



DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
WASHINGTON DC 20330-1000

26 DEC 1991

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

Mr. John B. Konek
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Dear Mr. Konek:

We are attaching an extract from the Study "Air Training Command's Support of Forces in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973." This extract discusses the unit mentioned in your December 7, 1991 Freedom of Information Act request.

We forwarded your letter to the Air Training Command/IM (FOIA), Randolph AFB, TX 78150 for additional information. They will reply directly to you.

We also sent your request to the Defense Intelligence Agency, Attn: DCP-IA (FOIA), Washington, DC 20340 for aerial photographs. They will reply directly to you.

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Sincerely,

Carolyn W. Price
CAROLYN W. PRICE
Freedom of Information Manager

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LIST OF NAMES OF PERSONNEL

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AIR TRAINING COMMAND'S
SUPPORT OF FORCES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA
1961-1973

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Publication Date - January 1978

In December 1972, UPT training for Vietnamese and other foreign personnel became known as the Security Assistance Training Program (SATP) in keeping with a redefinition of terms. ATC continued to train new VNAF pilots long after the program was renamed--until 30 April 1975 when RVN President Duong Van Minh announced an unconditional surrender to the communists. The only other major changes in the VNAF UPT effort prior to the end of 1973 involved locating part of the T-37 training at Webb AFB in August 1973 and the entry of some VNAF graduates of Keesler's and Sheppard's T-28/T-37 programs into the SATP T-38 training program. An outgrowth of South Vietnam's increased F-5 aircraft inventory, ATC began providing T-38 training to the VNAF at Columbus and Laredo later in 1973. Future classes would start training at Moody, Vance, and Williams AFBs.²⁹

FIELD TRAINING DETACHMENT 917H

ATC's training of the VNAF was not limited to the confines of the CONUS. The command also conducted a field training program, providing non-resident training away from ATC's own bases. Such training was accomplished either by permanently located field training detachments or by the more transient mobile training detachments. ATC's FTDs and MTTs were located both in the CONUS and overseas.

To accomplish its task of training VNAF personnel, the USAF either brought the Vietnamese to the CONUS, as it did in the case of the MAP UPT program, or it sent Americans to Vietnam, through ATC's field program, to train the Vietnamese in their own country. Each option offered advantages and disadvantages. Superficially, it would seem more efficient to send a small number of American instructors to train a large number of Vietnamese students than to send those same Vietnamese to the CONUS. CONUS training did have its compensations, however. Large and expensive training equipment, including aircraft, did not have to be transported overseas and, since many Vietnamese language students were already in the United States studying English, there was no reason to return them to Vietnam to complete their training when it could be accomplished at existing training centers in the United States. Additionally, it was felt that the Vietnamese students' mastery of English, being indispensable for further flying or technical training under American instructors, was facilitated by residency in the United States, where they would be immersed in an

English-speaking culture. Political advantages also accrued. One of the desiderata of MAP training conducted in the CONUS was the exposure of foreign students to democratic ideals and the "American way of life."³⁰ By 1962, however, the deteriorating military situation in Vietnam required that new VNAF pilots be produced as rapidly as possible. The political and cultural advantages of CONUS training had to be sacrificed for the greater efficiency of "in-country" training.³¹

Throughout the war, the Vietnamese continually pressed the USAF to shorten its pilot training courses to produce more VNAF pilots in less time, but ATC's courses, the product of many years' experience in flying training, proved remarkably resistant to reduction in length. In addition to pressing for the acceleration of the MAP T-28 course and bringing about the changes that were incorporated into the Vietnamese-only syllabus in October 1962, the VNAF also asked for a "special field or mobile training detachment sent to Vietnam to help them in helicopter training."³²

Largely because of American military assistance, the helicopter section of the VNAF was experiencing a critical pilot shortage in late 1962. The Vietnamese expected to have 8 H-19 and 22 H-34 helicopters by 1 July 1963. Under the Military Assistance Program, 18 more H-34 aircraft were programmed for Vietnam during FY 1964, making a total of 48 helicopters projected for the VNAF by 1 July 1964. Even based on the rather low pilot/seat ratio of 1.25, the VNAF expected to be short 30 helicopter pilots by 1 July 1963 and 51 pilots by 1 July 1964. Without additional pilots to fly them, the VNAF's growing force of helicopters was becoming an expensive multiple back-up inventory for a mere handful of rotary-wing pilots.³³

The VNAF's request for overseas field training assistance was initially made to the MAAG, Vietnam, and then relayed through US channels. VNAF helicopter pilots were being trained in the CONUS, but often they would not arrive for their scheduled classes because of last-minute rechecks by the Vietnamese government security service.³⁴

On 8 September 1962, CINCPAC sent a message to HQ USAF requesting that "all feasible steps" be taken to alleviate the current pilot shortage of the VNAF. The Chief of the MAAG, Vietnam wanted to train these additional pilots in Vietnam, where the language problem would be minimized. The problem of long lead time for

security clearances would also be alleviated since the student pilots could begin their training while their clearances were still being obtained. Given such an "in-country" training program, the Chief of the MAAG, Vietnam, believed that he could turn out helicopter pilots in approximately 16 weeks. CINCPAC approved the Chief's request, but noted that "USAF instructor pilot and maintenance support will be required to get [the] chopper training program started and should be in place ASAP [as soon as possible]." To expedite this training program, CINCPAC asked HQ USAF to get an ATC team "on [the] road without delay."³⁵

An ATC survey team visited Vietnam from 23 September to 7 October 1962 to study the various possible ways of training VNAF helicopter pilots in that country.³⁶ They concluded that in-country helicopter training would be both feasible and desirable, but that the MAAG's original request for an MTT to train 15 Vietnamese cadets as helicopter pilots "would not solve the acute pilot shortage presently suffered by VNAF." They recommended instead that an FTD, staffed by ATC personnel from Stead and Sheppard, be established in Vietnam to provide helicopter pilot and mechanic training. This was the only way, they believed, to "eliminate the need for USAF Forces serving in any helicopter air combat counterinsurgency operations." Their proposed in-country training program was "directed towards self-sufficiency by the VNAF to provide their own helicopter pilot and mechanic training within their own resources." Finally, the survey team recommended that the FTD be "in Vietnam by 1 January 1963, with training starting 1 February 1963." As for the VNAF, they were reported to be "in complete and joyous agreement with this plan."³⁷

In November 1962, HQ USAF approved the team's recommendations and directed ATC to deploy an FTD to Vietnam to conduct H-19 helicopter pilot training for the VNAF. A concomitant mission of the FTD, emphasizing the ultimate goal of Vietnamese self-sufficiency, was to "qualify VNAF personnel to assume conduct of this program at the earliest possible date."³⁸

Field Training Detachment 917S was organized on 3 December 1962 with an authorized strength of 12 officers and 47 airmen;³⁹ it was manned with personnel withdrawn from ATC resources, while logistic support was furnished by the Air Force section of the MAAG, Vietnam. Most of the newly-assigned officers and airmen of FTD 917S left the CONUS on 11 January 1963 and arrived in Vietnam the next day. The detachment soon

became operational and began training on 11 February 1963.⁴⁰

The training was conducted in eight H-19B helicopters. Three of these were already available at Tan Son Nhut Airfield in Saigon, while the remaining five were in flyable storage at the VNAF Bien Hoa Depot.⁴¹ The first pilot training class, designated 63A, consisted of 15 VNAF cadets.⁴² Its great success--the class experienced no attrition--and VNAF's continued urgent need for helicopter pilots led CINCPAC to request an expansion of the in-country helicopter pilot training program. Specifically, CINCPAC wanted to double the output of the FTD by adding nine officers, 41 airmen, and nine helicopters.⁴³ HQ USAF approved CINCPAC's request and informed ATC in May of 1963 that it planned to double the production of FTD 917S by augmenting it with an additional 11 officers, 31 airmen, and nine helicopters. Because ATC's helicopter training capability would be reduced 75 to 90 percent if the personnel to support this requirement were withdrawn from ATC resources,⁴⁴ the Air Rescue Service provided most of the necessary augmentees, including 11 instructor pilots. The commander of the FTD considered nine of these pilots to be deficient in training, however. Five of them were upgraded to instructor pilot status while in Vietnam, but the remaining four pilots had to return to Stead in September 1963 for an additional 35 flying hours of upgrade training. After passing a standardization flight check, they returned to Vietnam.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, on 17 June 1963, ATC transferred responsibility for FTD 917S from Sheppard to the 3635th Flying Training Group (Advanced) at Stead. FTD 917S was inactivated and FTD 917H was designated and organized at Saigon to take its place.⁴⁶ The reason for the change concerned the unit's primary mission of pilot training; it was reassigned to a "compatible ATC flying training organization."⁴⁷

Class 63A graduated on 14 June 1963. Each of the 15 student pilots had logged 75 hours of flying time, and all 15 students satisfactorily completed the course.⁴⁸ These graduate pilots were swiftly assigned to VNAF helicopter squadrons for upgrade and operational training.⁴⁹

Class 63B began training on 26 June 1963. Although 30 students, double the number of class 63A, were trained during the initial period of instruction for class 63B, only 14 were able to continue on to the flying training phase because of a shortage of aircraft and qualified instructor pilots. The initial period of instruction was

equally divided between academic training and flightline operations.⁵⁰

After graduating its first class of helicopter pilots and while beginning to train its second class, FTD 917H also undertook to train a class of helicopter mechanics. The first mechanics' class began on 1 July 1963 with 30 Vietnamese students. Their training involved both classroom instruction and practical experience. The students spent 3 hours per day in the classroom attending lectures, receiving a total of 180 hours of classroom engineering instruction in this manner. They also received 3 hours per day of practical flightline experience.¹⁵⁵ Each student was assigned to a crew chief or specialist and assisted him in the daily maintenance of the helicopter. This practical application or "laboratory" aspect of the instruction allowed the student mechanic to learn the proper maintenance techniques at first hand, taught him the correct use of maintenance forms and records, and helped him understand the internal workings of the helicopter. To quote a contemporary account, "The student mechanic displays much elation at the prospect of actually working on mission aircraft and is desirous of proving himself to his flight line supervisor."⁵¹

A major problem facing FTD 917H was the inadequacy of its logistical support. The ATC survey team had originally assumed that the staff of the Air Force Section of the MAAG would "provide liaison assistance as required to insure that logistics, facilities, and operational requirements are known to support this plan."⁵² Once deployed to Vietnam, however, the detachment found itself short of aerospace ground equipment, hand tools, and spare parts.⁵³ Although the unit repeatedly requisitioned the required tool kits, parts, and equipment through USAF supply channels, it was forced to rely on the 211th Helicopter Squadron of the VNAF for logistical support.⁵⁴ This poor supply situation continued throughout 1963, but by February 1964 the detachment commander was able to write that "The supply support improves daily." He could cite only "one item that threatens to give trouble," the main rotor gear box of one of the H-19 helicopters. By then, controlled cannibalization, coupled with the improvement in logistical support, had reduced the impact of the supply problem to one aircraft out of commission because of parts.⁵⁵

Personnel rotation presented the detachment with another kind of problem. The initial cadre of USAF officers and airmen arrived in the theater in January 1963,

having been briefed that they would return to their original duty stations upon completion of their tour of duty in Vietnam.⁵⁶ The training schedule at that time called for FTD 917H to complete its mission on 24 October 1964. Although no one was expected to remain in the theater for the entire 22-month programmed life span of the detachment, in the spring of 1963 ATC began directing 30-to-90 day involuntary tour extensions, adversely affecting detachment morale. Moreover, Sheppard AFB, which was responsible for the detachment until 17 June 1963, initiated procedures to reassign detachment personnel to the USAF at large. Sheppard also intended to rotate the original complement of detachment personnel in monthly increments beginning in November 1963 and continuing through April 1964, extending the tours of some airmen to as long as 15 months. The detachment commander protested the inequity of this plan: Replacements arriving in April 1964 would serve only a 6-month tour, less than half that served by other airmen. In addition, he argued that the 6-month rotation period was excessive and would adversely affect the continuity of the mechanics' training program, impairing the efficiency of the entire maintenance function. He urgently requested, therefore, that a more equitable rotation plan be formulated that would provide a "minimum period of disrupting concentrated training programs."⁵⁷ Following this request, the period of staggered personnel rotation began earlier than originally planned. By October 1963, the original cadre of officers and airmen was being replaced.⁵⁸

Beginning with class 64A, the detachment began to accelerate the pace of its training effort. This was accomplished in two ways. First, the training week was extended from 5 to 6 days, eliminating several counter-productive aspects of 2-day weekends which had been experienced by the detachment. Students' flying proficiency had decreased during weekends; Mondays were almost entirely spent returning the student pilot to the same level of proficiency which he had already attained on the previous Friday but had lost over the weekend. Students and instructors alike had found the long weekends to be unproductive and boring. The second procedure instituted to accelerate the pace of the detachment's training effort was an increase from 45-minutes of daily flying time per student to a full hour. Because the first 15 minutes of each day's flying instruction was devoted to reviewing the previous day's lessons, this change increased the time available to teach new material from 30 minutes to 45 minutes per student per day, an increase of 50 percent.⁵⁹

Class 64A had originally been scheduled to graduate on 12 May 1964, but the introduction of these new procedures allowed the graduation date to be moved forward to 13 April. The acceleration of the training pace allowed class 64B's scheduled starting date to be moved up to 17 April and its graduation date was advanced to 30 July, well before the originally scheduled graduation date of 24 October 1964. An added advantage of this program was that it alleviated the detachment's personnel problem. In the words of the detachment commander, "This program will not require supplementation of personnel, and the normal rotational plan can be implemented on personnel now in the Detachment."⁶⁰

Class 64B completed its helicopter flying training on 3 July 1964, although academic pilot training continued until 7 July. When the 26 student pilots of that class graduated on 18 July, they brought the total number of helicopter pilots trained by FTD 917H to 95. In addition to training these VNAF pilots, the detachment also trained 92 helicopter mechanics during its 19 months in Vietnam.⁶¹ Its mission accomplished, the detachment prepared to go home. On 20 August 1964, HQ ATC inactivated FTD 917H at Saigon.⁶²

The major problem experienced by FTD 917H in the training of VNAF personnel was one common to most foreign training: the language problem or, as the detachment commander put it, "Comprehension and retention of English in the cockpit."⁶³ This linguistic problem, which plagued the United States throughout its effort in Southeast Asia, was cited again and again as the "biggest problem" the detachment faced in the accomplishment of its training mission. The "low English comprehension and lack of understanding of most students" constantly frustrated the instructors' teaching efforts. Since no additional time was available to give further English instruction to the VNAF student pilots, the short-term solution adopted by the instructors was "repetition, patience, and extra instruction to the weaker students."⁶⁴ The only real long-term solution to the problem would have been a prior program of intensive English instruction for all VNAF trainees, preferably in the CONUS.

Although the detachment's supply situation had improved early in 1964, it continued to have logistical difficulties. The detachment had only six aircraft in commission in early July 1964; an urgent action technical order had required that all but 18 of the helicopters' pitch control rods be radiographed. Since radiography

was not available in Vietnam, the rods had to be flown to Air America in Taipei, Formosa. The detachment's maintenance personnel met the challenge, however, and kept the six remaining in-commission aircraft flying throughout this period.⁶⁵

FTD 917H garnered a number of awards for its performance in Vietnam. Under its earlier designation of FTD 917S, the detachment received the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award for the period 12 January to 14 June 1963. An associated unit, the 3638th Flying Training Squadron (Helicopter) at Stead received the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award for "training foreign pilots and supplying instructors to establish and operate the USAF helicopter pilot course in a foreign country." This award covered the period from 1 March 1962 to 1 March 1963.⁶⁶ In addition, the Air Force Advisory Group of the United States Military Assistance Command Vietnam recommended FTD 917H for the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award for its performance "throughout its period of deployment in the Republic of Vietnam." As a result of the detachment's efforts in producing "pilot and maintenance personnel," the VNAF was able to "develop a helicopter capability." Overall, the detachment was cited as having "contributed significantly to the operational capability of the Vietnamese Air Force."⁶⁷

PROJECT "GO-AHEAD": FIELD TRAINING DETACHMENT 921R

The success of FTD 917H in training helicopter pilots and mechanics led to a second field training detachment being established in Vietnam, this time to help overcome a VNAF shortage of fixed-wing pilots. Nicknamed "GO-AHEAD," this project involved the training of Vietnamese personnel in light aircraft and the beginning of a VNAF training capability. On 2 July 1963, HQ ATC designated and organized FTD 921R with an authorized strength of 29 officers and 86 airmen and assigned it to the 3510th Flying Training Group at Randolph AFB, Texas. The Air Force procured the aircraft needed for this project by contracting with the Cessna Aircraft Company for 25 light aircraft, Cessna model number 185, later designated the U-17A. Cessna also provided the initial flying and maintenance training for the detachment's personnel during July and August. The aircraft were airlifted from Wichita, Kansas, to Nha Trang, Vietnam, during August and early September.⁶⁸