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TODAY'S SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMY (700)

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WASHINGTON -- THE VETERAN ASIAN CORRESPONDENT DENIS WARNER WRITES IN THIS WEEK'S ISSUE OF LOOK MAGAZINE THAT THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMY, WITH CONTINUED AMERICAN LOGISTIC SUPPORT, HAS BECOME A MATCH FOR THE INDIGENOUS VIET CONG.

THE AUSTRALIAN JOURNALIST DENIS WARNER IS NOT A NEWCOMER TO THE VIETNAMESE SCENE. FOR MORE THAN TWENTY YEARS HE HAS REPORTED EVENTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. HE COVERED THE FRENCH WAR IN INDO-CHINA UP TO DIEN BIEN PHU AND HAS BEEN REPORTING FOR AMERICAN READERS ON THE PRESENT VIETNAM WAR, FIRST IN THE NOW DEFUNCT REPORTER MAGAZINE AND NOW FOR LOOK.

ALWAYS RESPONSIBLE AND CAREFUL IN HIS EVALUATIONS AND PREDICTIONS, HE HAS NEVER HESITATED TO DISAGREE WITH MORE OPTIMISTIC OFFICIAL AMERICAN ESTIMATES OF THE MILITARY AND POLITICAL SITUATION.

WHEN THIS WRITER TALKED TO HIM AT LENGTH DURING A SAIGON VISIT IN JUNE LAST YEAR, MR. WARNER WAS FAR FROM OPTIMISTIC IN HIS APPRAISAL OF THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMY. HE DID, HOWEVER, CONCEDE THAT THE MAGNIFICENT PERFORMANCE OF THE TWO KOREAN DIVISIONS IN SOUTH VIETNAM SHOULD REMIND US THAT IN KOREA, TOO, IT TOOK TIME AND PATIENCE TO ACHIEVE THESE RESULTS.

LAST WINTER IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE TET OFFENSIVE WHEN A WAVE OF PESSIMISM OVERWHELMED AMERICAN REPORTERS, HE WAS ONE OF THE FIRST CORRESPONDENTS TO WRITE ABOUT "THE NEW SENSE OF UNITY AND UNDERSTANDING OF NATIONHOOD" AMONG SOUTH VIETNAMESE POLITICAL GROUPS. THESE WERE GROUPS WHICH HAD HERETOFORE OPPOSED THE GOVERNMENT AND QUARRELED AMONG THEMSELVES. MR. WARNER WARNED THEN THAT IF NORTH VIETNAM'S GENERAL GIAP PUSHED HIS OFFENSIVE TO THE POINT OF DEFEAT, HE WOULD "LACK THE RESOURCES TO CONTROL ANYTHING."

THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED, MR. WARNER REPORTS NOW IN HISTORY OF THE VIETNAM WAR ON MICROFILM

HIS LOOK MAGAZINE ARTICLE. THE VIET CONG FORCES, HE WRITES, WERE SO DECIMATED AS A RESULT OF THE TET OFFENSIVE THAT ALMOST ALL REGULAR UNITS ARE NOW PREDOMINANTLY MANNED BY NORTH VIETNAMESE. THE AUSTRALIAN JOURNALIST ARGUES THAT THE ARVIN, THE REGULAR SOUTH VIETNAMESE ARMY, "HAS BEGUN TO BE A CREDITABLE FIGHTING FORCE. IT HAS EVEN REACHED THE STAGE," HE ADDS, "WHERE, WITH CONTINUED LOGISTICAL SUPPORT FROM THE UNITED STATES, IT COULD DEAL WITH THE INDIGENOUS VIET CONG."

SOME REDUCTION OF U.S. STRENGTH, HE BELIEVES, COULD BE MADE NOW WITHOUT PREJUDICE TO SOUTH VIETNAM'S SECURITY. MR. WARNER MAKES HIS POINT BY TRACING THE DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCE OF SAIGON'S FIRST DIVISION WHICH GAVE AN EXCELLENT ACCOUNT OF ITSELF DURING TET, AND HAS SINCE, WITH THE HELP OF AMERICAN FORCES, SECURED HUE AND THE COASTAL PLAINS AROUND IT. THE AUSTRALIAN JOURNALIST WARNS, HOWEVER, THAT THIS OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCE IS NOT AS YET TYPICAL FOR ALL ARVIN DIVISIONS, THAT INADEQUACIES AND SHORTCOMINGS REMAIN, WITH LEADERSHIP STILL THE MOST ACUTE PROBLEM.

"NEVERTHELESS," HE SAYS, "DEMONSTRABLE IMPROVEMENT WAS APPARENT IN OFFENSIVE EFFORTS ALMOST EVERYWHERE." ON THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE SIDE, MR. WARNER SEES THE BASIS FOR THIS REMARKABLE CHANGE IN ARMY REORGANIZATION, BETTER OFFICER TRAINING AND ADVANCEMENT POSSIBILITIES, BUT, ABOVE ALL, "IN THE SMALL CORE OF SOLID, UNOBTRUSIVE PROFESSIONAL OFFICERS AND NCO'S WHO HAVE BEEN FIGHTING FOR THE PAST 20 YEARS." THE AMERICAN EFFORT, MR. WARNER SAYS, OWES MUCH TO THE FORMER PACIFICATION CHIEF AMXASSADOR ROBERT KOMER AND GENERAL CREIGHTON ABRAMS, THE PRESENT SUPREME COMMANDER WHO EARLIER WAS THE MAIN LIAISON MAN WITH ARVIN.

IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING THAT THIS ENCOURAGING EVALUATION OF AN INDEPENDENT AND HIGHLY RESPECTED CORRESPONDENT HAS PARTICULAR SIGNIFICANCE AT THIS MOMENT IN THE VIETNAM NEGOTIATIONS. ONE OF THE STATED AIMS OF THE OTHER SIDE -- THE NORTH VIETNAMESE AS WELL AS THE VIET CONG -- IS THE WITHDRAWAL OF AMERICAN TROOPS. IN LINE WITH THE MANILA DECLARATION OF 1966 THE AMERICAN POSITION HAS BEEN ALL ALONG AS FOLLOWS: THE UNITED STATES IS WILLING TO WITHDRAW ITS FORCES AS THE OTHER SIDE WITHDRAWS ITS FORCES TO THE NORTH, STOPS INFILTRATION, AND AS THE LEVEL OF VIOLENCE THUS SUBSIDES.

DOESN'T THAT MEAN, SECRETARY RUSK HAS REPEATEDLY BEEN ASKED BY SKEPTICAL REPORTERS, THAT THE U.S. REGARDS SOUTH VIETNAM'S ARMY AS CAPABLE OF HANDLING THE VIET CONG FORCE WHICH WOULD REMAIN? MR. RUSK'S ANSWER HAS BEEN THAT, INDEED, THIS IS THE AMERICAN UNDERSTANDING. SOBER EVALUATION OF THE DEVELOPMENTS OF RECENT MONTHS NOT ONLY SUPPORTS MR. RUSK'S VIEW, BUT, AT THE SAME TIME, GOES FAR IN EXPLAINING THE READINESS OF THE OTHER SIDE TO NEGOTIATE. ITEM.

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