

Status & Strategy

Aug. 6, 1965



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It was a week of arrivals and departures, of decision and determination.

Into Cam Ranh Bay on South Viet Nam's bulging east coast slipped a grey-hulled U.S. troop transport, its decks aswarm with the "Screaming Eagles" of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division. Sentries on the dock paced impassively, their faces shadowed under their helmet liners, their M-14 rifles riding taut from the slings. As the transport neared the dock, a cry went up from the 3,700 paratroopers: "Take a break! We're here!" The sentries, like veterans anywhere, smiled knowingly.

The sheer ebullience of that cry, tinged as it was with eagerness and naivete, was both sad and stirring. As the 101st's former commander—Ambassador Maxwell Taylor—was quick to point out, it will take far more than fighting spirit for the U.S. to

succeed in Viet Nam. Hovering over the bay in a helicopter prior to his final departure for Washington, Taylor watched his old outfit land, then issued a soldierly warning. The Communist Viet Cong, he said, is "an enemy who is shrewd, well-trained, and with the guile of the American Indian during his best days."

The Foe. Taylor ought to know: in his 13-month Vietnamese tour, he has seen the war go from bad to worse as the U.S. poured in more men and equipment, and as the Viet Cong chewed up battalion after battalion of South Vietnamese troops. To be sure, the U.S. ground force had little chance to do more than establish its defense perimeters during those hectic months; the Communists gained momentum by launching their own monsoonal drive. Since the onset of the summer rains two months ago, the stain of Red domination has spread swiftly (see map); the Communists now control 65% of the countryside and fully 55% of the country's 16 million population.

U.S. intelligence estimates place the number of Communist combatants in South Viet Nam at 145,000 to 165,000. Of that total, some 50,000 are "hardhats" (fulltime fighters), another 100,000 are local guerrillas who can be ordered up from farm or village as needed. In reserve stand nearly 10,000 North Vietnamese regulars, infiltrated south since the beginning of the year. No longer are the Viet Cong armed mostly with captured U.S. weapons; quantities of Red Chinese assault rifles, machine guns, mortars and rocket launchers have poured into the country

via North Viet Nam, either down the Ho Chi Minh trail or by sea.

The Tactics. Viet Cong tactics have changed subtly along with the changing nature of Red troops and armaments. In the past three months, there has been a sharp decline in the number of attacks on government outposts, compared with the same period in 1963 and 1964. But the fewer thrusts have been conducted by bigger Red forces, aimed at specific targets, and have proved far more effective. The tactic is built around ambush: a small V.C. force hits an isolated government outpost; as government relief forces rush in by road or helicopter, a larger V.C. force mousetraps the rescuers.

At the same time, there has been a sharp increase in terror and sabotage incidents—techniques perfected by the guerrillas of Red China's Mao Tse-tung and North Viet Nam's General Vo Nguyen Giap. The aim is to demoralize the peasantry and segment the countryside by cutting roads, rail and power lines. As of last week, only a third of South Viet Nam's 12,000 miles of highway were passable; critical Route 19 from the seacoast to the beleaguered highlands (TIME, July 30) was once again closed when the Reds blew a bridge. Also severed: National Route 1 (the "Street Without Joy," as the French called it) from Saigon to the Cambodian border and intermittently to the 17th parallel; National 20, Saigon to Dalat; National 9, from Quang Tri in the extreme north, westward to the Laotian border.

Viet Cong crews using everything from hijacked bulldozers to primitive shovels, cut "harmonica" trenches 10 ft. long and 3 ft. deep on dozens of provincial roads, planting mines and booby traps where they haven't time to dig. Of South Viet Nam's 1,000 miles of railroad, only 100 miles is carrying traffic, and the few trains that run are subject to sniper fire, mines and ambush. Of the country's 225 major towns, 52 have been effectively cut off from supply. The burden of transport has fallen to Air Viet Nam and the six charter planes of the U.S. Operations Mission, which are carrying 715 tons of goods a month v. 75 tons a year. Cargoes range from fuel and medical supplies to rice, piglets and chickens. "What we need," sighs one official, "are trucks that fly."

The Strategy. Communist political strategy is less subtle than the military. Last week the Reds abandoned the fiction that the "National Liberation Front," political arm of the Viet Cong, was a popular coalition of patriots and democrats. The People's Revolution Party, the N.L.F.'s Communist component, publicly pronounced itself the "correct leadership" of the movement, declared that "military affairs must be subordinated to politics," and promised to apply "fully and creatively . . . the theories of Marxism-Leninism to the revolution in the South."

Opposed to this elusively diabolical Red enemy are 550,000 South Vietnamese soldiers, militiamen, airmen, sailors and police, plus 79,000 Americans. All are powerfully armed with modern weaponry. But in a guerrilla war, these weapons are often useless: tanks are all

but useless in Mekong Delta swamps; jets lack the endurance for close-support actions; heavy artillery is rarely on hand when the V.C. strike.

Moreover, air power as it has been applied in South Viet Nam is at best a subsidiary weapon, and although it has stung the Communists, it has not caused any major breakthrough. Air strikes (like that of the 25 B-52s that last week hit Viet Cong concentrations for the sixth time) must be followed up by thorough sweeps on the ground. Although U.S. units did follow through last week, they killed only one Viet Cong. The Reds, as usual, had faded into the bush.

The Enclaves. To counter the Communists' slash-and-grind strategy, the U.S. is engaged in a holding action. Washington's plan is threefold: 1) to establish a series of enclaves along the east coast (like that at Cam Ranh Bay); 2) to maintain Saigon's security and provide relief for the battle-weary South Vietnamese army; 3) ultimately to move out from the enclaves in "oilspot" fashion and systematically clear the surrounding areas. American commanders have no intention of feeding the Communist meat grinder with rescue missions that are bound to end in ambush. U.S. troops, says a high official, will tackle Communist troop concentrations only "when there is a battalion-sized conventional action possible."

Pivotal to the U.S. strategy is the necklace of five coastal enclaves, running from just below the 17th parallel in the north to just above Saigon. All

have their backs to the sea, a lesson learned from the French defeat at Dien-bienphu. If the U.S. strongholds should be overwhelmed by Red troops—Viet Cong, North Vietnamese or even Chinese—American troops and equipment could still be evacuated to seaward, rather than surrender to the enemy. (An exception: the inland U.S. airbase at Bien Hoa, just above Saigon, which secures the capital but presents a prime target.) A rundown of the enclaves:

¶ PHU BAI, ten miles southeast of the ancient Buddhist center of Hue, is the northernmost of the strongholds. From its bulbous, breezy Hill 225, a battalion of U.S. Marines under the command of Lieut. Colonel Woodrow ("Rough-house") Taylor guards a 6,000-ft. airstrip and an adjoining installation known as "the radio research unit," which is believed to be engaged in jamming North Vietnamese radar, monitoring Communist radio traffic, and guiding air strikes against the North. The marines' battery of 155-mm. howitzers dominates a 55-sq.-mi. sweep of sand dunes, dusty hillocks and paddyfields that yield suddenly to steep hills and jungles in the west. "Hell," said one marine rifleman recently, "I ain't seen one of them Victor Charlies [Viet Cong] since I been here."

But Victor Charlie is there all right: last week's Phu Bai "incident list" included "two villagers taken away by the V.C. and buried alive. Village chief shot at night." Such horrors are routine with the Reds.

¶ DANANG is next down the line, a plexus of planes and patrol boats guarding South Viet Nam's second largest city, which provides the launch pad for most of the air strikes North. The airfield's 10,000-ft. concrete runway (a second is being built) swarms with aircraft: barrel-chested Skyraiders, droop-nosed Phantoms, patrol craft pregnant with radar domes, unmarked light planes of the CIA and the Special Forces. The base is guarded by 18,000 U.S. marines, but nonetheless the V.C. last month managed to slip into mortar range and destroy three planes. Since they arrived last March, Danang's marines have lost nine dead and 90 wounded while killing 31 Viet Cong. Best success has come at night, when marine ambushes are set up along dark trails. The watchers in the shadows are required to sit without smoking, talking or moving for six or more hours, their M-14 rifles, blunderbuss-like grenade-launchers and machine guns trained on the "kill zone."

¶ 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.

¶ QUI NHON stands astride two major highways—Route 1 (the north-south highway) and Route 19 (leading to the highlands). The 1,600 marines who guard the seaside town hold a dozen positions in the fetid jungle round about, being resupplied daily by bottle-green H-34 helicopters. The Qui Nhon marines are growing bushwise: a patrol recently achieved the notable feat of stalking to within a few yards of six Viet Cong, who were resting on a ridge. Unfortunately, the patrol's marksmanship was less impressive than its bushmanship. Only one guerrilla was hit.

¶ CAM RANH BAY is the site of the biggest single construction project in South Viet Nam. Begun from scratch by U.S. Army engineers last June, it will be a deepwater port of about the same size as Charleston, S.C., by the time it is completed, eventually rivaling the port of Saigon in volume of cargo handled. Linked to the north-south rail and highway artery, it will have its own airbase and heavy transportation, and

will ease the Saigon bottleneck, where thousands of tons of war materiel are now tied up. Currently the bayside grumbles to the blades of bulldozers as Cam Ranh's 3,500-man garrison decapitates hills and readies a 1,400-ft. airstrip to handle Caribous and helicopters. Dynamite blasts send rock toppling from a hillside quarry, and on the crests overlooking the bay, helmeted infantrymen wearing the badge of the "Big Red One" (1st Infantry Division) guard against V.C. snipers.

Other Man's Enemy. The tasks that lie ahead for the 125,000 Americans now committed to the struggle are almost primerlike in their simplicity, yet infernal in their execution. First, the military enclaves must be secured—and security from Phu Bai to Cam Ranh Bay shows dire need of improvement. Then, having learned the trade of ambush and counter-ambush, American troops will have to move out alongside competent Vietnamese to secure hamlets and villages grown cynical after years of Communist terror and Western intransigence.

To do this will require better intelligence, a knowledge of where the Viet Cong are and where they plan to hit next. And it will, more than anything else, require adaptation on the part of the American fighting man, an acceptance of the axiom Australian officers drum into their superb troops: "The jungle is your friend if you make it your friend. Then it becomes the other man's enemy."