

SAIGON'S CHOPPERS: A CRASH WAITING TO HAPPEN

Late last month, a Huey helicopter from the 223rd Squadron of the Vietnam Air Force crashed shortly after take-off. All aboard were killed, including Gen. Do Cao Tri, the commander of South Vietnamese forces in Cambodia, eight other Vietnamese and NEWSWEEK's veteran correspondent François Sully. Afterward, when U.S. officials disclosed that the crash had been caused by a "four-stage assembly failure," NEWSWEEK decided to conduct its own investigation of the incident. In the course of that investigation, NEWSWEEK correspondent Edward Behr concluded that the crash in which Sully died was no isolated tragedy but a manifestation of a widespread—and disturbing—phenomenon. Behr's report follows:

Sergeant First Class John Keith is a career soldier with almost eighteen years in the regular Army, eight of them specializing in helicopters as a pilot and maintenance expert. Late last year, he found himself assigned as an adviser to the Vietnam Air Force's 223rd Squadron based at Bien Hoa, 15 miles northeast of Saigon. Almost immediately, Keith became alarmed at the shoddy level of maintenance performed on the VNAF choppers. Two days before General Tri and Sully died, Keith ordered a surprise inspection on all of the 223rd's helicopters—including Tri's personal chopper.

As things turned out, Keith never had a chance to test Tri's helicopter. "The first three helicopters I checked out," he told me, "were in such an appalling state that I went directly to Major Vinh, the wing's chief maintenance officer, to request that all the squadron's Hueys be grounded immediately. They were worse than the worst U.S. helicopters I had ever seen. Some had excessively dirty compressor blades and engine filters caked with dirt. Others had visible foreign-object damage in the engine." As Keith recalls it, he and Warrant Officer Second Class Michael Dodd, another U.S. adviser at the base, didn't even get around to taking the choppers up for test flights or hover checks. "We got to the end of the runway with one of them and that's as far as we made it. The dampers on this helicopter were so badly worn through wear and tear that we didn't even want to take it off the ground."

After a fruitless discussion with Major Vinh, Keith and Dodd decided to raise the problem of faulty maintenance with their commanding officer, Col. Richard Kenyon. And after listening to his men's complaints, Colonel Kenyon informed U.S. Air Force authorities in Saigon. Thus, it turned out that the Air Force was actually looking into the scandalous maintenance at Bien Hoa on the very day that General Tri and Sully took off from that base—and perished.

None of the U.S. advisers at Bien Hoa has any authority over VNAF personnel, and they are bedeviled by a host of technical and administrative problems. Worst of all is the language barrier. Each helicopter has a log book, and all entries are supposed to be checked out through what is known as a discrepancy list. "But when we write in English what is wrong," says Keith, "the Vietnamese don't understand, and when they write in Vietnamese what they have done about it, it's Greek to us. Sometimes, they just make out a fresh discrepancy list, with nothing on it, so that our remarks don't appear."

I spent a full day at Bien Hoa with

mission in helicopter No. 468 was more than a potential hazard—it was tantamount to suicide. "If you fly it like this, sir," Keith said to a Vietnamese captain standing nearby, "you're going to end up dead." The officer nodded gravely.

Other examples of sloppy maintenance abounded. The U.S. advisers complained that the routine flushing out of Huey engines with water and solvent—a regularly scheduled operation in U.S. helicopter units after every 25 hours of service—never occurred at Bien Hoa. "Every Huey position here once had a big drum for water beside it," said Keith. "Now they're all gone. I believe they're using them for trash cans." And while I was there,



Edward Behr—Newsweek

Keith (left) and Dodd check Vietnamese chopper: Flying death trap?

Dodd and Keith and, at their suggestion, I picked out a helicopter at random to have a look at its airworthiness. It may have been coincidence, but the helicopter I selected on the flight deck (No. 468 of the squadron) turned out to be just the kind of death trap that Sully and General Tri flew in last month. And despite the fact that No. 468 was, in the words of Keith and Dodd, "a potential crash just waiting to happen," its papers showed that it was rated fit to fly.

Suicide: Further consultations conducted in pidgin English with the chopper crew revealed that a U.S. Air Force adviser had "red-Xed" the chopper—that is, rated it unfit to fly. But later on that day, ignoring the "red-X," a Vietnamese maintenance man had given it a diagonal mark indicating "positive check-out" (fit to fly). Keith and Dodd went over the aircraft and reported that the helicopter's maximum torque was a mere 35 pounds instead of the normal 48 pounds. Since a fully loaded Huey needs 30 to 35 pounds of torque just to hover, and at least 40 to 45 pounds to gain altitude quickly, any

the only machines that the Vietnamese maintenance crews were hosing down were their own Honda motorcycles.

"The Vietnamese pilots are getting worried about maintenance standards," Keith said hopefully. "That's a good thing because they may be able to impose higher standards throughout the squadrons. But, in my opinion, until they change the system and insist on thorough inspections, with one man responsible, all the Hueys we give them will just be driven into the ground." It was hard to disagree with that assessment. Having peered at a succession of major oil and fuel leaks, dirt-caked filters, missing rivets (a rivet driven into the engine, Keith explained, means an almost certain crash) and visibly strained rotor attachments, I came away chastened at the thought of ever climbing into a Vietnamese helicopter. As one U.S. adviser said to me while we walked along the rows of Hueys parked on the flight line: "The next time President Nixon talks about the South Vietnamese hacking it alone, I suggest that he spend a day here first."