who have experience in transport planes how to fly the larger C-130 cargo aircraft that arrived toward the end of last year.

Since the late nineteen-sixties, when the air force began growing at a spectacular rate—in 1967 it had 16,000 men and 400 aircraft—the biggest problems for the service have been getting spare parts and equipment to where they were needed and keeping the planes in flying condition.

Even with the help of the American civilians, the air force has been unable to keep up with the maintenance required for its aircraft.

A spot check one day this week showed that in about half of the squadrons in the air force only about 50 per cent of the planes assigned to the unit were operational. With a few exceptions, where as many as 75 per cent of the planes were available for use, the rest of the units reported that far fewer than half their planes were operational.

One high-ranking American Air Force officer said that the problems confronting the South Vietnamese should not be a surprise to anyone.

"We are really forcing upon them in a very short period things that took us years to work out," he said. "For the South Vietnamese to have adapted as well as they have has been a fantastic phenomenon. But they've got a hell of a long way to go."

The South Vietnamese Air Force is a volunteer service and generally gets better educated men than the army. But even so the standards are much lower than in the United States, where enlisted mechanics must have high school diplomas and the pilots are college graduates. Enlisted men in the South Vietnamese Air Force must have at least nine years of schooling and officer candidates are required to have the equivalent of a high school education.

With the exception of the Chinook and Huey helicopters and the C-130 transport, the United States has given the South Vietnamese some of the most basic and easy-to-maintain aircraft in its inventory.

In the latest shipments, the South Vietnamese reportedly have received about 200 F-5 Freedom fighters and about 90 Cessna A-37's. Both are tiny compared with the American main fighter-bomber—the F-4 Phantom—or the principal Soviet attack plane that the North Vietnamese have in small numbers—the MIG-21. The F-5 and the A-37 are also much slower than the F-4 and the MIG-21, and they have no tracking radar or other complicated electronic equipment.

Many South Vietnamese pilots complain that they have been given second-rate planes to fight with, but all acknowledge that the ground crews could not cope with the F-4.

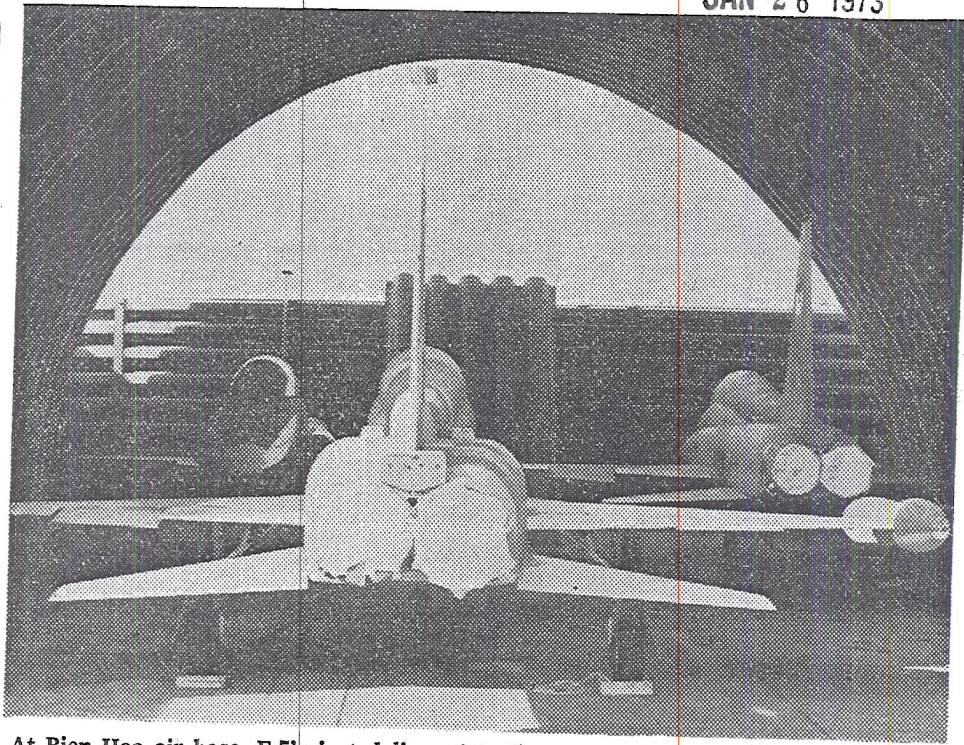
The main military reason for providing the F-5, American officers say, is that it was designed primarily as an air-defense plane. The thinking of American strategists is that after a cease-fire the South Vietnamese would be better served with a plane that could counter an enemy attack than by one that could carry a heavier bomb load for an offensive strike.

In one transport unit with 15 planes only two were fit to fly. A helicopter unit with 32 planes assigned also had only two aircraft that were operational. Another helicopter unit with the same number of aircraft assigned had four that could be used. In a fighter squadron of 20 planes, four were in safe working order.

The standard in the United States Air Force is that at least 71 per cent of the aircraft in a unit be ready for service.

"We have just been growing too fast," one South Vietnamese maintenance officer said. "It's just not possible for us to do as you Americans. We do not have the manpower and we lack many skills."

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At Bien Hoa air base, F-5's just delivered to the South Vietnamese Air Force by the United States have to be stored three to a hangar, for lack of space.