

U. S. 'Copters Are Shot Up By Viet Cong

**3 Americans Killed,
4 Wounded; 2 Craft
Are Feared Cut Off**

By Malcolm W. Browne

SAIGON, Jan. 2 (AP)—Communist guerrillas shot up a fleet of United States helicopters carrying Vietnamese troops into battle today, killing three Americans—one, an Army captain—and wounding four others. There were fears that two of the helicopters were cut off in enemy territory.

Springing a trap, the Viet Cong held their fire as the first wave of helicopters landed in rice-field country near the banks of the Mekong River 50 miles southwest of Saigon.

Then, with automatic small-arms and cannon fire, the Communists dealt the costliest defeat yet suffered by U. S. helicopters supporting President Ngo Dinh Diem's pro-Western government.

Officials here said the three deaths today—a captain serving as a military adviser, a helicopter crew-chief and a gunner—brought to 26 the number of Americans killed in action in the Viet-Nam civil war.

(Pentagon figures up to today listed 21 killed in action and 31 deaths from other causes.)

Communist ground fire hit 14 American helicopters taking part in an operation that began at dawn, and brought down at least eight. Five were destroyed.

Four of the aircraft downed were turbine-powered escort helicopters. The others were H-21 troop-carriers.

The wounded Americans, one described as in serious condition, were evacuated under heavy enemy fire. It was feared that two big H-21 helicopters, with their crews, were still cut off by the Viet Cong.

Vietnamese air force fighter bombers struck with rockets and shells at Viet Cong positions near the river town of Vinh Long, but the guerrilla force held.