

Americans Train South Vietnamese Natives for Guerrilla Warfare

Editor's note — A century ago, the U. S. cavalry used Indian scouts to fight fellow Indians during the battle for the old west. Today, American Forces in South Vietnam are trying to train primitive natives to carry guerrilla war to the Communist Viet Cong. Military experts say the outcome of the project may mean the difference between victory and defeat for non-Communist forces in the jungle-infested Southeast Asian nation.

By NEIL SHEEHAN
Pleiku, South Vietnam — To the average Vietnamese, the tribesmen who inhabit Viet Nam's jungle-infested central highland are "moi" — savage. The word has a connotation of utter contempt.

But regardless of the attitude of their countrymen, the primitive, spirit-worshipping mountain people are the object of a great tug-of-war between the wily Viet Cong guerrillas and U. S. special forces who are helping the beleaguered South Vietnamese government fight the Communist marauders.

American military advisers believe the outcome of the struggle for the loyalty and support of the 700,000 montagnards (montagnard is the French word for highlander) may be the difference between victory and defeat in this ill-defined war to keep South Vietnam outside the Communist orbit.

The Viet Cong have depended on the montagnards for food and other logistical aid in their forays against the more civilized Mekong delta and into coastal regions. The U. S. special forces are trying to train the tribesmen as an effective counter-guerrilla force to beat the Viet Cong at its own game.

In Action
American military advisers hope to use the montagnards against the Viet Cong the way the U. S. cavalry used Indian scouts to help subdue warring tribes in the old west. Two companies of montagnard "scouts" recently went into action against the Communists and nine others are in some stage of training.

Montagnards, some descendants of Indonesians who came here 1,000 years ago and others of Cambodian stock, share primitive customs and religious practices but their 20-odd tribes speak a variety of languages.

They live in thatched houses raised on poles as protection against roving animals and snakes. Woven reed and grass walls protect the multiple-family "long houses" from torrential rains of the monsoon season.

Montagnard men basically are hunters and many still prefer brightly colored loin cloths to western style shirts and pants. The women, often bare-breasted, perform most of the domestic work, much of it heavy, laborious chores shunned by women in more civilized societies.

Not Warlike
These mountain tribesmen are not warlike by nature but have not scruples about killing enemies who threaten them. U. S. advisers say they make enthusiastic fighters.

The vast majority of the montagnards today live on approximately the same cultural level the American Indian did in the 19th century. Civilization probably would have passed them by for many more generations if the jungles and mountains they inhabit were not so strategically important in the struggle for Southeast Asia.

The central highlands of South Vietnam dominate the coastal area to the east, the rich Mekong delta to the south and lie athwart the main Viet Cong infiltration route across



GIVES INSTRUCTIONS—American military advisers in Vietnam believe the outcome of the struggle for the loyalty and support of the 700,000 Montagnards ("montagnard" is the French word for "highlander") may be the difference between victory and defeat in the ill-defined war to keep South Vietnam outside the Communist orbit. U. S. special

forces are trying to train tribesmen as an effective counter-guerrilla force to beat the Viet Cong. Here, U. S. Army Ranger Lt. Bruce G. Smally, 28, of Stowe, Vt., gives Vietnamese Cpl. Y-Bhung bayonet training in the village of Buon Ki, outside of Ban Me Thuot, while other Vietnamese trainees look on. (UPI)

the northern Cambodian and southern Laotian borders. During the past few years the North Vietnamese have infiltrated thousands of crack guerrilla specialists into the area.

This infiltration, American officers say, has risen alarmingly since formation of the coalition government in Laos.

Strong Bases
The Viet Cong also have established strong bases in the central highlands from which they raid freely into the coastal area to the east. The eventual aim, American advisers say, is to gain control of a section of the central highlands and split South Vietnam in two. The war, the Americans say, will be practically won by the Communists if this happens.

The only way to regain control of the central highlands and deny it to the Viet Cong, American advisers say, is to gain the sympathy and support of the montagnards.

American advisers claim, and apparently with great justification, that if the montagnards were won over to the government side the Viet Cong would be deprived of a vast source of food, recruits

Log Truck Driver Injured in Accident

A logging truck driver was injured about noon Wednesday in a two-vehicle accident about a half mile south of the Lake Creek and Brownsboro junction, state police reported.

The driver, Charles Elmer Cooper, 35, of Klamath Falls, was treated at Sacred Heart hospital for injuries to his right leg and bruises to his head.

The logging truck was following a pickup truck driven by John Franklin Klinge, 56, Lake Creek, as they approached a farm tractor operated by Henry Meyer, Lake Creek. Both trucks attempted to pass at the same time, state police said.

The logging truck hit the pickup truck, swerved to the left, and traveled 370 feet, over a bank and into a nearby pasture, officers said.

The montagnards, a dark-skinned, short people with the more angular features of the Indonesian race as opposed to the lighter skin and Chinese features of the Vietnamese, love their land of mountains and valley covered with lush green jungle on which soft white mists float during the rainy season.

They resented fiercely the intrusion of land-grabbing Vietnamese who came after French administration ended. As a University of Michigan study pointed out, the situation bears a close resemblance

to the influx of American settlers into the west during the 19th century. Like the American Indian, the tribesmen were given "fire water" — in this case strong champagne wine — and then cheated of their lands and goods while drunk. The result was to create widespread discontent and a natural target for Communist subversion and propaganda from the north.

Communist propaganda promises the tribesmen that if the Diem government is overthrown, they will be allowed to create an autonomous area of their own.

Had Free Hand
Until the American military buildup began in South Vietnam in December, the Communists practically had a free hand with the montagnards. The government troops rarely dared venture beyond the safety of the larger towns and outposts.

In February a special American counter-guerrilla organization with a headquarters in Saigon began to initiate projects aimed at winning the support of the montagnards. A team of U. S. Army special forces men and Department of the Army civilians began working with the Rhade tribesmen around Ban Me Thuot farther south. The aim was to convince the Rhades in the area, who were under the control of the Viet Cong at the time, that they could resist the guerrillas themselves and gain independence from Communist demands for food, recruits and intelligence.

The special forces team trained and armed tribesmen and sent them back to their villages to fight as a defensive home guard. Propaganda teams were created, a Rhade medical staff was trained and, as the number of villages grew, a radio net was created to tie them in and give warning of attacks. A strike force of 700 men was created as a mobile reserve.

Has Paid Off
The project has paid off handsomely. Some 113 villages around Ban Me Thuot

encompassing 30,000 tribespeople have been won over and the village home guards now amount to 4,000 men.

Other similar projects have been started in neighboring provinces and the eventual hope is to tie them all together, denying the area to the Communists.

The Viet Cong already have become so worried about the Ban Me Thuot project that they have assigned a special battalion to attack the villages on the perimeter and prevent the organization from spreading. So far these attacks have been fought off and the special forces men have their fingers crossed.

Other attempts to train special montagnard scout companies as a counter-guerrilla force have met with less success because of Vietnamese suspicion and discrimination.

Not Paid
When this correspondent recently visited four of these companies in training at Tan Canh in northern Kontum province he found that two of the companies had not been paid in six months and had had 80 deserters. Most of the men were dressed in ragged, torn fatigues and lacked other essential equipment.

But if the experiment succeeds, the Americans hope the scout companies will serve as a valuable and highly mobile strike force against the Communists, able to exist and operate in the jungles for long periods of time.

The Communists also have made serious mistakes over the past year in dealing with the montagnards but the creaky Saigon bureaucracy has been excruciatingly slow to exploit them. Because of increased numbers of Viet Cong who have infiltrated into the central highlands and the consequently greater demands for food and recruits, thousands of montagnards have fled their remote villages to seek protection along the more secure areas near the towns and main roads.

Thousands of others have been taken from their villages by Vietnamese army troops and

resettled in safer areas. Over the past year, it is estimated by American officials, 56,000 montagnards have fled Viet Cong controlled areas. Most of these tribesmen are in dire need of food and medical attention which government propaganda promised them but which so far has arrived in very inadequate quantities.

Negotiations have been going on for the last two months to commit 50 million piastres in American aid funds (73 piastres to one U. S. dollar)

to montagnard relief, but are still bogged down in red tape and the funds have not yet been released. Washington has agreed to ship 750 tons of surplus corn and other grains to Viet Nam as aid to the tribes, but this will not arrive in Saigon until October, according to American officials.

American military advisers warn that if the montagnards in need are not helped soon they may return to the jungles and mountains and be lost to the government cause forever.

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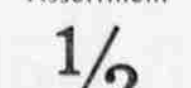
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