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Vietnamese Air Force Assuming Greater Role

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BINHTHUY, South Vietnam, Jan. 2—Lt. Nguyen Minh Son aimed his A-37 jet at the desolate, pockmarked swath of Longan province below him and headed downward.

"Three, two, one" he counted crisply in English as pods beneath the wings spit flaming rockets to the ground.

"That's beautiful," Son said softly, careening sharply upward to join the other three A-37s sent on a tactical strike against a suspected Vietcong hideout. Flying almost wing to wing, the four planes headed gracefully home.

Lt. Son, a 27-year-old who has flown over 1,000 combat missions, is stationed at Binhthuy Air Base, about 125 miles southwest of Saigon, the headquarters for the Fourth Division of the Vietnamese Air Force.

From here, some 36 combat sorties a day are flown to targets in the Mekong Delta and Cambodia. Most of them are flown by Vietnamese.

Awkward Term

Like so much of the war in the Mekong Delta, Binhthuy has been largely Vietnamized—although the term itself is rarely used by American advisers here out of deference to their native counterparts.

"It's awkward to talk to Vietnamese about Vietnamizing their war," said one U.S. Air Force officer.

The Fourth Division was created in March from the 74th Wing and it is one of five divisions in the Vietnamese Air Force. In the past five years, the air force has doubled in size to 37,000 and now has 30 squadrons.

American figures show that the Vietnamese Air Force flew 40 per cent of all air strike sorties in South Vietnam in 1970 compared with 10 per cent in 1968. Much of the air war, of course, has shifted elsewhere in Indochina. The U.S. Air Force in any event, has cut its squadrons here from 45 to 25 in the past two years.

Instead of "Vietnamization," what has happened at Binhthuy and elsewhere is termed "improvement and modernization."

In practice, this means training pilots and technicians and turning over to the Vietnamese the planes, equipment, buildings, even a tennis court brought in by the Americans. There were once about 4,000 U.S. airmen here. There are now about 550.

The base itself was returned to Vietnamese command in 1967, but it was not until last spring that U.S. Air Force personnel became a minority at Binhthuy. The remaining Americans are advisers (there are 98), some flyers, a radar squadron, a civil engineering unit and support units for the fenced in two-block U.S. compound.

The turnover has been fraught with cultural as well as technical difficulties. In September, for example, the Americans gave up responsibility for base defense and supplied the Vietnamese with sentry dogs to patrol the perimeter.

Within a matter of weeks, the dogs began to appear be-

draggled and two died. An American discovered that the Vietnamese airmen were eating the dogs' food. The daily food ration for a Vietnamese airman is 38 piastres (about seven cents). The ration for the animals was about three times as much.

Good Horsemeat

"It was good horsemeat," a U.S. officer explained in recounting the incident. An American adviser was reassigned to the dogs and the practice was stopped. Overall, however, the Americans give the Vietnamese Air Force high marks on base defense.

There has been only one mortar attack on the base since the Vietnamese took over protection and no one seems jumpy. Of the militiamen who are camped on the outskirts of the base, one U.S. Air Force captain said:

"These little fellows like to sleep on guard duty, but somehow they know when to get up."

Exactly how well the Vietnamese are doing here is difficult to say. Col. Franklyn C. Snyder, the top U.S. adviser, is filled with praise for the progress made on such things as night flying and combat assaults and his briefing charts naturally bear this out.

Unquestionably, pilots like Lt. Son, trained in flying and English at stateside installations, are the elite of the national air arm. They seem coolly professional, comfortable with the complex machinery and confident they can do whatever is asked of them.

In Ky's Image

Their flamboyant image, fashioned after that of Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, the former Vietnamese Air Force commander, gives them a special elan and what is said to be the highest morale in the Vietnamese armed forces.

"They have the skill and daring of the American air aces of 30 or 40 years ago," one U.S. adviser observed.

One smudge on this glow, however, is the fact that lieutenants and even some captains earn two to three thousand piastres less a month than what American officers pay their maids. This is an anomaly noticed by the Vietnamese.

Low pay leads to petty corruption and stealing. "If it isn't nailed down, they think you don't want it," said one U.S. airman.

A small black-market commissary (at which Americans wink) operates in at least one Binhthuy squadron. Here the pilots can buy the small personal items unavailable to them in their own bare commissary and the American PX, from which they are barred.

A caveat in measuring the "improvement and modernization" of the Vietnamese Air Force is the fact that it has no competition from the enemy. The Vietnamese army has to

fight the enemy on the ground, but the Vietcong have no planes and the North Vietnamese do not send theirs south.

In Jet Age

Progress then, in the view of Snyder and others, is a question of size, technical expertise and combat readiness.

Besides doubling in size since 1965, the Vietnamese Air Force has also moved into the jet age. Five years ago, the air force consisted only of propeller craft. Now it is equipped with the two-seater A-37S and F-5 Freedom Fighters.

When it reaches its full strength of 50 squadrons, the Vietnamese Air Force will be the seventh largest air force in the world.

At Binhthuy, all four wings that make up a Vietnamese division have been activated.

One wing consists of fighter squadrons, another of helicopter squadrons, a third handles maintenance and supply and the fourth wing is the base "housekeeper."

By Snyder's figures, more than three-fourths of the division's combat units are ready for battle, on their own.

"We are very proud to run this by ourselves," said Col. Nguyen Huy Anh, the 38-year-old division commander and a 17-year veteran of the Vietnamese Air Force.

"In the past Americans underestimated the quality of our pilots. The North and South Vietnamese are the same blood. Why, then, could they fly jets and we not? Now Americans realize that we have the capability. Now they equip us step by step."