

Oct. 22, 1965



PXs & Pup Tents. Around South Viet Nam's four present jet fields—Danang, Chu Lai, Bien Hoa and Saigon—are clustered most of the rest of the U.S. presence in Viet Nam. On the "hot pads" at the runway ends of each stand the silver planes, bombs aboard, on phased alert: the first wave is on five-minute call, the next on 15-minute call, then a group on 30-minute call, finally a wave on an hour's notice. On the average, within 17 minutes of a platoon leader's radioed call for help, the jets can be over the target with almost any combination of weapons he might need: .50-cal. machine-gun bullets, cannon shells, Bull-Pup missiles, Zuni rockets, napalm, 260-lb. to 3,000-lb. bombs. At the newest of the fields, Chu Lai, leveled and surfaced with aluminum matting by the Seabees in less than 30 days last spring, the runway is still so short that the jets take off in a double-throated roar of engines and Jet Assisted Takeoff bottles, sometimes returning to land carrier-style with an arresting cable at runway's end.

The marines at Chu Lai are accustomed to the roar over their tents on the steaming dunes. Less easy to take has been the choking dust, now damped down by the first northern monsoons, and the fact that the nearest liberty is the Marine headquarters town of Danang. "That's like being allowed to leave the state prison to go to the county jail," snorts one leatherneck. In Danang and Phu Bai, the rains have turned the infernal red dust into infernal red mud, in which a truck can sink to its door handles. On the perimeters, the marines and infantrymen live like soldiers on perimeters everywhere—primitively, with pup tents, ponchos and C rations. The airmen at Danang boast big airy tents with screened windows and solid floors, a new PX and mess hall. Most of the 173rd Airborne and Big Red One troops at Bien Hoa now have hot meals and floors under their tents.

U.S. troops were soon besting the Viet Cong in fire fights from Chu Lai to An Khe. The 34,000 marines in Viet Nam boast a 5-1 kill ratio over the enemy, have spread their original beachhead until now they control 400 sq. mi. of territory. When a bad bit of intelligence unloaded the 101st Screaming Eagles from their helicopters right into a battalion of Viet Cong near An Khe, the Eagles fought hand-to-mortar until the field was theirs. Soon the increasing aggressiveness of American ground troops everywhere was adding yet another dimension of fear and uncertainty for the V.C., already long harassed by U.S. air and sea power.

Some 400 of the daily strike planes are based aboard the carriers of Task Force 77 of the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet. The two flattops on "Yankee Station" shoot their planes off over North Viet Nam, while the "Dixie Station" carrier normally hits only V.C. in the south. The 30 ships, 400 warplanes and 27,000 men of "77" are not included in the 145,000-man total of forces now in Viet Nam. But they are very much a part of the war, and not merely of the air war. When U.S. Marines systematically took apart a V.C. regiment on the Van Thuong peninsula south of Chu Lai last August, two destroyers and a cruiser of Task Force 77 bombarded V.C. bunkers, blasted to pieces a Red company that tried to escape over the beach. Fact is, Seventh Fleet Commander Admiral Paul P. Blackburn's floating artillery can make life miserable—and hazardous—for the V.C. up to fifteen miles from the coast, and his screen of smaller craft on patrol duty in "Operation Market Time" has sharply limited V.C. gunrunning

The Elusive Target. The basic U.S. strategy in Viet Nam today, now that its defensive enclaves are secured, is to go over to the offensive, hitting out from the bases in fairly large-scale thrusts at main V.C. striking forces—to break them up, keep them off balance, erode their influence. For the present, the U.S. is less interested in expanding its geography than in wearing down the enemy. The priority targets, as the U.S. sees them now: first, the U.S. Marines' Hué-Danang-Chu Lai area, then as much of Binh Dinh province as can be cleared, finally the Hop Tac region around Saigon.

May 14, 1965



And in Viet Nam, despite a continuing chorus of criticism, particularly on U.S. college campuses, the President kept increasing the pressure. In the largest amphibious landing operation since the Korean War, 3,000 marines and 3,000 seabees went ashore near Chu Lai to build an airbase for launching more bombing raids into North Viet Nam. Although the President solemnly declared that "our firmness may well have brought us closer to peace," he admitted to reporters last week: "It's a mess. There is no question about that. I wish it was better, too."

Aug. 6, 1965



CHU LAI is known to the 7,200 marines and Seabees who man it as "the Gobi Desert." The base consists of a stretch of white sand dunes, some 40 ft. high, that sprawl for 20 miles along the coast and reach inland another four to a range of low, jungle-smothered hills to the west. It has an 8,000-ft. aluminum-section runway built by Navy Seabees. Resident V.C. have outsmarted Chu Lai's marines so far, and the local population of perhaps 20,000 Vietnamese is sullen and treacherous. The marines have begun to kill prisoners, embittered perhaps by a recent incident: they wounded two Viet Cong in an ambush, took them to the field hospital, where navy doctors expended twelve hours and several hundred pounds of invaluable ice in saving them. Then the South Vietnamese army claimed the prisoners, took them up in a helicopter and pushed them out of the hatch. Within the year, Chu Lai will be a major airbase and supply port, mounting Danang-scale air operations and spreading supplies by sea from a permanent jetty under construction

Jan. 7, 1966



Acting on Westmoreland's urgent plea for more combat troops and planes, the President in July spent eight days in secret conferences before adopting a cautious program of "maximum deterrence" calculated not to unduly alarm Hanoi's friends in Moscow. For the first time in any comparable emergency, the Administration did not order economic controls or mobilize reserves. Monthly draft calls were doubled to 35,000. The armed forces were authorized an additional 340,000 men for a total of 2,980,000. Most important of all, reinforcements were rushed to Viet Nam.

Main Artery. Even the sounds and sights of the land soon changed as U.S. deuce-and-a-halves, Jeeps, bulldozers, helicopters and fighter aircraft raised whirlwinds of cinnamon-colored dust and sand as white as snow. In the north, some 45,000 marines clustered

around Hué, Danang and Chu Lai. The new 1st Cav settled at An Khe, just off Route 19, main artery leading to the beleaguered Central Highlands. Qui Nhon, Route 19's eastern terminus, was held by South Korea's crack 15,000-man Capital Division.

At pristine Cam Ranh Bay, where czarist Russia's fleet took shelter just before its crushing defeat by the Japanese navy in 1905, combat engineers turned the natural harbor into a major port. Twenty miles down the coast, the "Screaming Eagles" of the 101st Airborne Brigade began operating as a mobile strike force. In the guerrilla-infested jungles around Saigon prowled the 1st Infantry Division ("Big Red One"), the 173rd Airborne, a 1,200-man battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment, a 250-man New Zealand artillery unit.

Water Through a Rag. Some of the marines barely had time to pitch their tents when they were sent into their first major battle. On a peninsula below Chu Lai, 5,000 marines, aided by rocket-firing Cobra helicopters, jet fighters and naval guns from Task Force 77, killed close to 700 guerrillas. But this, they soon learned, was Viet Nam. No sooner did Operation Starlight end, said an exasperated officer, than the surviving Viet Cong "seeped back in like water through a wet rag."

Not until the Communists began concentrating troops in the Central Highlands was there another battle of Starlight's scope. Worried that their supply routes might be in danger, 6,000 Viet Minh and Viet Cong on Oct. 19 pounced on a Special Forces camp manned by 400 montagnard tribesmen and twelve U.S. advisers at Plei Me, near where the Ho Chi Minh trail snakes out of Laos and Cambodia into South Viet Nam. But for 600 sorties that littered the camp's perimeter with Viet Minh dead, Plei Me would almost certainly have fallen. It was not the first time that air strikes saved the day. "The ground troops keep telling us that we are saving their necks," says Air Force Colonel James Hagerstrom, boss of the bustling Tactical Air Coordinating Center at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut Airport. As it was, the Communists broke off their siege of Plei Me after nine days and 850 dead.

The World

## Trap of the Harvest Moon

Dec. 17, 1965



The elusive enemy in Viet Nam rarely shows himself in force except to spring an ambush. So last week, in the largest joint Vietnamese-U.S. Marine operation of the war, the allies purposefully set out to be ambushed—and thereby lure the Communist ambushers into a giant ambush of allied design. The prey: some 3,700 veteran Viet Cong troops who have been roaming at will up and down the province of Quang Tin between the coastal Marine enclaves at Danang and Chu Lai. The province, for more than a year a hardcore Communist stronghold beyond the reach of government troops, is a paddy-checked producer of rice used to feed enemy troops. It is harvest time. And Viet Cong control of the region has made Route One—the natural north-south highway between Danang and Chu Lai—too hazardous for allied use.

"Operation Harvest Moon's" plan was simple enough. Vietnamese troops were to move deep into Quang Tin as bait. When the Viet Cong struck, waiting U.S. Marine units at Danang, Chu Lai and aboard the aircraft carrier two Juma would helilift in to the rescue, surround, and hopefully wipe out the Viet Cong attackers.

Narrowing Horseshoe. The first part of the plan worked, but at fearful cost. The initial force, a battalion of Vietnamese rangers, was barely 15 miles west of the district town of Tarn Ky when a regiment of V.C.s buried deep in bunkers and armed with .50-cal. machine guns and 81-mm mortars let loose at point-blank range. The battalion's two lead companies were virtually wiped out. The Marines dashed to positions south and west of the Viet Cong, while other South Vietnamese troops took up blocking positions. The enemy turned the flank of one Vietnamese infantry battalion and, coming up by surprise from behind, decimated the force. Meanwhile the Marines, working methodically through villages and scrub forest, tried to close the trap, while allied planes flew some 200 sorties and artillery pounded the Viet Cong. By week's end, some 6,500 allied troops, including three Marine and five Vietnamese battalions, had more than 3,000 Viet Cong squeezed into a nine-square-mile horseshoe.

Down in the Mekong Delta, South Vietnamese infantrymen flushed another hidden hard-core Viet Cong unit into fierce fighting scarcely 40 miles southwest of Saigon. The Communists blasted back with machine guns and 57-mm recoilless rifles. Saigon soon concluded that it had a veteran Viet Cong battalion at bay, ordered in the largest number of Vietnamese troops to be used in a single battle in the long war to try to encircle and crush the Reds.

Twelve-Hour Truce? While the fighting raged in the south, the U.S. mulled over a Viet Cong offer, broadcast over the enemy's clandestine radio, of a twelve-hour truce starting Christmas Eve. It might well be a trap: last year the Communists used a Christmas lull to take more strategic positions and to blow up a U.S. billet in downtown Saigon, killing two and wounding 107.

The Nation

## Winning Instead of Wishing

Nov. 5, 1965



Particularly in the months to come, support and understanding may be all the more necessary. Thirsty for even one showcase triumph, the Viet Cong are showing signs of suicidal desperation, and may well inflict some sobering reverses. Not only at Plei Me but also in enemy assaults on the U.S. enclaves at Chu Lai and Danang, this go-for-broke approach last week marked a significant shift from the canny laws of survival on which the Communists' guerrilla strategy is based.

Missed Mousetrap. At Plei Me, a victory was badly needed to bolster sagging Viet Cong spirits, to "blood" two untested North Vietnamese regiments totaling 6,000 men, and reassure Hanoi that this is not the kind of war that effete Americans are prepared to fight. The Reds got blooded, all right, but not as they intended. When their mousetrap at Plei Me failed to snap shut, they turned to another battle-tested stratagem: suicidal airbase raids. They brought off a minor tactical gain—18 U.S. helicopters and two Navy Skyhawks destroyed, 22 other choppers and five Skyhawks damaged at Danang and Chu Lai—that only six months ago would have blown up scare headlines in the U.S. This time, though, it was the Viet Cong who took the greater loss—in dead and wounded.