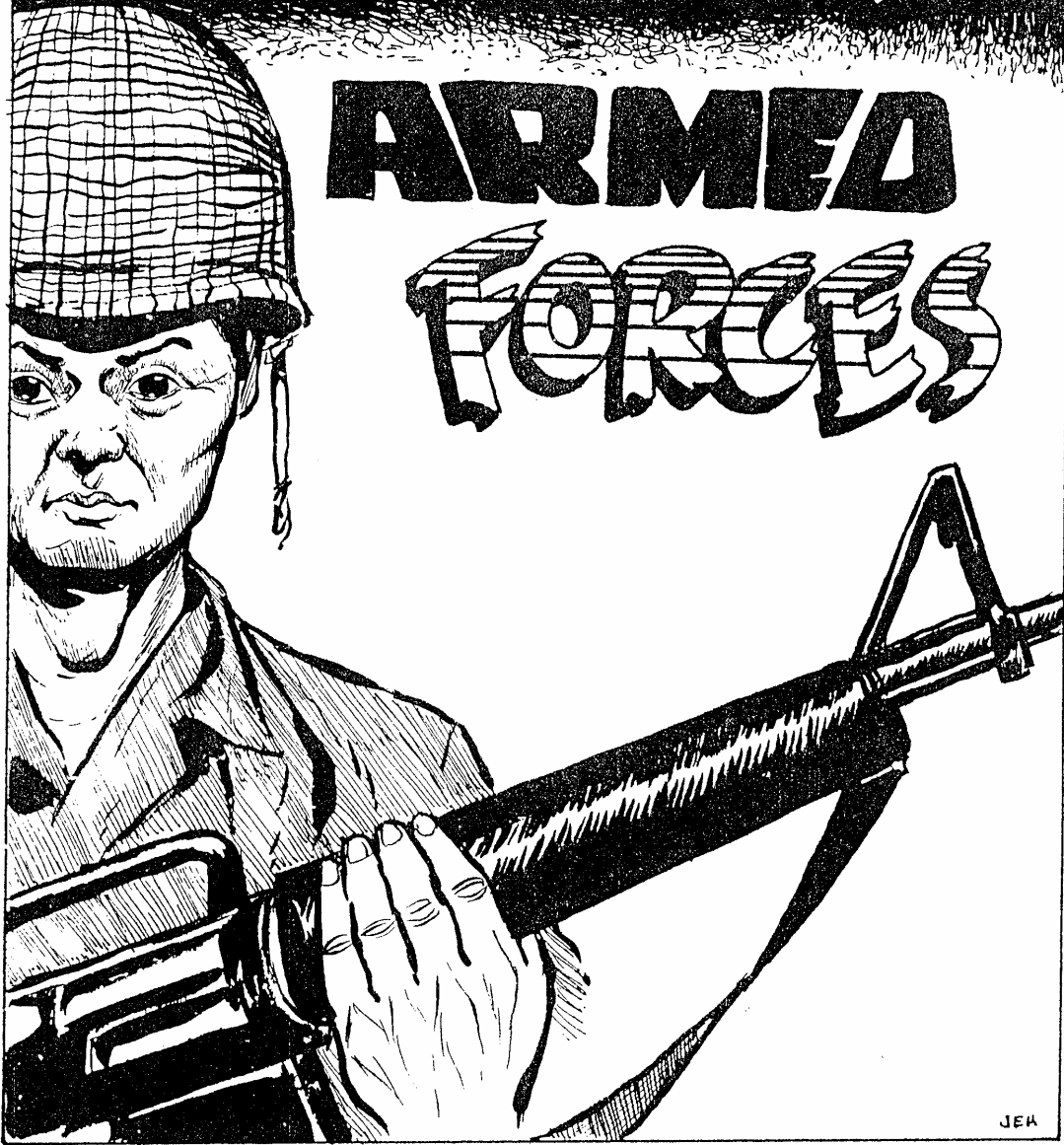


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SOUTH VIETNAMESE

ARMED

FORCES



JEA

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One out of nine. . .
SOUTH VIETNAM'S ARMED FORCES

The Republic of Vietnam, now fully mobilized for the first time in two decades of warfare, has trained one out of every nine citizens to fight the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army. With 1,045,500 uniformed servicemen recently augmented by nearly as many civilian home-defense recruits, 11.7 percent of the population bears arms.

South Vietnamese national, territorial and paramilitary troops, strongly reinforced as a result of a 1968 general mobilization call, today represent six percent of the country's 17,400,000 people. On a proportionate population basis, these full-time warriors -- excluding the unpaid civilians trained and armed to protect their home villages -- constitute a force three and a half times the size of the United States' standing military establishment. If the United States had six percent of its population in uniform, it would have 12 million instead of 3.4 million servicemen.

The Republic's 1,045,500 uniformed men are due to be increased by another 71,000 soldiers, 8,000 sailors and 10,000 policemen before the end of 1969. Already they make up nearly 63 percent of all forces opposing the communists in Vietnam. And casualties, a prime barometer of activity, indicate the degree of combat responsibility assumed by the South Vietnamese forces. They are carrying a burden of the fighting so heavy that they have lost twice as many men killed in the past 15 months as have all the allied forces put together -- forces from six free world nations totaling nearly 625,000 men. According to President Nguyen Van Thieu, from January 1968 through March 1969 the South Vietnamese troops lost 39,307 to the allies' 19,433 men killed. Since 1960 the Vietnamese armed forces have lost 108,500 men killed in action.

"We have made great sacrifices," said President Thieu on April 19 as he marked the 14th anniversary of the Vietnamese Air Force. A professional army man with the rank of lieutenant general, the commander-in-chief added: "We will continue to make even greater sacrifices."

Roster of Forces

The nation's armed forces include:

? The regular 10 infantry divisions and three independent regiments of the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) totaling 384,000 men;

? More than 46,000 elite striking forces like the three brigades of the Airborne Division, the 20 battalions of the Rangers, the 9,500 Marines, and the few but highly trained men of the Vietnamese Special Forces;

? The territorial or militia troops, including 218,000 Regional Forces (RF) and 173,000 Popular Forces (PF) for a total of 391,000 men;

? A Navy of more than 21,000 men, including 11 percent officers and 27 percent petty officers;

? An Air Force of 18 squadrons, including two jet squadrons (to be increased to at least four), some 400 aircraft and 21,000 men, including more than 1,000 pilots;

? Paramilitary troops totaling 182,500 men, including more than 79,000 National

Police, 45,000 CIDG troops (tough combat patrol specialists -- Montagnards, Vietnamese, Khmers and Nung Chinese -- of the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups, led by the Special Forces), 4,000 former Viet Cong in Armed Propaganda Teams, 1,500 former Viet Cong serving as Kit Carson Scouts for U.S. Marines, 46,000 armed Revolutionary Development (RD) team members, and 7,000 Truong Son team members doing similar RD work in hamlets of the Central Highlands.

Also, while not listed as members of the armed forces, there is today an important adjunct in urban neighborhoods and rural hamlets:

? People's Civil Self-Defense Forces of about one million youths, women, veterans and older men, organized since May 1968 to defend their own communities, with some 800,000 already trained and with weapons already issued to them on the basis of one submachine gun, rifle, carbine or shotgun to every three members.

New Aggressiveness

The communists' Tet offensive of February 1968 marked a turning point for the armed forces in terms of morale, manpower and equipment. During the lunar new year holiday the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army hurled 84,000 troops against the South Vietnamese and their allies, and Hanoi assured its troops that ARVN units would desert to them in droves., But not a single squad went over to the enemy, and the communists lost half their attacking force (20,300 to the South Vietnamese, 18,581 to the Americans and the rest to other allied forces).

The ARVN went over to the offensive in mid-year and has not lost the initiative since then. Amid a rare burst of public praise for their showing against the heaviest attacks the enemy could mount, the regulars of the ARVN division and the "Ruff Puffs" of the RF companies and PF platoons experienced a soaring of morale unequalled in the army's 20-year history.

The Tet offensive spurred the Saigon government to new action. The National Assembly in mid-June answered President Thieu's call for general mobilization by lowering the minimum and raising the maximum draft ages. It passed a law inducting men from 18 to 38 into military service and ordering youths of 17 and older men from 39 through 43 into civil defense duty. The primary goal was to augment army strength by 268,000 recruits before December 1968, a 33 percent increase (excluding casualties suffered during the mobilization period). The quota was met well before the deadline, with 220,000 inducted before the summer was out. Of them, 161,000 chose their branch of service by volunteering for induction.

At the same time, with the help of its foreign allies, the Saigon government embarked on an extensive program to upgrade the weapons and equipment of its fighting forces, as well as a program of fringe benefits for servicemen to improve morale. Delivery of fast-firing M-16 rifles to ARVN units, for instance, was such a stimulus to the Vietnamese soldiers' aggressiveness that it was immediately reflected in enemy casualty rates. Viet Cong facing ARVN units armed with M-16s left more of their dead on the battlefield than neighboring communist forces opposing ARVN units that had not yet received their M-16 issue. Said one Green Beret on a front near the Cambodian border: "Give a Vietnamese soldier an M-16 and you make a tiger out of him!"

Increased aggressiveness is shown in current battlefield statistics. Each day now the ARVN mounts from 40 to 60 battalion-size or larger operations, and the "kill ratio" has

improved from 1:2.9 in 1965 to one ARVN killed for every 5.9 of the enemy slain today. The daily battalions-in-combat statistics also are significant. During 1967 an average of 101 ARVN battalions were engaged in combat operations each day. The number rose 16 percent during 1968 to 118 battalions. Weekly tactical sorties by the Vietnamese Air Force, which now flies one out of every five missions throughout the country, rose from 2,242 in 1967 to 3,510 during the first 11 weeks of 1969. Vietnamese Navy missions rose from 2,428 per week in early 1968 to 2,860 in the same period of 1969.

Similarly, defense expenditures budgeted by the Saigon government in 1967 totaled 53,000 million piasters (US\$450 million), rose to 75,000 million piasters in 1968 and had to be supplemented before the year was out. In 1969 they will total at least 95,000 million piasters. Much of the current increase is due to mobilization of additional manpower, but much is necessitated by morale-building programs and a heavier sustained rate of combat operations.

Army Organization

What makes the South Vietnamese armed forces so different from the usual military aggregation is the fact that the military is responsible not only for the defense of the nation, but for much of its civil administration as well. The regular divisions of the ARVN are striking forces coming under the direction of the general officer commanding each of the four Corps Tactical Zones into which South Vietnam is divided. But in addition to his military functions, each corps commander is responsible for civil administration within his CTZ. The Regional Forces companies come under the tactical command of the chief of each of the 44 provinces, who is usually an ARVN lieutenant colonel or colonel, yet that province chief also is responsible for civil administration within his province. The Popular Forces, usually in static defense near each platoon's home village, recently have come under the direct supervision of the village chief, a civilian elected to head the committee administering the routine civil life of the village. But his military commissioner is a PF officer, and in practice both RF and PF units are deployed and led in local operations by the district chief. District chiefs are ARVN captains or occasionally majors, and they are responsible through channels for RF/PF actions and civil activities within their 243 districts. While neither province chiefs nor district chiefs deploy the regular ARVN divisions within their jurisdictions --for company-grade and field-grade officers do not make troop dispositions for a general officer's command --they do coordinate their RF/PF operations with the local ARVN commander, often can "borrow" ARVN elements for their offensive requirements, and occasionally take part in massive cordon operations involving all regular, territorial and paramilitary forces in the area. It is doubtful a civilian province chief could achieve such smooth-working arrangements.

Within each CTZ there is a dual command structure. The principal military channel goes from corps commander to division and regiment. A second channel goes from corps commander through the province chiefs to district chiefs. Each channel has its own prerogatives and forces. In recent years there has been a trend away from concentration of all civil power in corps headquarters, with province chiefs now being appointed by Saigon rather than by the corps commanders and with central government ministries communicating directly with province chiefs. Most villages and hamlets now elect their own chiefs and administrative bodies, so province and district chiefs have advisory, coordinating and occasionally veto functions in the villages rather than administrative

tasks. But some 291 military officers from general to captain stationed at corps, province and district headquarters still bear heavy responsibility for the day-to-day activities and the general well-being of their jurisdictions.

This dual civil-military responsibility evolved from the necessity of martial law in a country at war, and continued even after popular elections were held under the Second Republic because it was found that in a society so long at war it was inevitable that the best manpower resources, the best leaders and administrators, were in uniform. Cabinet ministers, city mayors and a number of other government officials have had to be recruited from the ranks of the military. One of the advantages is that officers experienced in the dual system develop a comprehensive grasp of the war in its total military, political and psychological compass.

By their votes at the polls the people of South Vietnam have endorsed this military administration. (While a so-called "peace" candidate ran well in the 1967 presidential elections, he lost to the military slate of Lieutenant General Nguyen Van Thieu and Air Vice Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky.) Much of this acceptance of military administration by the country's majority seems to stem from the fact that the army has built a tradition of civic responsibility, a reputation for bringing relative stability out of chaos in order to permit the government to govern. After the 1954 Geneva Agreement partitioning Vietnam at the 17th parallel, it was the army that prevented the South from falling into petty warlord fiefdoms. Its first fight as the official Army of the Republic of Vietnam was against the bandit fiefdom of the Binh Xuyen gang, and later it defeated the independent armies of the Hoa Hao sect, bringing that community of, three million Delta residents into cooperative loyalty to the Saigon government. It was the army that prevented the subsequent Viet Cong insurrection from sweeping the country. The army toppled a mandarin dictatorship that was losing the war in 1963. The army took over direct administration of the government in 1965, ending a period of revolving-door regimes in Saigon that had brought political chaos to the country. And it was the army that in 1967 voluntarily gave up total power in favor of an elected, constitutional republic, an act almost unprecedented in modern history.

The Army Grows

The Army of the Republic of Vietnam was created on May 23, 1948 (now celebrated as Armed Forces Day) by decree of Bao Dai, who had earlier abdicated as Emperor but retained power as chief of state until Ngo Dinh Diem's election to the presidency of the First Republic. From a small, polygot force of fewer than 100,000 men -- some units tracing their lineage back to Vietnamese units operating as part of the French Union Forces and some created by Bao Dai's decree -- the ARVN in the past score of years has developed-into a modern, well-trained and aggressive army of professional soldiers.

Today the Republic's armed forces are headed by the Minister of Defense, General Nguyen Van Vy. Under him comes the Joint General Staff, headed by General Cao Van Vien. In addition to Vien's Army Command, the JGS includes Rear Admiral Tran Van Chon's Navy Command, Major General Tran Van Minh's Air Force Command, a Logistics Command and a Political Warfare Command. Also directly under the JGS is the National Strategic Reserve, comprising such elite units as Major General Du Quoc Dong's Airborne Division, Lieutenant General Le Nguyen Khang's Marines and some of the 20 Ranger battalions. Most Ranger battalions, however, come directly under CTZ

commanders. The crucial Saigon-Gia Dinh area is controlled by a special Capital Military District under Major General Nguyen Van Minh, a former Delta division commander with a reputation for combat success. The Special Forces, with headquarters at Nha Trang, are commanded by Major General Doan Van Quang

The regular ARVN divisions are triangular, normally having three regiments plus a cavalry squadron and two artillery battalions, or about 10,000 men. Each regiment has three battalions and each battalion three companies. Recently, support elements -- engineers, transport, ordnance, logistics -- were brought into a division support command in a more modern organizational structure for each division. The 10 regular ARVN divisions as well as ARVN's three independent regiments are deployed under CTZ commanders as follows:

? In Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam's I CTZ (known as Eye Corps), embracing the five northern provinces, there are the First Division at Hue, the Second Division at Quang Ngai, the 51st Independent Regiment at Hoi An and the 54th Independent Regiment at Tam Ky.

? In Major General Lu Mong Lan's II CTZ, covering the central coast and the Central Highlands, there are the 22nd Division at Qui Nhon, the 23rd Division at Ban Me Thuot and the 42nd Independent Regiment north of Kontum.

? In Lieutenant General Do Cao Tri's III CTZ surrounding Saigon there are the Fifth Division at Phu Loi, the 18th Division at Xuan Loc and the 25th Division at Duc Hoa.

? In Major General Nguyen Van Minh's IV CTZ, in the populous Mekong Delta, there are the Seventh Division at My Tho, the Ninth Division at Sadec and the 21st Division at Bac Lieu.

Notable Units

The First Division, guarding the two northern provinces just below the Demilitarized Zone, has been judged by General Creighton W. Abrams, the U.S. forces commander, as one of the finest divisions to take the field of battle. U.S. Defense Secretary Melvin Laird recently awarded this division the Presidential Unit Citation for sustained bravery in action during engagements in Quang Tri and Thua Thien provinces. It is no coincidence that the First Division is commanded by a man considered by friend and foe alike as the best division commander in Vietnam, 39-year-old Major General Ngo Quang Truong. And this elite division includes an elite company, the Hac Bao, the Black Panther assault company that stopped an entire North Vietnamese battalion on the Hue airfield during the Tet offensive and later emerged victorious from a 72-hour battle against overwhelming NVA forces with 19 of its 240 men alive.

From that Tet battle in the Hue Citadel, where the First Division successfully tackled two NVA divisions, through October 10, 1968, the division's men killed 12,661 NVA and VC troops, took 2,571 prisoners and picked up 5,622 weapons. In that period the division lost 1,600 killed, 6,675 wounded and 238 weapons. According to Colonel John A. Hoefling of the Second Brigade, 101st U.S. Airborne, the division which shares responsibility with General Truong for defense of Hue and surrounding areas of Thua Thien province: "I have never seen a division as sharp as the First ARVN Infantry Division, and I have been in two wars. They could handle any task given them, now or in the future, if provided with proper artillery and helicopter support."

But the ARVN is not all the First Division. No army ever is as good as its best units, and the ARVN has its 25th Division as well as its First Division. Until last year, by the candid acknowledgement of a JGS general at Saigon's Camp Tran Hung Dao, the 25th was "the worst division ever to enter any battlefield east of Suez." Working out of Duc Hoa in Rau Nghia province west of Saigon and extending into Long An province South of the capital, the 25th operated like most divisions operated in the Orient during the 1930's: it shunned combat to conserve resources. In the warlord days of pre-Pacific War China and neighboring states, a division commander would put himself out of a job if he spent his manpower and equipment resources in combat. The 25th ARVN Infantry Division therefore carried out the traditional role of preparing and holding strong fortified positions near major population centers and road routes, but did not commit troops to offensive patrolling except at the stern and insistent direction of higher headquarters. And as the 25th improved its intelligence network, learning more about enemy dispositions, it improved its ability to march its troops in the opposite direction. Thus month after month the 25th would find itself on the bottom of the list of divisions rated by the number of enemy contacts per operation. But with the wholesale housecleaning launched by General Thieu after his election to the presidency came the inevitable sacking of the mandarin general commanding the 25th Division, despite his political and social connections. In January 1968 Brigadier General Nguyen Xuan Thinh took command with the announcement that "I am cultivating aggressiveness." And with the new command there did come a new sense of aggressiveness on the part of 25th Division troopers. Launching joint operations with their "brother" division in the area, the 25th U.S. Infantry Division from Hawaii, the men of the 25th ARVN Division showed what capable soldiers can do when given capable leadership. Today the 25th stands firm in blocking position across a major enemy infiltration route from the Cambodian border to Saigon. It is pulling its weight there in Hau Nghia, and is conducting an important pacification operation in Long An as well. But it has a long way to go before it matches the effectiveness of the First Division.

Elite Units

The First, largest of all ARVN divisions (five infantry regiments and two cavalry squadrons), is not the only Vietnamese unit to collect commendations and awards. Another is the Marines, which trace their history back to the French Marine Commando Companies used in river assaults. Originally part of the Navy, the 9,500 Marines became a separate command under the JGS in 1963 and now are part of the strategic defense of Saigon's Capital Military District. Another elite force is the Airborne Division. Also part of the strategic reserve, they have seen action in the Demilitarized Zone, in Saigon during the 1963 Tet offensive, at the embattled Citadel of Hue, and in nearly every major struggle of the war. Now they are in the Tay Ninh area blocking any potential eastward movement of four North Vietnamese Army divisions, including the dangerous NVA, poised in a threat to Saigon. Other famed units include Colonel Tran Ba Di's tough Ninth Division in the Delta, and the Second Division at Quang Ngai. And there are the Rangers. The 42nd Ranger Battalion, for instance, has received unit citations for bravery from two U.S. Presidents.

The Rangers were organized in 1960. That year every fourth company in the regular ARVN divisions was designated a Ranger company and given special training in order to

create a quick reaction force to counter Viet Cong guerrilla moves. Eighty-six companies were thus created, and now are operating in 20 battalions. Originally the Rangers were assigned to province chiefs for local operations, but later were placed directly under corps commanders to operate over wider areas. As a primary reaction force, better trained and equipped and more mobile than the regular ARVN battalions, the Rangers have been involved in almost every major battle of the war.

As the Viet Cong threat grew in intensity from 1957 on, the need developed for counter-insurgency troops which could meet the guerrilla in his own jungle and swamp lairs. The Luc Luong Dac Biet (LLDB), the Vietnamese Special forces were created and patterned after the U.S. Special Forces, adopting their distinctive green berets. Assisted by a handful of U.S. Special Forces advisers, the LLDB command the CIDG companies -- 45,000 specially trained warriors, most of them minority-group tribesmen from the jungled mountains -- now manning small, scattered border outposts along the infiltration trails and deep inside the uncultivated backcountry.

The Vietnamese troops suffering the heaviest casualties and inflicting the most casualties on the enemy in proportion to their numbers are the "Ruff Puffs," the laudatory title unofficially given the 391,000 militiamen of the Regional Forces and the Popular Forces. The RF operate in 123-man companies under the province chiefs, though often led on operations by district chiefs. The PF are organized into 35-man platoons for local village and hamlet security. Originally the Ruff Puffs were regarded as guard troops. Armed mainly with Garands and carbines, the RF guarded provincial facilities and bridges, cleared roads and conducted minor operations within their home provinces while the PF manned guard compounds and the perimeters of their home villages. As the first line of community defenders they often were the first target of any attacking force. No longer are they in static defense positions, however. Now better armed, the RF does much the same work as company-size units from the regular ARVN divisions, going on extended operations against Viet Cong forces, doing village pacification work, joining in combined operations with allied forces, and utilizing the helicopter and artillery support services of the big divisions. The PF, also much better armed as a result of a US \$200-million militia modernization program, still maintain static defense posts but also send out roving patrols to meet the enemy before he reaches the PF perimeter. Although not as well trained, armed or paid as the regular ARVN divisions, the Ruff Puffs are recruiting food men, for a number of draft-age youths enlist in the RF so they can stay in their home provinces, or in the PF so they can live with their families in compounds near their own villages.

The Paramilitary

Statisticians list the National Police as paramilitary forces (without listing U.S. police in comparative military establishment figures) because in Vietnam the police are in the front rank of initial reaction forces. Usually the police are the first to be informed of a Viet Cong raid and the first to rush to the scene. In provincial towns the traveler recognizes the police station by the green and white jeep parked in front, usually with one or two bullet holes in the windshield.

The Police Special Branch is the core of Operation Phung Hoang, a nationwide pooling of intelligence data to flush out the VCI, the Viet Cong infrastructure. The VCI are the leadership elements who run the communist political apparatus, control the

guerrilla bands, collect taxes, order assassinations, set up front organizations, draft men and women as soldiers, guerrillas and laborers, disseminate propaganda and direct terror campaigns. About 80,000 cadres originally were estimated to hold VCI jobs. In the first 11 months of a campaign that jumped off at the beginning of 1968, Operation Phung Hoang resulted in 13,404 of these cadres being rooted out of their underground positions in the communists' shadow government. Under Phung Hoang the National Police and other government intelligence agents man district centers which collect data on the VCI, check information against files and dossiers, and where warranted, arrange for operations. These operations may be as small as the sending of a lone policeman on his bicycle to arrest a man identified by VCI defectors as a hamlet tax collector for the communists. Or the operation can be so large that it entails the deployment of two or three battalions of troops for a week-long sweep and screening mission covering an entire district. Without the local knowledge of the policemen engaged in these sweeps, many more of the VCI would slip through the cordons.

One tribute to the effectiveness of the National Police is the fact that enemy attacks in both urban and rural areas usually are directed first against police headquarters and substations. During February 1968, at the height of the communists' Tet offensive, 239 policemen were killed and 298 wounded. Last year 827 of the 79,000 National Police died defending their posts. Now 10,000 new policemen are being recruited.

Viet Cong who have turned their backs on communism and rallied to the government's side under the Chieu Hoi (open arms) program are engaged in a number of paramilitary activities. More than 104,000 have defected since the program started, and most are in the regular ARVN divisions. But about 4,000 are in Armed Propaganda Teams. These APT men go back into enemy-controlled or contested areas to proselytize their former Viet Cong comrades and generally spread the word about how life in government-controlled areas compares with life under VC rule. Another 1,500 former Viet Cong are serving as Kit Carson Scouts for the U.S. Marines in the northern provinces, helping in pacification and village development programs, identifying the VCI, passing on knowledge of terrain, people, guerrilla fighting methods and booby trap techniques. Some former VC have joined such specialized groups as the PRU (Provincial Reconnaissance Units), whose stock-in-trade is using terror against Viet Cong terrorists.

Important paramilitary forces who have received more than their share of Viet Cong attacks are the 46,000 Revolutionary Development and the 7,000 Truong Son members, the men (and a few women) in black pajamas who help villagers recreate local democratic government in newly pacified areas. Lightly armed, they provide hamlet defense until the people can be motivated, trained and armed to protect their own communities.

While RD teams, some working in 59-man units and others in 39-man units, have been teaching self-defense methods to villagers for some years, the program to build hamlet-level civilian home protection units did not begin to snowball until after the communists' Tet offensive. The general mobilization decree helped, for it called for drafting 17-year-old boys and men from 39 to 43 into civil self-defense units. In most cases the draft was not necessary, for young boys and older men were quick to volunteer in order to have a voice in their local unit's organization. And in many units the teen-age girls and women, who are not subject to the draft, volunteered in such numbers that they constitute the majority of the members of their People's Civil Self-Defense Force. Since the Tet offensive about one million PCSDF members have been recruited across the country, not only in the hamlets, but in urban neighborhoods as well, to provide an alert

force and anti-infiltration screen. In Hue, for instance, there are 18,000 civilians standing guard in eight-hour shifts, each guard passing his weapon to the man or woman who relieves him. Hue, so badly damaged in the Tet offensive, may be attacked again. But thanks to the People's Civil Self Defense Forces, never again will it be attacked by surprise.

The ARVN Soldier

The average Vietnamese soldier is young -- 19 to 24 years old -- with little more than a rural education. Of peasant stock, he is small, with a thin, lithe build, but surprisingly muscular, and he can tote a 30-Kilo pack for hours without fatigue. He usually is an experienced combat veteran, for in Vietnam soldiers sign up for the duration. (Technically, the original draft period was four years but few able-bodied men have been released since 1965. After the Tet offensive the government officially made the period of service equal to the duration of the war.) He has received 12 weeks of basic training (cut to nine weeks during the general mobilization drive of 1968) but often has received advanced training in division camps, including taekwando, the Korean Karate or unarmed combat course. Properly led, he develops an elan and a fighting spirit under the most difficult combat conditions. He must be at home in Delta rice paddies, mountain rain forests and city streets. He must fight often, and in his less hectic hours he is expected to help the rural people build a new life. He must guard long stretches of road and railroad and canals, thousands of bridges, thousands of hamlets and government facilities. For this, if he is a private with no dependents, he earns 3,000 piasters a month (US\$25). Ruff Puffs earn less, but they are closer to home than the ARVN regular, who may be sent to serve in any of South Vietnam's 44 provinces. Men with dependents and elite troops -- those wearing the jaunty berets (green for Special Forces, red for paratroops, black for armored troops, maroon for Rangers) -- earn more. But the average pay of the soldier remains low because of the inflationary impact that general raises to more than a million soldiers would have on the nation's strained war economy.

After Tet the government accelerated a morale-building program to improve the soldier's fringe benefits. It started a post exchange and commissary system so soldiers can buy food and other items at cheaper than market prices. The leave system was extended and improved, even to providing truck transportation for home-bound soldiers. Families. Families may now visit their uniformed relatives because of the addition of visiting facilities to base encampment. A program to build more adequate housing for soldiers' dependents was launched with an eventual goal of 340,000 units. And an Inspector General's Office was created to listen to and investigate soldiers' gripes. One result was that the desertion rate between 1966 and 1968 was cut in half, to about 9.5 per 1,000. (Only a handful of men have ever deserted to the enemy, but in any peasant society where war is prolonged, the planting and harvest seasons have always lured men from the battlefields. Most usually return to their units when their families' crops are in, or enlist in the local Ruff Puffs. Regular leave schedules and more accurate reporting of unit rolls have done much to curb such practices.)

Promotions do not come easily in the ARVN. A colonel may command a division, as the popular Tran Ba Di does in the Ninth. Regiments are given to lieutenant colonels and sometimes majors. Captains often command battalions. Rank is tight, but there have been programs inaugurated recently to give merit promotions in the field, especially in raising

promising young noncommissioned officers to company-grade officer level. But most promotions still are based more on seniority than merit, and a number are across-the-board promotions of one grade for all enlisted ranks ordered by the government to celebrate, for instance, a new national holiday. During 1969 additional promotions will be given officers, noncoms and enlisted men in July, October and December, with first priority being given men with more than two years of service who have been passed over once by the Promotion Council.

Two years ago extra efforts were made to upgrade the training of officers and noncoms. The Thu Duc Officers School was expanded and the curriculum improved. Special command and staff schools were inaugurated for field-grade officers at Dalat, with attendance a prerequisite for promotion. The Dalat Military Academy later this year will graduate its first class of 90 students with four years of education. Since its founding in 1948 it has had only nine-month and two-year courses, and the expanded curriculum is considered a major step in providing the army with an educated corps of professionally trained young officers. Ranking officers now are being given advanced command training at the newly established National Defense College in Saigon. Key officers continue to be sent to advanced schools in the United States such as the infantry course at Fort Benning and the command and general staff schools at Fort Leavenworth. More than 8,000 officers and men have received training in U.S. military schools since 1957. But most ARVN officers have been developed in the hard furnace of actual combat, and in 20 years a number have become extremely proficient.

ARVN officers also have had to learn to be adaptable. Trained in conventional warfare tactics to meet World War II or Korea War situations, first by the French and then by the Americans, they had to adapt to the communists' guerrilla warfare. And then, from the start of the big unit war in mid-1965, they had to adapt to the mobile warfare in which the helicopter has revolutionized tactics.

In a typical small-unit operation, one of scores going on across the country simultaneously, the Hau Nghia province chief in Bao Trai, an ARVN colonel, learns from the National Police sub-station that a column of Viet Cong has been seen filing down a country road eight kilometers west of Bao Trai. The province chief has already sent his RF companies to various district chiefs for local operations or pacification campaigns, so he calls 25th ARVN Infantry Division headquarters at Duc Hoa and borrows a platoon of the 25th encamped near Bao Trai. Then, through his Senior Province Adviser, a U.S. Army colonel, he contacts 25th U.S. Infantry Division headquarters at Cu Chi and borrows the helicopters needed to lift the ARVN platoon to the scene of the intelligence report. Troops and choppers converge quickly on the province chief's helipad, the choppers roar off at treetop level and land the troops in fields adjacent to the road. Results: one Viet Cong killed, one wounded, seven suspects rounded up, one ARVN wounded.

Or the operation can be as big as the classic "soft cordon" operation conducted last September to rid Viet Cong troops and the VC infrastructure from Vinh Loc island east of Hue. The 10-day operation utilized every regular military, territorial, paramilitary, naval, police, psychological warfare and intelligence capability in the area. A combined S-3 military operations command was set up including the province chief's security staff, the 54th Regiment of the First ARVN Division, the Second Brigade of the 101st U.S. Airborne Division, the Vinh Loc district chief and his military, intelligence and advisory personnel. Results: the VCI shattered, 116 VCI captured, 154 VC soldiers killed, 254

captured, 56 VC rallied to the government's side, and 12,000 Vinh Loc refugees returned to their now-pacified hamlets. Friendly casualties: One APT member and one policeman killed; seven ARVN, two Ruff Puffs, two U.S. Army and one U.S. Navy man wounded; two island residents wounded; three grass huts destroyed.

New Equipment

Improved leadership has done much to boost ARVN morale and proficiency, but one of the greatest spurs to aggressiveness has been the re-outfitting of the armed forces with modern weapons. Morale had been badly shaken when the North Vietnamese in 1965 and 1966 began equipping their infiltrating troops with weapons the South Vietnamese could not match -- modern Soviet-design automatic weapons, including the RPD light machine gun, the AK-47 assault rifle, and the armor-busting B-40 and B-41 rocket launchers. But then the United States offered to re-equip the ARVN with a newer family of U.S. weapons. In addition to the prized M-16 rifle, these included LAW anti-tank rockets, the useful M-79 grenade launcher and the M-60 light machine gun. Initially issued to regular ARVN divisions, these weapons now are being given the Ruff Puffs, with completion of the rearming program expected by the end 1969. Some 350 Mobile Advisory Teams of U.S. officers and noncom specialists have been assigned to help upgrade the Ruff Puffs through training in battle tactics, weapons use, and improved security.

In artillery, the number of battalions is being doubled and newer pieces, such as the light M-102 howitzer of 105mm size, are being introduced. In the Airborne Division, for example, a third artillery battalion is being formed, giving each brigade of the division its own mobile artillery support. Before 1968 the division had only a single artillery battalion.

At the start of 1968 the ARVN possessed only 600 APCs (Armored Personnel Carriers) but by the end of 1969 it will have 1,500. The 10 armored cavalry squadrons also have some older M-41 tanks.

The communications capability of ARVN units is being improved. The newer PRC-25 model pack radio has replaced the PRC-10, with an increase in range from 15 to 40 kilometers. And improved command radio and teletype nets have been installed.

The Navy has received 25 new gunboats costing US \$7,700,000, designed especially for Delta patrols, and will increase its personnel to 29,000 before the year is out. Minesweepers, Swift boats and a wide variety of riverine craft are being rapidly turned over to the Vietnamese Navy by the Americans. Soon the Navy will assume complete operational responsibility for river and canal patrolling in the Ha Tien area, including the Vien Te Canal. The Navy already has taken over responsibility for nearly all the coastal patrolling in the Fourth Coastal Zone, which embraces the Gulf of Thailand waters around Phu Quoc Island, and the inshore waters southward to the tip of the Ca Mau Peninsula.

The Air Force has been given a far greater capacity to airlift troops. It now flies some 100 helicopters, and a new fleet of 300 turbo-powered UH-14 helicopter transports and gunships has been ordered at a cost of US \$83 million. Already some of the new and improved Hueys have been delivered to the 211th Helicopter Squadron at Binh Thuy. Recently a fleet of old but reliable C-119 transports was turned over to the VNAF to boost its strategic mobility. Versatile little A-37 jet attack bombers and F-5 jet Freedom Fighters have been delivered to the VNAF, and more are programmed over the next two years. The

VNAF is slated to receive 60 of the A-37s at a cost of US\$18 million. Some 1,500 pilots will be trained in America on newer jet fighters and helicopters.

A major impetus to increased ARVN offensive operations has been improved mobility. Now able to call on transport planes and helicopters for troop airlift, and now assured of good communications and artillery support, field commanders order combat sweeps, enveloping maneuvers and direct assaults that would have been unthinkable in 1965 and 1966. Today even militia companies and platoons can be tactically deployed by helicopter, and are being so deployed, in ever increasing numbers. The Viet Cong's ability to pick the site of battle has been shattered.

Some Deficiencies

But the areas in which the ARVN has made the most improvement -- firepower and mobility -- are still the areas of its greatest weaknesses. The ARVN is quite capable of fighting and defeating the 20,000 main force Viet Cong troops and the 70,000 local force VC guerrillas in the country. In open combat on a designated battlefield the ARVN could defeat the 110,000 North Vietnamese Army regulars now in the South, despite their modern Chinese and Soviet-bloc weapons. But with the ARVN's basic responsibility for territorial defense that the NVA does not have, and with the NVA's proclivity for regrouping in inaccessible sanctuaries, it would be a formidable task for the ARVN to drive the NVA back to Hanoi. It could not conceivably do so without the helicopter, jet-strike, artillery, communications and logistics support now provided by U.S. forces. An ARVN division is a potent force, but even in the case of the First Division one of the factors making it an elite unit is its ability to call in helicopter and artillery support from the neighboring 101st U.S. Airborne Division. Because the average ARVN division, particularly since the war became a big unit war in mid-1965, has been able to rely on its ally's artillery, air strike and transport capabilities, it has not yet developed its own such capabilities to a point that would make it self-sufficient on a modern battlefield. Even when the 300 new helicopters all have been added to the present fleet of 100 choppers, the entire Vietnamese Air Force still will have fewer helicopters than the First U.S. Air Cavalry Division's 425. (There are about 3,000 helicopters assigned to all U.S. forces in Vietnam.) Even when the 60 new jet attack bombers are added to the 40 fighter jets now in action, the VNAF's jet capability still will be little better than that of a single U.S. carrier sailing off the Vietnamese coast with its 75 to 80 jets aboard. And the average American division has about twice the number of howitzers and mortars available to an ARVN division.

One way to help make up this deficiency is a plan announced on March 23 by U.S. Defense Secretary Laird, and that is to hand over the equipment of disbanding U.S. units to ARVN units remaining in the field. The first such turnover took place that March weekend near Can Tho, in the Delta. The Sixth Battalion of the 77th Artillery, attached to the Ninth U.S. Infantry Division, disbanded, sent a number of its men on normal rotation back to the U.S. and assigned the remainder to other U.S. outfits in Vietnam. Although the battalion was inactivated, overall U.S. troop strength was not lowered. After spending two months in training ARVN artillerymen to use its 105mm howitzers, the Sixth, in its last formal act as a battalion in service, turned over its 18 105mm howitzers, trucks, radios, ammunition and repair equipment to the South Vietnamese. Brigadier General Nguyen Huu Hanh, commander of Special Zone 44, accepted the weapons and equipment on

behalf of the newly activated 213th Artillery Battalion of the 21st ARVN Infantry Division. The 21st, with 12,000 men backstopped by Ruff Puffs, protects an area including 2,100,000 residents of six Delta provinces, an estimated 35,000 of whom are armed Viet Cong.

In the next few months another U.S. artillery battalion as well as transportation, engineer and maintenance units --some 2,500 men -- will disband and transfer their equipment to ARVN forces. This program, says Secretary Laird, will help in "modernizing the forces of the South Vietnamese on a realistic basis."

The ARVN, once a loose force of diverse troops left to their fate by the retreating French, has developed during 20 years of bitter fighting into an effective, highly motivated army, and in recent years it has been equipped to fight a modern war. Its improvement particularly since the Tet offensive has been exceptional, and that improvement continues month by month. Australia's Army Minister P. R. Lynch, reporting to the House of Representatives in Canberra after a 1969 Tet anniversary tour of Vietnam's battlefields, said: "In the past 12 months the ARVN forces have become better equipped than ever before. Their officer training programs are of a high quality. The Vietnamese Army has grown considerably in strength and in operational efficacy."

It is noteworthy that this assessment, like those of many other observers of the Vietnam scene, stresses that the time of the Tet offensive was the turning point. The communists may have won propaganda advances around the world when they launched that offensive, but in Vietnam they lost the battle. And more and more the repercussions to the Tet offensive indicate they may have lost the war with that attack during a sacred holiday season. For that was the time when the government and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam turned the corner. Now both are viable, strong and growing more efficient as they gain more confidence with each passing month.

The Saigon government, backed by an army that has proved itself capable of defeating the heaviest blows the enemy could hurl against it, seems destined to continue to gain strength until no neighbor again will dare to send invading troops across its borders.