

PHILCAG, PHILCON

# End of a decade of humanitarian work

SAIGON — The 15th and last team of the Philippine Contingent to Vietnam (Philcon V) has bowed out of the longest war in modern times, ending nearly a decade of humanitarian mission in South Vietnam.

The 51-man team of doctors, dentists, nurses and medical technicians under Col. Jose Mercado left for Manila late February in compliance with the terms of the Paris ceasefire agreement calling for the withdrawal of all foreign troops.

Except for the brevity (two months) of its stint here, the last Philcon team experienced most everything that its predecessors did. It tried to alleviate human suffering due to war and was itself often under fire.

Technically, the war was supposed to have stopped January 23, but ceasefire violations take place daily — not the major, pitched battles of the past months but small harassing actions especially in the provinces where Philcon teams had been posted: Tay Ninh, Hau Nghia, Dinh Tuong, and Binh Duong.

When the ceasefire was only hours old, for instance, the team in Tay Ninh had to be evacuated to Saigon because of the intensity of the fighting. It returned a couple of days later. The team in Hau Nghia also had to withdraw to Saigon early February, so tenuous was the situation there. The team in Dinh Tuong, which we visited February 13, experienced nightly shelling from mortars.

Since August 16, 1964 when the first Philcon team came to Vietnam, up to December 1972, records compiled at the Philippine Embassy here show that, together with the medical and surgical components of the two Philippine Civic Action Groups (Philcag), the Filipino medical teams had treated a total of 1,022,950 medical cases, 185,769 surgical cases, and 348,126 dental cases. They conducted a total of 52,543 X-ray examinations and 3,931 laboratory tests.

In terms of human lives saved and manpower brought back to effectiveness, Philcon's contribution was one of the Allies' best. Certainly, they did not win the war, but in the dark days of 1964 when the enemy was very strong and moral in the country was not so high, the efforts of the teams' psywar-civic action officers contributed a lot to South Vietnam's efforts to unite its people.

A total of 272 officers, 239 enlisted men and six civilian volunteers served in Vietnam under Philcon's flag. While they served, they learned, and they all returned home wiser about this kind of war and about international cooperation and brotherhood.

The Philippines, despite its own problems and limitations, has demonstrated once more its dedication to the democratic ideal, its loyalty to its allies and its love for the people of a neighboring Asian country.

As early as 1952, years before the American military escalation and long

before the other allies decided to assist in Vietnam, the Philippines was already preparing to send assistance to Vietnam.

But the plan did not immediately materialize.

After the coup that toppled President Ngo Dinh Diem, General Duong Van Minh, then chairman of the Military Revolutionary Council and chief of state, and General Tran Van Don, then minister of defense and chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, indicated the desire of the government of Vietnam to send a military mission to the Philippines to explain the situation here and ask for Philippine aid.

Eventually, a mission was formed



Filipino doctor and Vietnamese patient: a gesture of humanitarianism.

to make a formal request. General Tran Thien Khiem, now Prime Minister, and at the time minister of national defense and commander in chief of the South Vietnamese armed forces, left for Manila on June 24, 1964 with then Lt. Col. Tran Van Minh, now lieutenant general commanding the Vietnam Air Force.

The Khiem mission was warmly received in Manila, including by then Senate President and now President Marcos, who immediately promised cooperation.

Philippine response to the request was quick. On July 7, or nine days after the departure of the Khiem mission, President Macapagal convened the National Security Council for advice. The Council favorably endorsed the request for medical teams and psywar-civic action teams, but had to skip the request for aircraft maintenance teams because these were in short supply.

The President then requested Congress for authority and funds and this the Congress gave by unanimous vote. Republic Act 4162 appropriated P1 million to cover assistance work for one year.

The AFP quickly implemented the Act, and Philcon I, as the first group was known, left for Saigon on August 16, 1964. It was composed of 16 psywar-civic action advisers, two surgical teams of six men each, one civilian volunteer medical team of four and two civilian civic action officers.

The contingent, although small, was made up of specialists. Events later proved to prove that the combination of

psywar-civic action and medical service beautifully complemented each other in the campaign to win the countryside.

Philcon I arrived just in time for the implementation of the "Hop Tac" (oil spot) and "Pica" pacification operations which started September 1.

The psywar-civic action officers were assigned singly in the related units. Each adviser was on his own, and in view of the shortage of logistics at that time, each officer had to improvise, beg or borrow or modify his plans.

The surgical teams were assigned to operate the surgical suite in the Tay Ninh provincial hospital where there were many civilian casualties.

The civilian volunteer medical team was assigned to Kontum provincial hospital to reinforce the efforts to win over the Montagnards. Kontum, since the days of the French, was very important. It was the key to the strategic Highway 19 of which the Communists had always dreamed of taking over to divide South Vietnam into two at the 14th parallel.

The psywar-civic action teams were

the first teams.

Philcon II faced even greater work as the war was on the upswing and civilian casualties were mounting. Psywar-civic action officers were also giving particular attention to Hau Nghia province.

Philcon III arrived on August 23, 1965 to replace Philcon I. It was composed of 15 psywar-civic action officers, one surgical team of six men and two rural health teams — a new type of medical unit designed to provide mobile medical service and limited surgical services in the field. Each rural health team had six members — two doctors, two nurses, and two technicians.

The Philcon supervisor had conceived of this type of team after the experience in Operations Brotherhood ten years earlier had shown that a mobile clinic moving from one hamlet to another instead of waiting in a fixed clinic could go a long way in showing the government's concern for its people.

In a province where there are no provincial hospital, like in Hau Nghia, and in areas where there were many refugee centers the rural health team was the answer. Combined with the efforts of the psywar-civic action teams, their work was so effective that the Vietcong singled them out for "special treatment." Several times, the team was the object of VC attacks.

Philcon IV, consisting of seven doctors, six nurses and seven enlisted men, arrived on April 25, 1966 to relieve Philcon II.

The war was still escalating. US President Johnson appealed for the expanded involvement of the Allies and the Philippines was soon plunged into one of the most controversial issues of that time: to send or not to send additional aid to Vietnam.

Proposed was the sending of one engineer construction battalion to be used in a civic action program in the province of Tay Ninh, accompanied by a battalion for security. In May 1966 the Philippine Congress approved the proposal, and Philcag, as the new contingent was known, started to arrive in Vietnam. Philcon IV was absorbed by Philcag on October 1, 1966 and so were the succeeding seven contingents of Philcon until Philcag was withdrawn in 1969.

Under Philcag, the activities of the medical and surgical teams were subordinated to that of the civic action battalion. All civic action was concentrated by Philcag in one area. The surgical teams continued to man the provincial surgical suites and one rural health team was retained to serve Hau Nghia province.

During the enemy Tet offensive in 1968, the medical-surgical teams had their hands full. The ladies' quarters of the team in My Tho was completely wrecked by enemy shells. Fortunately no one was hurt.

When Philcag finally left for the Philippines in December 1969, President Marcos retained the medical teams, thus reviving Philcon as an independent unit.

Since then, five teams have come, and the last has just left Vietnam.

If the Philippines is to continue this effort which manifestly had served as a medium for Philippine-Vietnamese cooperation, any new mission that comes will have to be civilian in nature to conform to the new spirit brought about by the Paris ceasefire agreement. DAVID V. BAQUIRIN