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VIET—MEASURING AN 'INVASION'

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1ST DIVISION AREA, South Viet Nam.

A serious question regarding the credibility of an American military announcement playing down North Vietnamese troop infiltration south of the 17th parallel has been raised by South Vietnamese generals.

The official American statement minimizing reports of infiltration has been sharply contradicted by South Vietnamese officers in the mountainous, two-province area bordering both Laos and Communist North Viet Nam where the infiltration has been concentrated.

On July 14, a top United States military spokesman at a specially convened press conference handed reporters a prepared statement—which at least had been checked by the American Embassy—which said "there are no indications of the presence of any PAVN (People's Army of North Viet Nam) units on South Vietnamese soil."

Only the day before, Premier Nguyen Khanh, in an exclusive interview, had described infiltration from the north as "overt invasion" and explained, "Before, we had the problem of infiltration and subversion. Now we have whole units coming in from North Viet Nam."

The North Vietnamese prisoners Gen. Khanh reported taking—the first ones captured in the war, he said—looked like concrete proof of Hanoi's involvement in the guerrilla movement in the South.

THE QUESTIONS

But the U. S. military statement—followed two days later by a similar one from Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara in Washington—raised a question which is troubling many observers here: On what evidence was it based? Was it an example of "managed news"?

If, for example, Washington acknowledged that Hanoi was escalating the five-year-old war against South Viet Nam, would the United States be forced to retaliate against North Viet Nam, as Johnson administration officials threatened last month?

Or did the American statement reflect a more cautious and less emotional analysis than the publicly expressed views of Premier Khanh and his generals? Gen. Khanh called last week end for direct attacks on North Viet Nam.

On-the-spot investigation in the 1st Division area, comprising South Viet Nam's two northernmost provinces, disclosed that before the U. S. military statement on July 14 and the Washington statement on July 16, no American official had interviewed any of the North Vietnamese prisoners seized by South Vietnamese government forces during the previous eight days.

In fact, American field officers conceded they did not

Confusion and frustration have been the hallmarks of the war in South Viet Nam—and especially of the United States' role in the conflict. In the last few months, the Administration has attempted to clarify its position, but to little effect. At one point, Washington seemed to be urging stronger military action, now the Vietnamese are crying for an expanded war—and the U. S. is cautious. Yesterday it was reliably reported in high Washington circles that important news will be coming from Saigon in the next day or two. This news, it was said, would provide indicators as to the future course of the anti-Communist war effort.

even know how many North Vietnamese prisoners had been captured. (A Vietnamese intelligence report listed three; this correspondent saw two.)

Since American officials had not interviewed the North Vietnamese prisoners and hence had no independent source of judgment, they were forced to rely primarily on prisoner interrogation reports prepared by Vietnamese military officers. These "initial" reports, averaging four pages per prisoner, dealt primarily with immediate tactical information.

U. S. military officials demonstrated a selective credibility by accepting one part of one report as accurate—namely that two Russian helicopters had ferried troops from North Viet Nam into Laos and that these troops had then marched across the border into South Viet Nam—while other sections of the interrogation reports were discounted as lacking substantiation.

During a three-day visit to the 1st Division area, this reporter interviewed one North Vietnamese prisoner for three hours and discussed with the division commander, Brig. Gen. Nguyen Chanh Thi, and his intelligence staff the testimony of the prisoners. These staff officers openly criticized American officialdom for "being too slow and sticking too close to form."

"The Americans weren't even interested in these prisoners," Gen. Thi exploded. "None of the American advisers here speak Vietnamese, but the American consul (in Hue)

does. He wouldn't even condescend to come here to interview them."

American officers in the northern provinces, conceding that Americans had not interviewed the prisoners, replied, "We've never had a policy of interviewing prisoners. We're not running this war." Presumably, no orders from Saigon or Washington have reversed this policy, although American advisers actively participate in other areas of the war effort. The American advisers in the field also called Gen. Thi "a sensationalist and publicity hound."

This correspondent read the interrogation report on prisoner Le Phan Hung, a 24-year-old peasant born south of Hanoi. He was listed as a private first class who had entered the North Vietnamese Army in May, 1963, was sent to a training center for three months and then went to join Company 3, Battalion 7, Division 325, stationed in Nghe An, North Viet Nam, 220 miles south of Hanoi.

Excerpts from the report say the prisoner "underwent further training for six months on 81-mm. mortars and . . . then received orders to go to South Viet Nam to destroy the control of the enemy over the population. He was well fed over the five days in preparation for the trip south and was promoted to private first class.

"In May, 1964, he received the order to start the trip with his whole company. Other companies have not started the trip yet, but they may perhaps go later. This company is composed of draftees of 90 fighting men. . . . In addition to this company there is another company of 90 men which came south with his.

" . . . They were taken to the airfield of Dong Hoi and boarded a helicopter painted black. The helicopter carried 20 passengers. There were two helicopters and each helicopter made five trips. Each trip took 40 minutes. At about 2 o'clock in the afternoon all 180 had been transferred. The helicopter landed in the jungle in Laos. Location unknown. . . ."

During a three-hour interview with this reporter, the prisoner confirmed and expanded on the report.

Several sections of it were accepted by high-ranking American officials in Saigon and in the northern provinces: first that the prisoner was bona fide; second that he flew to Laos in a Russian helicopter.

They also accepted that the prisoner was a private—and that rank would indicate combat troops rather than Mr. McNamara's description of "cadre of individuals." Cadres generally mean military officers, political commissars or military specialists.

THE CONTRADICTION

The U. S. military statement and the McNamara press conference sharply contradict several fundamental parts of the report.

The prisoner said he came to South Viet Nam with his own 90-man company and another unit of the same size.

But the U. S. military statement said the infiltrators were "dispatched in small groups to South Viet Nam where they reportedly were to combine with existing local units to form new companies and battalions." Mr. McNamara indicated at his Washington press conference that he knew of no instances of infiltration of organized North Vietnamese units into the South Vietnamese war.

The prisoner's interrogation report did not say whether the entire 90-man company was composed of personnel born in North Viet Nam. However, the U. S. military statement said they were trained in "mixed packets," indicating that some were born in North Viet Nam and some in South Viet Nam.

The prisoner told this correspondent all 90 men in his company spoke in North Vietnamese dialect.

The prisoner identified himself with 6th Company of the 7th Battalion of the 325th Division of the People's Army of Viet Nam. The report listed names of its officer in the north and said he moved into South Viet Nam with the company he trained with.

The U. S. military statement explained that low-ranking infiltrators "continue to identify themselves with their unit in North Viet Nam" and this "occasionally gives rise to false initial impressions that regular PAVN units have infiltrated into South Viet Nam."

The U. S. military statement also said, "As far as can be determined, all former members of PAVN units and groups of men drawn from PAVN units sever connections with their former units once they have infiltrated into South Viet Nam. Thus it can be said with a fair degree of probability that there are no members of PAVN in the northern areas of South Viet Nam—for that matter, anywhere in South Viet Nam."

American intelligence procedures demand at least two pieces of evidence—such as a prisoner report and a document—before confirming the existence of a unit.