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Viet wind-down strains GIs

'There will not be a classic victory'

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"As far as I can see it, the President can't get us out any too soon," says a lieutenant colonel, a former Vietnam battalion commander, reflecting the views of many of his colleagues.

Thus, at least for many officers in the middle grades, the Vietnam war has from the early 1960's gone from an interesting, possibly fascinating way to win points with superior officers to a hard, dangerous, and rewarding war to a terrible thing that seems to go on and on.

Senior officers and junior officers and career enlisted men have often found themselves on an endless shuttle between Vietnam and somewhere else.

Race and drugs have made their marks. While blacks and whites have usually fought together without quarrel near the front or where there was danger, there was time and leisure in the rear for strife.

Many experienced officers, especially in the middle grades, are frankly concerned now about the way the young both in and out of service feel toward the Army, about how the Army behaves toward the young, and about what will happen after the war.

• Last year, in military Region I, a company of the Americal Division was unwilling to go out again. In the forefront were what the Army saw as a few ring-leaders. But others in the company later told reporters they were in general agreement.

• This year a unit of seasoned men balked at going along a route selected by their company commander to a helicopter pickup point. A new route was chosen, and senior officers complimented the men for their good judgment in balking.

• Of one division in Vietnam, a senior general here said, "It didn't accomplish anything much when it first was in Vietnam. And it hasn't accomplished anything much since."

Survival vs. hitting out

• Life magazine ran a lengthy report recently on a company in the Army's prestigious 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). According to the report, which Army officials here generally find quite probable, a concern for survival has replaced a zeal for hitting at the enemy. Success on missions is limited.

Of one mission, the company commander said, "I'm not pleased. It's fine that we didn't get anyone hurt, but we didn't accomplish anything. Professionally, I'm still hungry."

In the last war it fought, the Korean war, the Army ran out of steam toward the end.

Again, officers say, recalling the continued combat after the talks began, many at the very end were unwilling to give up their lives for uncertain reason.

To a similar degree, no matter how hopeful the Army might once have been, it cannot hope to bring Vietnam to a successful conclusion, no matter what happens. There will not be a classic American victory.

To many, there are few reasons to risk one's life in heated combat in Vietnam, and many reasons not to do so. For one thing—mentioned often by military men—few at home expect or are appreciative if the ultimate sacrifice is made.

As one colonel here put it, "Maybe there are only 28 killed a week. Who wants to be one of the 28?"

With so few traditional verities to cling to in this war, young soldiers tend to have more uncertainty and questions. And it is part of youth today to ask more questions anyway.

Many officers have found that poor answers just won't do. A man told to charge a hill usually will not accept an answer the equivalent of "because we were ordered to" or "because it's here."

Each commander takes a different approach, some going toward strictness, some leniency. But as a young captain noted, "The least successful officers now are those who expect to be followed because they are officers."

Flexibility advised

Essentially, many young company and battalion commanders are finding, they must run things carefully, fairly, and with a watch out for problems. What works for one unit may not for another. The officers must be willing to adjust, most say.

Rather than be dictatorial about approaches, a former battalion commander said, "I let the young leader work things out for himself, so long as he can and we can end up with the mission done."

Within the middle ranks of the Army there is a tremendous pressure for change. Many officers believe they must be more inventive, responsive, and flexible in the future. And, they say, the Army must change or lose its manpower and its effectiveness. That change is beginning to take place slowly.

It is probably inevitable that the change be slow. While the Army is trying to adjust to keep up with the new young world, the importance of being an effective army remains.

A senior colonel said in a moment of bitterness, "The United States Army now probably could not defeat any enemy under any but the best circumstances."