

# Copters and

Even before the American decisions on the troop build-up were announced formally on Dec. 14 with a public exchange of letters between Presidents Kennedy and Diem, the first two American helicopter companies had arrived—400 men with 33 H-21C helicopters. On Feb. 5 the press reported that the first helicopter had been shot down by the enemy.

Despite the Administration's efforts to

# Casualties

draw a careful bureaucratic distinction between support troops ("Category A") and combat troops ("Category B"), this was hard to maintain in the field. The study records without comment that by mid-February President Kennedy was asked at a news conference if the Administration was being "less than candid" about American involvement in Vietnam. He acknowledged that American troops were "firing back" to protect themselves

although he contended that these were not combat troops "in the generally understood sense of the word."

The Pentagon study goes on to record that on April 11, two days after two American soldiers were killed in a Vietcong ambush while on a combat operation with Vietnamese troops, President Kennedy was asked at a news conference: "Sir, what are you going to do about the American soldiers getting killed in Vietnam?"

In reply, the President said: "We are attempting to help Vietnam maintain its independence and not fall under the domination of the Communists. . . . We cannot desist in Vietnam." Months later, he admitted to increased casualties along with the build-up he ordered.

According to Pentagon records, nearly 10 times as many Americans were killed or wounded in action in 1962 as in 1961—figures closely paralleling the tenfold build-up in American forces to 11,000 men by the end of 1962. The Pentagon statistics show that the number of killed and wounded in combat increased from 14 in 1961 to 109 in 1962 and to 489 in 1963.

## Period of New Commitments

Although the Pentagon study describes the Kennedy years as a period of new commitments, it does not indicate whether in this case President Kennedy—by putting American airmen in position to fly tactical air missions and ground advisers to take part in combat operations with South Vietnamese units—crossed an important firebreak in the American involvement in Vietnam.

Documents accompanying the Pentagon study amply recount the rapid

tempo of the American build-up—rapid by the standards by the previous seven years. A military briefing paper for the President on Jan. 9, 1962, cited in the Pentagon account, reported:

¶The number of American servicemen in Vietnam jumped from 948 at the end of November to 2,646 by Jan. 9 and would reach 5,576 by June 30.

¶Two Army helicopter companies were flying combat support missions and an air commando unit code-named Jungle Jim was "instructing the Vietnamese Air Force in combat air support tactics and techniques."

¶United States Navy Mine Division 73, with a tender and five minesweepers, was sailing from Danang along the coastline.

¶American aircraft from Thailand and from the Seventh Fleet aircraft carriers off Vietnam were flying surveillance and reconnaissance missions over Vietnam.

¶Six C-123 spray-equipped aircraft "for support of defoliant operations" had "received diplomatic clearance" to enter South Vietnam.

## 'Under Combat Conditions'

At a news conference on March 18, 1962, Secretary McNamara acknowledged under questioning that American "training" of the South Vietnamese "occasionally takes place under combat conditions." He added that "there has been sporadic fire aimed at U.S. personnel, and in a few minor instances they have returned the fire in self-defense." News reports in the spring of 1962 told of American pilots flying in the front, or action, seats of "trainer" aircraft while Vietnamese trainees rode behind.