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Vann, a Top U.S. Adviser
In Vietnam, Dies in Crash

Former Officer, 47, Had
Spent More Than Decade
With Saigon's Forces

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Saturday, June 10 — John Paul Vann, a senior American adviser and one of the most experienced United States officials ever stationed in South Vietnam, was killed in a helicopter crash last night.

Mr. Vann, whose work with South Vietnamese forces spanned more than a decade, was 47 years old. He was apparently checking the developing military situation on his way to Kontum in the Central Highlands yesterday when the helicopter in which he was flying crashed in flames.

It seemed probable that the helicopter had been shot down by one of the strong North Vietnamese units reportedly operating near the crash site in the II Military Region, where he was assigned.

A spokesman of the American command said Mr. Vann took off in a light helicopter from his base at Pleiku at 9:15 P.M. for the short flight to Kontum, about miles to the north. With him were two Americans, an Army pilot and an Army officer.

Soon after leaving Pleiku, Mr. Vann's helicopter was heard radioing for landing instructions at Komtum, which has



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John Paul Vann

been under siege by an enemy division for several weeks. Thereafter contact was lost.

A search operation by American helicopters and supporting aircraft was begun and South Vietnamese troops at Fire Base 41, about 10 miles north of Pleiku on Route 13, told the Americans they had seen a helicopter go down in flames.

The crash site was found soon afterward and the bodies of all three occupants of the helicopter were recovered.

The identities of the pilot and the accompanying officer were withheld pending notification of their families, but since Mr. Vann was a State Department

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employe, his death was announced immediately.

Career Approached Legend

By PAUL L. MONTGOMERY

In a war largely without heroes, John Paul Vann was one of the few men in South Vietnam whose career approached legend.

From the time he arrived there in 1962 as a young lieutenant colonel to advise a South Vietnamese division until his death as one of America's highest ranking civilians, he attracted a devoted circle of friends, caught by his frankness, his personal bravery, the depth of his knowledge and his enthusiasm for the Vietnamese people.

While his friends included many who turned against the war or who were against it to begin with, Mr. Vann could never have been considered a dove. His harshest criticisms, angering superiors and allies alike, were reserved for what he considered failures to prosecute the war properly.

"My entire goddamned involvement here has been to try to bring some reason and justice to our effort," he said in an interview last year. "One thing is goddamned sure. I'll never be able to get a job anywhere else."

Mr. Vann's last position—as director of the United States Second Regional Assistance Group, in the Central Highlands—was virtually without parallel in South Vietnam, largely because of his personal prestige and influence.

Had Wide Authority

Although he was technically only the senior adviser in the area, with rank equivalent to major general, his authority often seemed to exceed that of the South Vietnamese lieutenant general in command.

In the last few years, Mr. Vann became more dedicated to the war and the possibility of "winning" it. This is what he said in an interview in May, 1971:

"Actually, the whole nature of the war has changed. It once was quite clearly a rebellion. There is no denying that it was externally stimulated and assisted, but it was still a rebellion of the rural population against the existing Government of Vietnam.

"The war has now been transformed quite clearly into a North Vietnamese invasion. I frankly anticipate that the Government is going to be successful, but if it is not successful in the political conflict, I, as an American, am not going to be ashamed that the Government of Vietnam has not been given an adequate chance."

With the change on his views and the acceptance of many of

his ideas that had been unpopular in the 1960's, Mr. Vann's influence climbed. On a visit to the United States several months ago, he spent two hours briefing President Nixon on the course of the war.

A few days ago in South Vietnam a friend was talking about Mr. Vann. "John is too good," he said. "When he finally gets killed, and he will be one of these days, I shudder to think what will happen to those people he's been advising. He has come closer to being the indispensable man than any other American in Vietnam, and that's a very dangerous thing."

John Paul Vann was born in Roanoke, Virginia, on July 2, 1924. At the age of 18 he enlisted in the Army Air Force, spending the latter part of World War II as a navigator of a B-29.

After the war, he began training in the paratroops, then the service most attractive to ambitious young officers. Although he was not a West Point man, and did not come from an Army family, he worked his way up through drive and dedication.

In 1950, he went to Korea a captain, commanding the first airborne ranger company to be sent into action. Much of the company's work was behind enemy lines, and Mr. Vann acquired his life-long interest in guerrilla warfare and counter-insurgency.

After Korea, Captain Vann went to Rutgers University as assistant professor of military science and tactics in the R.O.T.C. program. He also studied at night and got his B.S. degree from Rutgers in 1954. Through the Army, he went to Syracuse University for further study, and got an M.A. in business administration in 1959. He acquired enough credits for a Ph.D. in public administration, but could never write a thesis that satisfied him.

In 1962, a lieutenant colonel, he volunteered to go to South Vietnam, where the American military involvement was still on an advisory level. He was attached to the South Vietnamese Seventh Division in the Mekong Delta and soon established a reputation as one of the most respected American officers in the country.

Unlike many South Vietnamese officers, he joined the troops in battle. To get to know his territory, he walked over it and criss-crossed it in his jeep. The Vietnamese regarded him as something of a madman, driving alone at night over roads the Vietcong were believed to control.

His narrow escapes were many. Once, a Vietcong patrol attempted to capture his jeep, and he fought his way out with his pistol.

The young lieutenant colonel began to develop his own ideas

about counterinsurgency and pacification, most of them running against the conventional wisdom of his Army superiors. One of his arguments was that the massive infusion of American heavy equipment then arriving—trucks and helicopters and bombs—was only corrupting the South Vietnamese ground forces into not fighting.

"This is a political war and it calls for the utmost discrimination in killing," he said at the time. He believed that a knife or rifle was best for the purpose, and that planes and artillery were the worst, since they killed many innocent people in a war where the enemy was indistinguishable from the populace.

Statistics were his passion, and he did an analysis of the casualties the South Vietnamese took in defensive positions as compared with those suffered in offensive action. He was not surprised to find that most casualties were defensive, showing that American urgings to go out on the attack were little heeded.

A key point was the battle of Apbac in the first week of 1963. A superior South Vietnamese force had a Vietcong battalion surrounded, and then withdrew ignominiously rather than take casualties, allowing the Vietcong to get away. Colonel Vann rallied a mixed force of cooks and radiomen and managed to take a few prisoners, but the battle was lost.

The colonel did not stint in telling reporters of the defeat, a view that was unpopular with the command in Saigon, which was interested only in victories. He also prepared a report stating that the pacification program was failing because of the lack of aggressiveness of the South Vietnamese and the corruption of the Saigon Government.

This difference in view between the optimistic command in Saigon and frustrated officers in the field was the beginning of the debate about the war that still persists.

Colonel Vann, apparently at the beginning of a promising

career, as a general officer, fell into disfavor. When his year's tour ended in April, 1963, he went to the Pentagon expecting to give a full report, like other returning advisers. He found that nothing was scheduled, and began to give presentations on his own. Word of their value got around, and he was scheduled to brief the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

At that time Maj. Gen. Victor Krulak, adviser on Vietnam, to Secretary McNamara had just returned from a trip with a report glowing with optimism about Saigon's progress—exactly the opposite of the colonel's view.

Briefing Suddenly Canceled

Two hours before his briefing was to begin, it was canceled on orders from higher up, Mr. Vann, never known for his even temper, resigned from the Army and began giving interviews on the Vietnamese failures.

He went to work for an aircraft company in Denver, but was not happy out of the Army. However, the respite did

give him time to spend with his wife and five children.

1964, he was the Colorado organizer for the unsuccessful Republican Presidential candidacy of Henry Cabot Lodge.

In February, 1965, Mr. Vann gave in to the prime interest in his life and went back to South Vietnam as a civilian employe of the Agency for International Development.

In December, 1966, Mr. Lodge, then the Ambassador in Saigon, named him head of civilian operations in the III Corps in a command shake-up intended to stiffen American efforts.

One of Mr. Vann's causes at the time that made him unpopular with his American superiors was his support of Tran Ngoc Chau, a South Vietnamese politician jailed by the Thieu regime on charges of collaboration with the Communists.

Mr. Vann in his last tour in Vietnam gathered a loyal group of followers and staff people who lived together in a compound, eating together and talking always of Vietnam.

He was a short, intense man.

with thinning sandy hair and skin that never tanned in the Vietnamese sun, always turning out a fiery red. His quick temper was legendary; when he was operating on little sleep his angry shouts could be heard throughout his command building.

Mr. Vann recognized that many of the tactics he had advocated in a guerrilla war became invalid with the North Vietnamese offensive. He highly approved of the B-52 strikes in support of fighting in his area, and carefully planned the targets each day.

He seemed, during the last months, to have begun hating the enemy, especially the North Vietnamese regular units. He often smiled with satisfaction as he spoke of catching large numbers of enemy troops in the open and killing great numbers of them.

Earlier, he had usually expressed sympathy for the fallen foe, and in the Mekong Delta had been a major force in reducing the killing and torture of prisoners.

His relations with reporters

were always cordial. He was one of the few American officials who almost always spoke "on the record," and at times he seemed to go out of his way to press his views on correspondents.

Reporters who liked him feared their quotations of his outspoken views would hurt his career. "You never hurt me any more than I wanted to be hurt," he said to one.

His last job in the 19 provinces of the Central Highlands and central coast, where pacification had been lagging, began in May, 1971. With the beginning of the North Vietnamese offensive in March, he flew almost daily to the beleaguered city of Kontum. In April, he flew through gunfire to rescue American advisers trapped in Tancanh.

Mr. Vann is survived by his wife, Mary Jane, of Littleton, Colo.; four sons—John, Justice, Thomas and Peter—and a daughter, Mrs. Patricia Buhl of Pueblo, Colo.

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