

U.S. Forces Out of Vietnam; Hanoi Frees the Last P.O.W.

By Joseph B. Treaster (Special to The New York Times)

Saigon, South Vietnam, March 29 -- The last American troops left South Vietnam today, leaving behind an unfinished war that has deeply scarred this country and the United States.

There was little emotion or joy as they brought to a close almost a decade of American military intervention.

Remaining after the final jet transport lifted off from Tan Son Nhut air base at 5:53 P.M. were about 800 Americans on the truce observation force who will leave tomorrow and Saturday. A contingent of 159 Marine guards and about 50 military attaches also stayed behind.

The fighting men were gone, but United States involvement in South Vietnam was far from ended.

When Gen. Frederick C. Weyand presided over the furling of the colors of the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, this afternoon, he told a handful of American servicemen, "You can hold your heads up high for having been a part of this selfless effort."

In a second address later on in the afternoon, delivered in halting Vietnamese, General Weyland declared: "Our mission has been accomplished. I depart with a strong feeling of pride in what we have achieved, and in what our achievement represents."

As the last American commander in Vietnam said good-bye to the huge white tropical building that was sometimes called Pentagon East, a force of 7,200 American civilians employed by the Department of Defense was standing under the eaves.

A majority of these civilians are technicians who are already at work with the South Vietnamese armed forces, trying to fill the gap in special skills that the Vietnamization program has been unable to provide. Many are repairing helicopters, jet fighter-bombers, radar systems and computers, and some are instructing the Vietnamese in these tasks.

This afternoon at Tan Son Nhut, while waiting for his plane to take off, Col. Einar Himma, a naturalized American from Estonia, talked of his two tours in Vietnam. He had grown fond of the Vietnamese, he said, and he felt sad about their future.

"There's going to be a full blown war starting up after we leave," he said. "The fighting has never stopped anyway."

As he spoke a Government officer downtown was reporting that more than 100 military incidents had occurred in the last day- almost double the number reported in the last weeks before the cease-fire was proclaimed on Jan. 28.

Across the airport, 30 coffins with the bodies of Government soldiers had just been unloaded from trucks. A Vietnamese woman knelt weeping beside her husband's coffin.

Colonel Himma's candid talk was unusual for a military man. Many of his colleagues refuse to admit that in eight years, with hundreds of thousands of soldiers, millions of tons of bombs, a panoply of deadly devices and billions of dollars, they had not won the war.

Many offices still contend that the Army never lost a battle in Vietnam; their reasoning is that, at whatever price, the troops always took or held the terrain in question. But now the places where some Americans consider that the greatest victories of the war were achieved- Khe Sanh, Dak To, Hamburger Hill, the Ia Drang Valley, the rises and hollows south of the demilitarized zone- are controlled by the Communists.

Army publications and some officers describe the Tet offensive of 1968 as an allied victory even though many others say that its impact on the American public triggered the beginning of the United States' disengagement from Vietnam.

Admiral Moorer's Regret

Still, one general said the other day: "The Army leaves with its chin out and its chest high. It's done a commendable job."

Today, there were congratulatory messages from Washington and the Pacific headquarters and a fleeting note of regret from Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that the war had not enjoyed "the full measure of support it deserved."

When the first big American fighting units began arriving in South Vietnam in 1965, there was a standard explanation for the United States presence.

"We've come here to stop the spread of Communism," the soldiers would say without hesitation. "If we don't stop them here we may be fighting them in San Francisco next." Sometimes the soldiers also mentioned giving the South Vietnamese the opportunity to live under a democratic system.

One officer who has been involved in Vietnam for several years conceded in an interview earlier this week that what the United States had achieved here was "certainly less than any of us planned in the beginning." He said that the United States had succeeded in giving the South Vietnamese "a reasonable chance to survive."

"Now," he continued, "it becomes a matter of will and determination on the part of the South Vietnamese."

To reach this point, the cost to the United States has been almost 46,000 men killed and more than 300,000 wounded. The military has become controversial, its self-confidence has been reduced and it has been forced into a new mold- a volunteer army spruced up to attract enlistees but anathema to many old regulars.

North Vietnam, South Vietnam and the Vietcong have lost a million men on the battlefield. No one on the allied side knows how many Communist soldiers have been wounded, but it is doubtful that the number is fewer than the 400,000 South Vietnamese hurt in combat.

American officials estimate that perhaps a million South Vietnamese civilians have been killed in the war and that more than 40 per cent of the 16 million survivors have been uprooted by the fighting, their homes and belongings lost, their families scattered.

From the beginning American military men felt that the fighting in Vietnam would be like the fighting in Korea. But there were seldom front lines or large formations of troops to assault.

"In this war," a colonel said, "a squad of 10 or 12 men was considered an excellent target for wings of aircraft and battalions of artillery."

The Americans used such tactics partly out of frustration, but also because commanders were under pressure from Washington to keep their casualties down in an unpopular war.

Many Vietnamese civilians became victims. Wide areas of territory used by the Communists were declared "free-fire zones." These were places where bombs could be dropped or artillery fired at any time without special clearance. Peasants living in the areas risked death if they did not leave.

Under Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the American commander in Vietnam when the troop build-up began, there were "search-and-destroy" operations, in which sometimes thousands of soldiers would push through an area, often in tanks and armored cars.

The ambush was the greatest enemy tactic and the booby-trap was his most effective weapon until last spring, when the Russians began supplying 130-mm. guns that could fire a shell 17 miles.

One way that the Americans tried to overcome the ambush tactic was to expose the enemy's hiding places. They did this by defoliating thousands of acres and plowing down great stretches of rubber plantations and forest land bordering the roads.

But the favorite weapon of the Americans was the helicopter. This, as one general liked

to say, freed the men from the "tyranny of the terrain."

In the early days the most popular helicopter tactic was the air assault. A general would pick a trouble spot, soften it up with artillery and air strikes for 15 or 20 minutes and then load up 400 or 500 men in helicopters and set them down on the edge of the objective.

Toward the end of the American experience in Vietnam, helicopters were mainly used for armed reconnaissance in which they would scout a suspicious area and shoot at anything that moved. In Da Nang last June a couple of helicopter pilots bragged about how they had made a farmer "dance" in his rice field and how another time they had shot down a boney cow.

As United States troops strength moved downward from its 1969 peak of 543,000, the pressure increased to keep down American losses and the use of bombers increased. This added to the cost of the war and almost certainly led to more inadvertent casualties.

My Lai Most Damaging

The most painful memory for the Army was the My Lai massacre. But an incident in which eight Green Berets were accused of killing a Vietnamese double agent in the fall of 1969 hurt the Army too. The eight- six commissioned officers, a warrant officer and a sergeant- were arrested and charged with shooting Thai Khac Chuyen in June, 1969, and dumping his body in the South China Sea. A little later all Special Forces soldiers were pulled out of Vietnam.

Often when American military men talk about the mistakes of the war, they conclude that more force should have been used. Many think that North Vietnam should have been invaded. Failing that, they would have preferred to march deep into Laos to try to cut the Ho Chi Minh supply network.

Early Training of Vietnamese

There is general agreement that the United States should have started building the Vietnamese armed forces from the beginning, instead of assuming the main combat role until it became clear that the American public would no longer support the war.

There is little question that in four years the Vietnamese armed forces have made strides forward, but they still have shortcomings.

General Weyand declared today that the Government forces had proved "their readiness, determination and capability to defend their ideals" during the North Vietnamese offensive of 1972.

In that campaign, several South Vietnamese units broke and ran, others suffered devastating casualties and, in some cases, entire battalions were captured. American and

South Vietnamese officers said that the massive use of American air power had saved the country.

Although American advisers to Vietnamese units and Special Forces Soldiers often lived close to the Vietnamese, and often ate Vietnamese food, most American servicemen lived in isolation in compounds and barracks that were as much like home as they could make them.

Air-conditioners, soft drinks, beer, ice cream, the latest movies, television, tape recorders and pin-ups were standard. Most of the food was shipped from the United States. Generals prided themselves on elaborate messes.

Junior officers and noncoms took pride in building fancy clubs. The Air Force club in Pleiku was known for its huge crystal chandelier. One of the most popular clubs in Saigon used to be the top of the Rex Hotel, where the officers held barbecue cookouts every Sunday night. In the beginning there were slot machines everywhere, but they abruptly disappeared one day.

Heavy Ratio of Support

Men in support jobs outnumbered combat troops by more than 7 to 1. But there were line units with many helicopters, like the First Cavalry Division, where the "grunts," or fighting men usually got two hot meals a day and sometimes had ice cream and soda in the field.

The tour of duty in Vietnam was one year. Its brevity made the separation from family more bearable but it created great turbulence in the armed forces. Many officers felt that this short tour weakened the services structurally and created a situation in which, as one officer said, "We didn't have 8 years or 12 years, or whatever it was of experience- we had one year of experience eight times."

Officers spent six months in combat duty and six months in administrative or support jobs. This gave everyone some exposure to the war and increased his chances for promotion, but it also kept everyone in unfamiliar jobs.

With all the amenities, though, morale began to fall in 1970 and 1971. Drug use became endemic. A few units refused orders to go into combat and enlisted men occasionally "fraggged" their officers- throwing fragmentation grenades. Soldiers began to wear love beads and peace symbols and let their hair run shaggy. It was only after units had gotten down to a hard core of "lifers," specialists and technicians that the American forces in Vietnam regained some of the lost discipline.

Today, as the last men were heading home, a reporter asked whether they were happy or sad. Several majors, lieutenant colonels and colonels glared fiercely and snapped, "No comment!"

Answer Questions:

- WHAT happened?
- WHEN did this happen?
- WHERE did it happen?
- WHO are the important people involved?
- WHY was this an important, newsworthy event?
- HOW did this event shape the nation?