

CAN CHOPPERS BE VIETNAMEZED?

Whenever Lt. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, commander of the South Vietnamese drive in Laos, leads his troops into battle, he does so aboard a Huey helicopter. Sparklingly clean and meticulously tuned, it is no ordinary chopper; its interior is beautifully red-carpeted and all four of its crew members are American. Asked recently if he would rather fly with a South Vietnamese crew, the tall, reserved general laughingly replied: "You must be jesting. No thank you."

That General Lam and most other South Vietnamese commanders feel safer flying in American-piloted helicopters has not, of course, enhanced the reputation of the South Vietnamese chopper pilots. And recently that reputation sank even lower after two South Vietnamese helicopters went down with the loss of five journalists and Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri, the ARVN commander in Cambodia. Today, in fact, there are many experts who question whether the U.S., despite its avowed intention of turning the war over to South Vietnam, will be able to withdraw its helicopter support for many years to come without endangering the entire Vietnamization program. "I seriously doubt," one American chopper pilot said last week, "that the helicopter war can be Vietnamized."

Crash Programs: Nevertheless, the U.S. is attempting to do just that. Less than two years ago, when the Vietnamization program went into high gear, the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) could boast some 100 choppers. By now, the South Vietnamese helicopter force numbers 400 helicopters, and 400 more are scheduled to be delivered by 1972. Far more diffi-

cult, however, has been the problem of producing trained and competent pilots. Until late in 1969, only 350 South Vietnamese had been trained as helicopter pilots. But with the advent of Vietnamization, the U.S. Army and Air Force were instructed to initiate crash programs to train South Vietnamese chopper pilots and ground crews. The goal was set at 1,500 fully trained South Vietnamese chopper pilots, and most have already completed their courses. The last of the batch will be graduated by early next year.

For the Vietnamese cadets, it is an arduous program. Carefully chosen from all levels of Vietnamese society, the candidates must first learn at least a smattering of English at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon. Those who pass (about 75 per cent of the original class) are flown to Lackland Air Force Base in Texas for six weeks' additional study in English. Then they are sent to Fort Wolters, Texas, for sixteen weeks of training in the basic mysteries of the chopper. There, if they do well, they eventually solo and go on for sixteen more weeks of advanced tactics training at the Hunter-Stewart base complex near Savannah, Ga.

Instruction: Many of the trainees find the program a very confusing experience. To begin with, there is no such thing as a helicopter repair manual in Vietnamese. All instruction is in English, and some instructors lapse into pidgin, some into jargon and others into equally impenetrable Texan. Sometimes, when the trainees are asked a question that they do not understand, they reply with an Oriental "yes" just to appease their instructor. "Learning in a foreign language, from foreign instructors, in a foreign country and in a foreign technical environment, it's a wonder any of them get through," comments one American instructor. "I couldn't imagine myself going over there to learn Vietnamese and fly."

In fact, U.S. military men are divided over the question whether this type of Stateside training can turn out South Vietnamese chopper pilots who are capable of carrying on the war without massive U.S. helicopter support. Some Americans, such as Col. James Kidder, head of the training program at Hunter Army Air Field, believe that the South Vietnamese are the equal of the American graduates at Fort Rucker. "A man can either fly or not," says Kidder. "It doesn't make any difference what the color of his skin is or where he is from." And this view is supported by Col. John Hughes, a beribboned flier who has seen South Vietnamese helicopter pilots in action. "Absolutely they'll be able to fight this kind of warfare," argues Colonel Hughes. "I have a feeling that many Americans



Vietnamese cadet: Underrated?

still underrate Asians—in spite of Pearl Harbor."

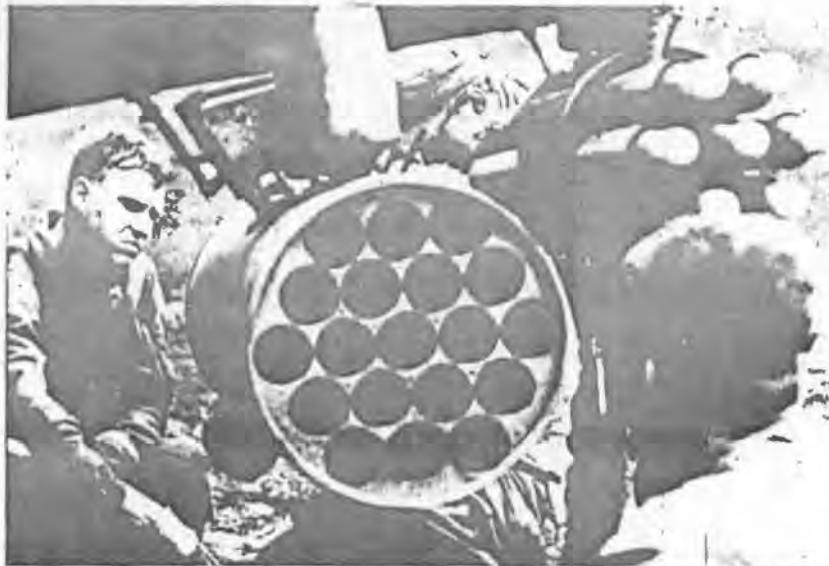
On the other side, some American military men argue that the Vietnamese do not maintain their aircraft properly. They point to the fact that only a handful of South Vietnamese helicopter maintenance men receive Stateside training and that, as a result, nearly 75 per cent of the VNAF's fleet of choppers is grounded by mechanical trouble at any given time. Among the skeptics is retired Lt. Gen. James Gavin, father of the "sky cavalry" concept, who says: "I don't think Vietnamese academic background and manual skills are up to training sufficient numbers of them to use helicopters well in the time we have got left there. I don't see leaving sophisticated helicopters and continuing to replace them. Oh, no. That would be like dropping them in the Pacific Ocean."

Firepower: Indeed, even the most enthusiastic supporters of the helicopter-training program admit that it would be a mistake to expect the South Vietnamese to service and fly the most advanced U.S. helicopters. As a result, there are no present plans to give the VNAF complex Cobra gunships. Instead, the VNAF will have to make do with Huey choppers outfitted with guns. "They won't have quite the firepower we have," said one veteran American chopper pilot, "but the Huey is a good ship and the South Vietnamese should still have a big edge over the enemy if they use it right. The question is whether these Vietnamese pilots will prove themselves in combat. And the only place you will get that story is in Vietnam after they go into action on a major scale."



William J. Cook—Newsweek

Training session: Too confusing?



Gunship crewmen check their rocket launchers: A lethal surrogate

incursion has demonstrated the potential of the helicopter in conventional warfare of the sort that might occur in Europe. "I think this really tough campaign has proved that the helicopter has an aggressive role to play against sophisticated defenses," says Colonel Molinelli. "A combination of helicopters with fighter-bombers overhead waiting to be called in is just about an unbeatable combination." The Army is already studying another combination, an experimental "tricap" (triple capacity) division to be formed by merging the First Air Cav with the First Armored Division. The new outfit, earmarked for Europe, would have one brigade of air cavalry, a brigade of armor and a brigade of infantry, as well as a reserve brigade of National Guard tanks. The Army is also hoping that the Nixon Administration will resume production of the new, heavily armed Cheyenne gunship, which was canceled because of rising costs, delivery delays and shortcomings in performance. "The helicopter gunship," insists one officer, "may be the best answer we have to the overwhelming numbers of Soviet bloc tanks in Europe."

Threat: It is obvious, however, that ground fire can pose a serious threat to helicopters, to say nothing of enemy fighter planes, which the choppers have not yet encountered. The Army thinks that both problems can be solved by taking advantage of "ground clutter"—principally trees and buildings—to hide from an enemy. In this way, some officers believe, that helicopters can even cope with jet fighters. Last fall, a series of tests at the Army's Hunter-Liggett base in California pitted Cobras against Navy F-4 and F-8 jets in simulated combat. The results are still classified, but the Army is said to be encouraged. "On the whole," says an Army spokesman, "we found that a helicopter alone on the deck, using its inherent agility, can have a low vulnerability to jets."

Many military experts wonder

about that. They note that, so far, more than 1,900 U.S. helicopters have been shot down and destroyed in Indochina, often by rifle fire or hand grenades. And if the North Vietnamese ever get their hands on a lightweight, heat-seeking missile—similar to the one already developed in the U.S.—American helicopters may be more vulnerable still. The critics also point out that the helicopter is a notoriously fragile piece of equipment. "A Huey," remarks one pilot, "consists of hundreds of moving parts, each one trying to tear the others to shreds." Indeed, for every hour in the air, a helicopter normally requires four hours of maintenance work. And even with these precautions, more than 2,300 helicopters have been wrecked in Indochina by accident, collision or mechanical failure. Altogether, the 4,200 helicopters that the U.S. admits to having lost in Vietnam cost an estimated \$1.5 billion.

Predictably enough, the Air Force

often argues against the airmobility concept. "The chopper is useful in transporting troops and supplies in the battlefield area, but its usefulness is limited," says an Air Force general. "It cannot survive when the enemy has sophisticated anti-aircraft weapons or air power." Many neutral experts and even some Army men also believe that the Pentagon is putting too much emphasis on helicopter warfare. "Military leaders always tend to be one war behind," contends a civilian aeronautical engineer. "Now they're thumbing for a weapon that has a very doubtful value in a conventional war setting and even a somewhat doubtful value in the so-called limited war." And retired Army Lt. Gen. James M. Gavin, one of the "fathers" of the airmobility concept, charges that helicopters are being used for jobs that should be done by other means. "In some moments of desperation, it is justified to use sky cavalry to solve these tactical problems," he says. "But you can't go on doing it. Sky cavalry should not be used to fight the heavy infantryman's battle, and it should not be used against strong anti-aircraft fire. That's murder."

Many of the men who do the actual fighting agree that Army helicopters should back off a bit in Laos. "The high command hasn't realized that we're fighting a conventional war out there," says a Huéy crewman. "It's no good sending in choppers, because they're not built to tangle with those defenses." Says an officer: "You just can't use the helicopter as a close-support infantry weapon under these conditions. The Army has got to change its tactical use of helicopters. The trouble is that the boys have found a new way of going to war, and they don't want to change it." Not yet anyway. But if the first taste of conventional warfare in Laos is any indication, the Army may have to reappraise some of its grand designs for fighting land wars from the sky.

P.S. TO A BRIEFING

Two weeks ago, in an attempt to rebut charges that the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos had produced only meager results, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird called upon Lt. Gen. John Vogt—known as "the best briefer in the Pentagon"—to present the Administration's case to the press. At a news conference, Vogt proclaimed that one of the major achievements of the drive into Laos had been the destruction of a vital enemy oil pipeline. To dramatize his point, Vogt displayed a 3-foot length of pipe which, he said, had been ripped out of the oil line. Technically, that was true. But last week, under questioning from reporters, Laird admitted that the particular piece of pipe brandished by Vogt had not been seized during the current Laos invasion but had been brought back months ago by a South Vietnamese intelligence team.



Vogt displaying pipe