

TELEVISION ON THE WING



Two C-121 Navy Superconstellations await the next flight to bring TV to our troops.

It was twilight at the Tan Son Nhut airport a few miles outside Saigon. A Superconstellation's four engines coughed to life, and soon the great, dolphin-shaped plane was rolling toward the head of a runway, and moments later it was sprinting faster and then faster on the tiptoes of its wheeled tripod, and then it lurched upon the wind and curved upward into the melancholy gray of a South Vietnam dusk.

In the cockpit, Lt. Cdr. Donald Ferris, USN, held the controls lightly in his gloved hands and eased the airplane into a slow, climbing turn toward the southeast. Below was the Mekong Delta, South Vietnam's fertile rice basket, a vast, muddy crazy-quilt of rice fields under a shimmering patina of water that reflected both the aircraft and the thunderhead clouds above it.

The plane's destination was not far off—nor was it even on the ground. After traveling only 15 miles, it banked again and began flying a lazy circle, 10 miles in diameter and 10,000 feet over the Delta mud. Com-

mander Ferris scanned the control panel, then switched on the autopilot; he leaned back in his seat and accepted a container of coffee from a crew member.

A few feet behind the cockpit, in a microcosmic television studio measuring 5 feet wide and 10 feet long, an "announcer"—actually an Air Force sergeant attached to the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service—was daubing his face with theatrical make-up. All through the plane, technicians in orange flight suits were bending over consoles, sharpening test patterns on rows of TV monitors, and giving final checks to an array of electronic gear.

Soon floodlights brightened the tiny studio, illuminating the announcer's face. A small vidicon TV camera in front of him came on, and he smiled broadly and said: "Good evening. I'm Master Sergeant Shelly Blunt. Welcome to another evening of viewing on Armed Forces Television, Vietnam."

On the ground, thousands of GIs—and many Vietnamese—settled back to

The Blue Eagles circle Vietnamese skies carrying nothing more lethal than TV programs BY NEIL HICKEY



Aboard a Blue Eagle in flight, crewmen monitor a broadcast to the terrain below.

watch programs aimed at them by one of the most ingenious broadcast setups any place in the world: a flying television station capable of beaming a full evening's schedule of TV shows directly to the men engaged in the prosecution of a war.

That's how TV first was broadcast in Vietnam a little over a year ago (Feb. 7, 1966), and until a fancy new ground transmitter in downtown Saigon went on the air last Oct. 25. Right now, American television shows are visible not only in Saigon, but in the upcountry environs of Qui Nhon and Da Nang. Pleiku is next. These outlying transmitters (each is five kilowatts) are set up next to ingenious, mobile vans; but the one in Saigon is a full-fledged, 25-kilowatt transmitter in a modern, permanent installation.

By July 1 the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service in Vietnam will have a total of eight TV stations reaching 90 percent of all U.S. forces in that war-riven land. The morale-boosting effect of such a network is expected to be enormous, creating for

the troops the impression that—in spite of the mud, the booby traps and disease—they're really not too far from home.

At the outset the Saigon area received three hours of television per day, seven days a week. Now that the ground transmitters are working, the schedule both in Saigon and in the central and northern provinces lasts from 6:30 to 11 P.M. on weekdays, and from 1:30 P.M. to Midnight on Saturdays and Sundays.

Practically all of the programming comes to Vietnam in cans from the Los Angeles headquarters of the AFRTS, which in turn procures it from the national networks in the U.S. But the new studios in downtown Saigon also are capable of transmitting live news broadcasts and special programs.

Thus Americans in Vietnam are tuning in such stateside TV shows as *12 O'clock High*, *Bewitched*, *I've Got a Secret*, *The Tonight Show*, *My Favorite Martian*, *Candid Camera*, *Hollywood Palace*, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *The Danny Kaye Show*, *continued*

Vietnam TV / *continued*

Batman, The Beverly Hillbillies, Gunsmoke, Meet the Press, sports events, documentaries, and many others.

When American authorities first discussed bringing television to Vietnam, they decided not to postpone its inauguration during the period required for construction of the ground transmitter. So two Navy Superconstellation C-121's—called the Blue Eagles—were outfitted with transmitting gear in the U.S. and dispatched hurriedly to the battle zone.

On an evening last summer, as one

of the Blue Eagles orbited lazily south of Saigon, its pilot surveyed his instrument panel, sipped coffee, and chatted with TV Guma's man, who was installed importantly in the copilot's seat. "It's been a fantastic success in spite of the obstacles," said Commander Ferris. "Sometimes the turbulence up here is tremendous. After dark we frequently see the muzzle blasts from gunfights going on down there in the Delta. And of course the Saigon airport is usually surrounded by Vietcong in small numbers."

At times, said Ferris, air strikes were called for on the terrain directly below the C-121's orbiting pattern. "That's when the announcer back there goes on camera," Ferris added with a grin, "and tells the audience, 'Due to atmospheric conditions, we are shifting our flight pattern five miles to the west.' Then viewers get up and swivel their antennas a bit."

But those rigors belong to the past—at least as far as the English-speaking audience in Vietnam is concerned. The Blue Eagles still fly out of Saigon every evening, but now they wing southwestward 90 miles and orbit over the town of Can Tho in the Mekong Delta, transmitting Vietnamese-language programming to that populous area. (South Vietnam is busy establishing—with American help—its own TV network, as described in TV GUIDE, Dec. 3, 1966.)

Last April 13 the Vietcong conducted a mortar attack on the Saigon airport and damaged the two C-121's—each containing \$3,000,000 worth of electronic gear—which fly on alternate evenings. One of them took 50 shrapnel holes in its fuselage, but was patched up with such alacrity and expertise that it went aloft that same day. The other was out of action for a month, during which time the TV schedule went to five nights a week. In a second Vietcong attack early in December a Blue Eagle plane once

again was damaged, but not enough to curtail its operations.

Last Christmas Eve a small band of Vietcong raiders attacked the AFRTS transmitter in downtown Saigon but were driven off after an exchange of gunfire. The studio-transmitter compound is well fortified with concrete bunkers, but officials expect that the Vietcong will make other attempts to knock the station off the air.

In the countryside the 11-ton mobile vans (each costing around \$200,000) also require defenses. The one near Qui Nhon, for example, is perched near the top of an 1800-foot mountain, (hauled there by bulldozers), and the 12 men assigned to the station live up there in armed bunkers. Part of their job is to protect the 132-foot transmitter tower.

When Gen. William C. Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, cut the ribbon opening the Qui Nhon station last September, he used the sword of a Montagnard mountain tribesman, and said the proposed network would be "of great value" in bringing needed entertainment and news to troops in the actual combat zones.

The Armed Forces Radio and Television Service network in Vietnam is, actually, the first attempt ever made to bring a full diet of home TV entertainment to soldiers engaged in the day-to-day prosecution of a war.

Since any Vietnamese who happens to own, or have access to, a television set can tune in the American programs, all the shows are "screened for local sensitivities" to be sure they contain no offense to Asian dignity.

Roughly 80 percent of Vietnamese

are Buddhists and have strong feelings about such things as disrespect for the dead and intrafamily violence. Many resent the sight of indignities inflicted upon animals. Danny Kaye once did a Thanksgiving comedy sketch in which he dressed up as a turkey and wobbled crazily about the stage. That part of the show was not seen in Vietnam.

Enthusiasm is high among the military men for this electronic breath of homo, which fosters the feeling among them that as long as those acrobats keep showing up with Ed Sullivan, the stateside scene hasn't changed very much during their year-long duty tour in Vietnam.

It is an odd fact that the Vietcong—just as easily as the Americans—can tune in *My Favorite Martian* or *The Beverly Hillbillies*, using TV sets they've either pilfered or purchased on the black market. One cannot escape the vision of a Vietcong guerrilla, crouched in his jungle foxhole, frowning at the flickering TV set before him, and trying to puzzle out the cosmological significance of Zsa Zsa Gabor bantering with Johnny Carson on *The Tonight Show*.

As of last Dec. 31, PX's in Vietnam had sold 46,000 TV sets to authorized military men and civilians, and new sets are arriving in the country at the rate of 10,000 per month. Long lines form every time a new shipment goes on sale, since each batch sells out.

TV Guide's man conducted a small, private poll as to which program is most popular among Americans in Vietnam. The answer most often received? You guessed it—*Combat!*