

THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE  
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20301

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21 APR 1970

MEMORANDUM FOR ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT FOR NATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS

SUBJECT: Desertions and Combat Pay (U)

In a memorandum of January 28, 1970, I indicated that before I made a decision to institute a system of combat pay, I wished to determine with more precision the causes of desertions in Vietnamese combat units. Although the data are tenuous, studies indicate that increased benefits in the form of rations and dependent shelters would be more likely to reduce desertions than would a direct financial incentive such as combat pay.

Trend Data

RVNAF desertions decreased from 140,000 in CY 1968 to 123,000 in CY 1969, a 12% reduction in a period when the RVNAF strength increased 51% (from 643,000 to 969,256). As you know, desertion rates for different type forces differ widely. There is also a large disparity in desertion rates between similar type combat units. In 1969, gross rates varied from a high of 47 per 1000 men per month in the 21st Infantry Division to a low of 16 per 1000 in the case of the 22nd Infantry Division. Moreover, desertion rates of the ARVN divisions did not follow any particular pattern, and only one division, the 25th, has shown clear and definite progress in reducing desertions.

Causes

Large numbers of Vietnamese apparently leave regular combat units and then enlist in territorial units to be closer to their homes. The precise numbers going from the ARVN to the RF/PF are not known because the RVNAF lacks a system to identify deserters who join other units. However, the Vietnamese anticipate that a national identification system will be in operation by the end of CY 1970. This system should provide a source of valid data on desertions and may be a major deterrent.

Although combat units' desertion rates are higher than other forces, a comprehensive statistical analysis covering a two year period (1968-1969) failed to show any statistical relation between casualties suffered in a unit and the desertion rate. Similarly, a study of US advisor responses on the causes of desertion indicates that family connected matters are the principal cause of desertion. Only 4% of the advisor's responses identified combat intensity as a cause of desertion.

Several Vietnamese studies, including interviews with 520 deserters, have identified the following as causes of desertion: (1) deficiencies in leadership, (2) homesickness, (3) concern for welfare of the family, (4) inability to make the transition from civilian to military way of life, (5) fear or hardship and danger and (6) leniency in treatment of deserters which makes desertion a

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preferable alternative to the rigors of military life. The relationship of leadership to desertion is especially apparent in combat units. Generally, units which have good leaders and good combat records have low desertion rates. A case in point is the ARVN 1st Infantry Division.

Data are inconclusive on the effect that financial incentives have on desertion. Although all regular force personnel are on the same pay scale, desertions vary by component and service. Moreover, the popular forces (PF) have the lowest pay scale and the lowest desertion rate. There have been four RVNAF pay raises in the past three years, but analysis of these increases failed to show any relation between desertion and a pay raise. Also, the GVN believes that raising RVNAF living standards through better housing and food is a more effective means to deter desertions than raising pay.

#### Action to Deter Desertions

The Vietnamese Joint General Staff has initiated a number of measures aimed at controlling desertions. These range from organizing desertion control committees at each echelon of command to developing a nation-wide identification system (mentioned above) and programs aimed at improving leadership.

Although some progress has been made in improving leadership, I am concerned that enough is not being done to insist on a high level of performance at the higher levels of RVNAF command. Although some inept division commanders have been replaced, during my visit to SVN I expressed a hope to President Thieu and General Abrams that more changes reflecting an emphasis on quality would be forthcoming in the near future. I am continuing to stress this point at every opportunity.

Programs for providing the RVNAF increased rations and better housing are currently under review. MACV and the JCS are coordinating a proposal submitted by the Vietnamese government in January to increase ration support for the Vietnamese. I have directed the Joint Chiefs of Staff to provide their recommendations on these plans, including cost implications, by the end of the month.

A combined JCS/MACV committee has agreed on dependent shelter requirements and funding. The plan is to build 202,000 shelters in a 20,000 unit/year construction program. I have directed members of my staff to accelerate staffing of this proposal and to assign the highest priority in its implementation.

I am encouraged by the active part the Vietnamese have taken in determining the causes of desertion and recommending remedial measures. For the present, I intend to support their programs, assuming they remain within reasonable financial bounds, and closely monitor progress.

