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THE PLEIKU AIRLIFT

PLEIKU, SOUTH VIET NAM--Senior Vietnamese and American officers are gambling the Pleiku Airlift will defeat the Communists in war in the jungled highlands as soundly as the Berlin Airlift diplomatically defeated the Russians nearly two decades ago. H S

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To win the gamble would be a big step ~~it~~ towards winning the war in this jungled highlands area bordering Laos and Cambodia, ~~which has~~ ^{has been} evern major highway, minor road and national railroad out. ~~Government~~ ^{Government} forces are too low in strength to secure the roads; some reliable sources estimate it would require at least ~~one~~ ^{one} more division of troops--and maybe two divisions--to keep the roads open. Even then, government forces would be ~~an~~ open to devastating Communist ambushes. In some cases, Communist forces attack a government position, but have more than three times there ~~attacking~~ ^{attacking} strength positioned into ~~it~~ ^{it} ambushing roads and helicopter zones which government forces must use to ~~reforce~~ ^{reforce} the position. In several cases, ~~the Communist forces,~~ ^{Southern Born} North Vietnamese ~~Communist~~ ^{Government} forces have ambushed the first relief force, so badly a second relief force was rushed to the battle only to have that disasterously ambushed, only to have a third rushed in to retrieve the situation.

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To lose the gamble, however, would mean a defeat--either through increasing Viet Cong Communist assaults on isolated government positions--or else at the ~~government positions~~ government-held cities would simply crumble away politically. Currently, the government-held cities are potential hotbeds of political discontent against the government. The price of rice is skyrocketing; prices of other foodstuffs are also increasing; luxury items such as beer, cigarettes and a coca cola have long ago disappeared; restaurants are closing up. More and more refugees are drifting into government-held cities to escape the increasingly furious war in their countryside, demanding even more supplies.

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The problems of the Pleiku Airlift are clearly more difficult than was the Berlin Airlift, though the scope may be ~~smaller~~ ^{smaller}. Pleiku, the second corps headquarters, serves as the serial collecting point for supplies, ~~which are then flown in by heavier transport aircraft~~ ^{which are} flown in by heavier transport aircraft, which creates a caving-in of the steel-planing ~~run~~ ^{run} plank runway. The material is then transferred to smaller transport aircraft to be ~~shuttled~~ ^{shuttled} into smaller provincial capitals and government outposts. But ~~in the meantime~~ ^{now} ~~in the~~ the Communists have begun to attack the airstrips of the isolated posts, which under-manned government units can not prevent.

Not only are Communist bullets becoming more effective as they bring in heavier and more accurate anti-aircraft weapons, but ~~it~~ also the monsoon rain clouds are moving in lower.

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Between the Communist bullets and monsoon rainclouds--both expected to get worse--the problem of logistics appears relatively the simplest; the difficulty, however, is that obviously the military supplies of ammunition and troops come first while the civilian ~~problems~~ needs of rice and clothing comes second.

"The poor logisticians and weathermen are going out of their minds," one American advisor explained. "And the transport pilots are flying 17-18 hours a day. They are doing a fabulous job."

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"Before we could get back in with more supplies, the Communists attacked Dak-To," he continued. "This shot a hole in our plans of what to do with those refugees. ~~When the Communists~~ All of these refugees fled the Communists during the attack and we met them on the road when we went back to re-capture the district town.

"Now we are working round-the-clock to try to get rice and food up there; we hope in the future to build temporary shelters for them."

An even more difficult problem is the loss of an increasing number of ~~the~~ the best Vietnamese ~~commanders~~ commanders and ~~the~~ district chiefs who have been killed or wounded during the battle engagements.

One of these was Lt. Col. Lai Van Chu, whom the American advisors called "The Tiger."

As commander of the 42nd Infantry Regiment, ~~he~~ Chu's jeep lead the armed truck convoy to re-take the district town of Dak-To last week.

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"After ~~wax~~ Chu's jeep got two kilometers down the road, the four Army tanks and the ~~vietnamese vietnamese~~ forces got in formation and the tanks began to ~~reconnoitre~~ reconnoitre the mountainside by firing. This triggered off the Communists that were along the steep hillsides. *one American House. EXPLAINED.*

"Col. Chu was ordering the troops about by pointing out orders with his cane; he seldom carried a weapon. Within seconds, he was disembowled by His American counterpart groundfire. was shot in the foot but refused to leave the battlefield until ordered. A jeep raced down the road, carrying the colonel out of the battle area; ~~he was still alive and within thirty minutes an~~ American helicopter evacuated him to the hospital. But we couldn't save him. The loss of ~~"the tiger"~~ 'The Tiger' will hurt us up here--he knew all the people in the surrounding valleys."