

CAN CHOPPERS BE VIETNAMIZED?

Whenever Lt. Gen. Hoang Xuan Lam, commander of the South Vietnamese drive in Laos, leads his troops into battle, he does so aboard a Huey helicopter. Sparklingly clean and meticulously tuned, it is no ordinary chopper; its interior is beautifully red-carpeted and all four of its crew members are American. Asked recently if he would rather fly with a South Vietnamese crew, the tall, reserved general laughingly replied: "You must be jesting. No thank you."

That General Lam and most other South Vietnamese commanders feel safer flying in American-piloted helicopters has not, of course, enhanced the reputation of the South Vietnamese chopper pilots. And recently that reputation sank even lower after two South Vietnamese helicopters went down with the loss of five journalists and Lt. Gen. Do Cao Tri, the ARVN commander in Cambodia. Today, in fact, there are many experts who question whether the U.S., despite its avowed intention of turning the war over to South Vietnam, will be able to withdraw its helicopter support for many years to come without endangering the entire Vietnamization program. "I seriously doubt," one American chopper pilot said last week, "that the helicopter war can be Vietnamized."

Crash Programs: Nevertheless, the U.S. is attempting to do just that. Less than two years ago, when the Vietnamization program went into high gear, the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) could boast some 100 choppers. By now, the South Vietnamese helicopter force numbers 400 helicopters, and 400 more are scheduled to be delivered by 1972. Far more diffi-

cult, however, has been the problem of producing trained and competent pilots. Until late in 1969, only 350 South Vietnamese had been trained as helicopter pilots. But with the advent of Vietnamization, the U.S. Army and Air Force were instructed to initiate crash programs to train South Vietnamese chopper pilots and ground crews. The goal was set at 1,500 fully trained South Vietnamese chopper pilots, and most have already completed their courses. The last of the batch will be graduated by early next year.

For the Vietnamese cadets, it is an arduous program. Carefully chosen from all levels of Vietnamese society, the candidates must first learn at least a smattering of English at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon. Those who pass (about 75 per cent of the original class) are flown to Lackland Air Force Base in Texas for six weeks' additional study in English. Then they are sent to Fort Wolters, Texas, for sixteen weeks of training in the basic mysteries of the chopper. There, if they do well, they eventually solo and go on for sixteen more weeks of advanced tactics training at the Hunter-Stewart base complex near Savannah, Ga.

Instruction: Many of the trainees find the program a very confusing experience. To begin with, there is no such thing as a helicopter repair manual in Vietnamese. All instruction is in English, and some instructors lapse into pidgin, some into jargon and others into equally impenetrable Texan. Sometimes, when the trainees are asked a question that they do not understand, they reply with an Oriental "yes" just to appease their instructor. "Learning in a foreign language, from foreign instructors, in a foreign country and in a foreign technical environment, it's a wonder any of them get through," comments one American instructor. "I couldn't imagine myself going over there to learn Vietnamese and fly."

In fact, U.S. military men are divided over the question whether this type of Stateside training can turn out South Vietnamese chopper pilots who are capable of carrying on the war without massive U.S. helicopter support. Some Americans, such as Col. James Kidder, head of the training program at Hunter Army Air Field, believe that the South Vietnamese are the equal of the American graduates at Fort Rucker. "A man can either fly or not," says Kidder. "It doesn't make any difference what the color of his skin is or where he is from." And this view is supported by Col. John Hughes, a beribboned flier who has seen South Vietnamese helicopter pilots in action. "Absolutely they'll be able to fight this kind of warfare," argues Colonel Hughes. "I have a feeling that many Americans

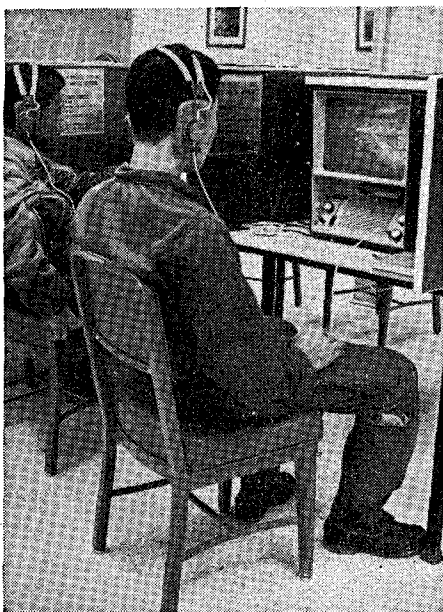


Vietnamese cadet: Underrated?

still underrate Asians—in spite of Pearl Harbor."

On the other side, some American military men argue that the Vietnamese do not maintain their aircraft properly. They point to the fact that only a handful of South Vietnamese helicopter maintenance men receive Stateside training and that, as a result, nearly 75 per cent of the VNAF's fleet of choppers is grounded by mechanical trouble at any given time. Among the skeptics is retired Lt. Gen. James Gavin, father of the "sky cavalry" concept, who says: "I don't think Vietnamese academic background and manual skills are up to training sufficient numbers of them to use helicopters well in the time we have got left there. I don't see leaving sophisticated helicopters and continuing to replace them. Oh, no. That would be like dropping them in the Pacific Ocean."

Firepower: Indeed, even the most enthusiastic supporters of the helicopter-training program admit that it would be a mistake to expect the South Vietnamese to service and fly the most advanced U.S. helicopters. As a result, there are no present plans to give the VNAF complex Cobra gunships. Instead, the VNAF will have to make do with Huey choppers outfitted with guns. "They won't have quite the firepower we have," said one veteran American chopper pilot, "but the Huey is a good ship and the South Vietnamese should still have a big edge over the enemy if they use it right. The question is whether these Vietnamese pilots will prove themselves in combat. And the only place you will get that story is in Vietnam after they go into action on a major scale."



William J. Cook—Newsweek

Training session: Too confusing?