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Mountaineers Fight Reds

U.S. Arms Tribesmen In S. Viet Nam Jungles

By PETER ARNETT

BAN ME THOUT, South Viet Nam (AP) — Mountain tribesmen are fighting Communists deep in the jungles of South Viet Nam, and apparently winning.

Already, 4,500 volunteer Rhade, pronounced rah-day, tribesmen have been armed under a U.S. Army Special Forces program that was secret up until recently.

These tribesmen have returned to their villages, built bamboo fortifications and underground shelters, and are beating off Viet Cong attacks.

Before the Special Forces program began last November, the proud Rhades had been reduced to tribute-bearing vassals of the Viet Cong who roamed this central plateau.

American military authorities in Ban Me Thuot, the headquarters of the Vietnamese army's 3rd Division, regard this program as the most significant yet devised to squash the Viet Cong movement at the grassroots level.

Better Trained

"These people are better trained and better equipped than the Viet Cong," says Capt. Ron Shackleton of Newark, N.J. "They are fighting for their own houses and their own families and they are succeeding."

The program carries a calculated risk to the republic of Viet Nam because the mountain peoples, particularly the Rhade, have resented attempts by the government to control them.

The immediate threat of the Communists as against a theoretical future threat by the mountain peoples is seen as sufficient reason by Americans here to arm the Rhades.

To qualify for weapons and training, village chiefs must swear alliance to the republic, turn in known Viet Cong informers, and build sharpened bamboo stockades and underground shelters.

So far, 80 villages are armed and fortified. Many informers have been brought into the Special Forces camp outside Ban

Me Thuot and put through an extensive indoctrination course.

Red Casualties

Casualties in Viet Cong raids on Rhade villages in the past few months, according to the special forces: 49 Viet Cong killed, 45 wounded, 100 captured, 120 surrendered.

One Rhade woman was killed as she carried her child to shel-

ter but no men have died in armed conflict with the Viet Cong, the Special Forces claim.

"We give the villages a choice," Shackleton said, "between yielding to the Viet Cong or fighting for their way of life. They are choosing us."

He showed an example of the successful indoctrination program. Sixty Viet Cong informers,