Saigon Snafu: Security Lax, Taxes Paid to Reds

By Beverly Deepe
A Special Correspondent

SAIGON.

"We always goof up the littlest, little things," one American adviser in the Mekong Delta explained. "And it's these little things that will make the difference in this war. If we lose, it won't be because the Viet Cong are so good—it's because our side is so bad."

The lack of meticulous control—because of American bureaucracy and Vietnamese inefficiency and corruption—is an important element in the problem of security, so essential in this country experiencing a guerrilla war.

While Americans here openly ridicule the Vietnamese for their flagrant corruption, the Americans find it easier to go along rather than try to eliminate it.

For example, foreign economic experts are shocked at the indirect way in which United States military and economic funds and goods contribute to the Viet Cong Communist guerrilla strength.

TAXES

"All the aircraft gasoline trucked to the big American helicopter base at Soc Trang is taxed twice by Viet Cong roadblacks," one of them explained. "Then it is piped into American helicopters to kill Viet Cong. It does not make sense. It might have been excused in 1962 at the beginning of American involvement, but in 1965 it is a sign of weakness."

Soc Trang, 100 miles southwest of Saigon, has been hit by mortarfire at least three times by the Viet Cong, including once immediately following the February bombing raids on North Viet Nam. The aircraft fuel is purchased from petroleum companies, which sublet the trucking of the gasoline to Vietnamese contracting companies.. These firms, in turn, pay off the Viet Cong to get through their roadblocks, according to petroleum company officials.

In another case, American military officials contracted to Vietnamese construction companies the building of American billets and compounds in the provinces, especially in 1962-'63. But to cut the trees for the lumber, the contracting firms paid Viet Cong taxes—and this cost was added onto the price paid by the U. S. government.

DRAWINGS

In some cases, Viet Cong construction workers built the American compounds. In other cases, Viet Cong sympathizers later came in to repair fixtures or re-paint the buildings. In short, the Viet Cong have access to the drawings of the interior of almost every American compound.

Following the Tonkin Gulf bombing of North Viet Nam last August, when American policymakers moved a squadron of B-57 jet-fighters to Bien Hoa, just outside Saigon, government security agents captured a Viet Cong sergeant who had sent to his higher headquarters the complete drawing of the Bien Hoa airbase. He told Vietnamese security officials that the Viet Cong were planning an attack on the airbase—and on Nov. 1 it happened.

Several weeks ago a young Vietnamese peddler girl on the main street of Saigon attempted to sell to this correspondent an American-made blueprint of an American compound in Nha Trang, 200 miles north of Saigon.

A laxity in the control of plans and material allows the Viet Cong to buy on the open market whatever they need at a cost to the U. S.-South Vietnamese war effort.

FOR SALE

Reliable sources indicate that Viet Cong guerrillas regularly purchase large quantities of Sun Tan lotion in the Long Dien open market (a market in Viet Cong controlled territory southeast of Saigon in Phuoc Tuy province). They use it for treating napalm burns.

On the main street of Catinat shops sell American captain's and major's insignia and fatigue caps with U. S. insignia. American servicemen regularly buy their boots from local shopkeepers—which could easily be copied by the Viet Cong, Eurasian or Caucasian Communists. The black and green camouflage uniforms of the U. S. and Vietnamese marines can be purchased from ordinary shops in Thu Duc, a suburb of Saigon.

American servicemen have lost over the years here hundreds of their U. S. government identification cards. U. S. authorities hope they are not being sent to Europe for the Communists to infiltrate American bases there. In short, the Viet Cong have the means and identification to outfit themselves exactly like a Vietnamese or an American soldier.

UNIFORMS

The Viet Cong have also seized hundreds of Vietnamese government green fatigues—they once captured more than 500 of them in a truck only 20 miles outside of Saigon. It now appears only a question of time before they overrun government installations by appearing to be Vietnamese government troopers—they have repeatedly done this at the village level.

In the sabotage attack on U. S. installations at Pleiku on Feb. 7 Viet Cong suicide squads threw explosive charges plunked into American beer cans. Two years ago Marine helicopter pilots learned that American beer, soda cans and coke bottles had to be destroyed or else the Viet Cong would salvage them and use them as containers for boobytraps and explosives. Yet, two years later, in another part of the country, American GIs were unaware of the importance of destroying these items.

Similarly, when American and Vietnamese GIs practice shooting on rifle ranges, young Vietnamese children scurry around and pick up the empty brass cartridges—which are turned over to the Viet Cong, who can melt them down for their own purposes.

CUT THE GRASS

One extraordinary example of the lack of detailed attention to security matters was revealed in the isolated outpost of Ashau in the north on the Laotian border. Last summer the plane carrying the American military commander, Gen. William C. Westmoreland, was shot at and hit more than six times as it lumbered down the runway and turned around for takeoff. The American Special Forces captain in charge of the camp explained to a correspondent that the Viet Cong had walked through the American minefield, hid in the high elephant grass and boldly peppered the general's airplane. The captain said the general was understandably disturbed about this—and ordered all the elephant grass, some of it 10 feet high, to be cut.

But, he later explained, while the Viet Cong knew where his minefields were situated—he did not. For the mines had been laid by Vietnamese and Americans during the two previous years and they had been moved to other camps. Because the location of the camp itself had been slightly changed the maps showing the American minefields were useless.

Finally, an American expert in mines was flown out from the corps headquarters—to determine the location of the government mines—and then days were spent cutting the elephant grass.

INTELLIGENCE

It is often heard in Viet Nam that one of the key problems of security and of winning the war is that of intelligence.

It is openly acknowledged by Vietnamese military officials that Viet Cong agents are in the highest levels of the Vietnamese military, the police and the government.

Some Vietnamese security officials also believe that they have penetrated into the American military command headquarters. These officials say Vietnamese working in the American command—secretaries, office boys and janitors—have been cleared by Vietnamese personnel and security forces on the basis of payoffs. For the price of four months' salary, these security officials maintain any Vietnamese can get a job in the American command (the price has risen, however—once the price was a month's salary).

Another example fringing on security and intelligence-considered part of the French espionage network (which has contacts with the Viet Cong). Above the nightclub is one of the most sophisticated brothels in town. In the northern city of Da Nang, the Vietnamese corps commander received so many complaints about the American-frequented bars, he closed down nine on main street—but 33 were left open.

Perhaps the most striking example of the mis-directed bureaucracy, witnessed by this correspondent—was immediately following the Bien Hoa mortar attack on Nov. 1 and the Pleiku attack. What was shocking was not that American GIs were killed by American ammunition and suspected American mortars—or that Vietnamese sentries had not been patrolling actively enough. It was the fact that a Viet Cong mortar attack could have been rendered less lethal by the construction of a more practical and substantial roof on American billets.

In both the Bien Hoa and the Pleiku mortar attacks, the mortar rounds—because of their high trajectory—crashed directly through the insubstantial roofs and exploded on impact with the floor. some of the first rounds—through fragmentation or concussion—killed or wounded American GIs before they ever got out of bed.