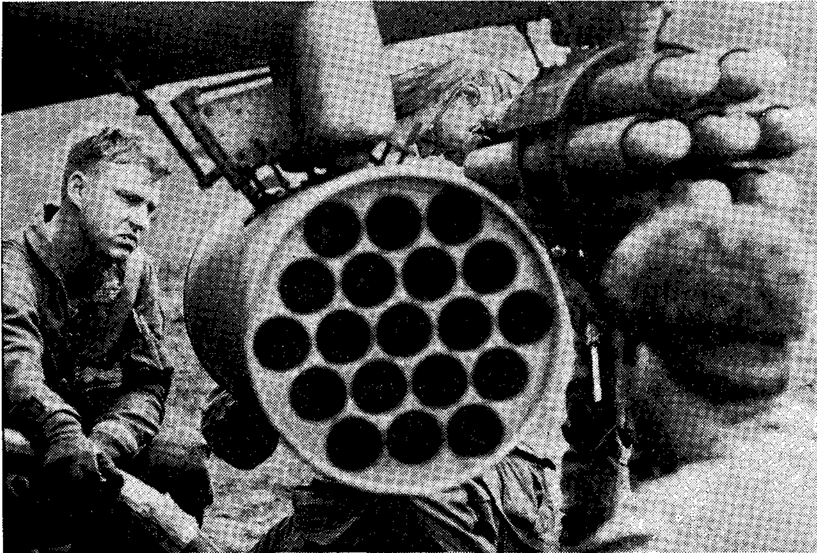
Denis Cameron—Franz Furst

Gunship crewmen check their rocket launchers: A lethal surrogate

incursion has demonstrated the potential of the helicopter in conventional warfare of the sort that might occur in Europe. "I think this really tough campaign has proved that the helicopter has an aggressive role to play against sophisticated defenses," says Colonel Molinelli. "A combination of helicopters with fighter-bombers overhead waiting to be called in is just about an unbeatable combination." The Army is already studying another combination, an experimental "tri-cap" (triple capacity) division to be formed by merging the First Air Cav with the First Armored Division. The new outfit, earmarked for Europe, would have one brigade of air cavalry, a brigade of armor and a brigade of infantry, as well as a reserve brigade of National Guard tanks. The Army is also hoping that the Nixon Administration will resume production of the new, heavily armed Cheyenne gunship, which was canceled because of rising costs, delivery delays and shortcomings in performance. "The helicopter gunship," insists one officer, "may be the best answer we have to the overwhelming numbers of Soviet bloc tanks in Europe."

Threat: It is obvious, however, that ground fire can pose a serious threat to helicopters, to say nothing of enemy fighter planes, which the choppers have not yet encountered. The Army thinks that both problems can be solved by taking advantage of "ground clutter"—principally trees and buildings—to hide from an enemy. In this way, some officers believe that helicopters can even cope with jet fighters. Last fall, a series of tests at the Army's Hunter-Liggett base in California pitted Cobras against Navy F-4 and F-8 jets in simulated combat. The results are still classified, but the Army is said to be encouraged. "On the whole," says an Army spokesman, "we found that a helicopter alone on the deck, using its inherent agility, can have a low vulnerability to jets."

But many military experts wonder about that. They note that, so far, more than 1,900 U.S. helicopters have been shot down and destroyed in Indochina, often by rifle fire or hand grenades. And if the North Vietnamese ever get their hands on a lightweight, heat-seeking missile—similar to the one already developed in the U.S.—American helicopters may be more vulnerable still. The critics also point out that the helicopter is a notoriously fragile piece of equipment. "A Huey," remarks one pilot, "consists of hundreds of moving parts, each one trying to tear the others to shreds." Indeed, for every hour in the air, a helicopter normally requires four hours of maintenance work. And even with these precautions, more than 2,300 helicopters have been wrecked in Indochina by accident, collision or mechanical failure. Altogether, the 4,200 helicopters that the U.S. admits to having lost in Vietnam cost an estimated $1.5 billion.

Predictably enough, the Air Force often argues against the airmobility concept. "The chopper is useful in transporting troops and supplies in the battlefield area, but its usefulness is limited," says an Air Force general. "It cannot survive when the enemy has sophisticated anti-aircraft weapons or air power." Many neutral experts and even some Army men also believe that the Pentagon is putting too much emphasis on helicopter warfare. "Military leaders always tend to be one war behind," contends a civilian aeronautical engineer. "Now they're tub-thumping for a weapon that has a very doubtful value in a conventional war setting and even a somewhat doubtful value in the so-called limited war." And retired Army Lt. Gen. James M. Gavin, one of the "fathers" of the airmobility concept, charges that helicopters are being used for jobs that should be done by other means. "In some moments of desperation, it is justified to use sky cavalry to solve these tactical problems," he says. "But you can't go on doing it. Sky cavalry should not be used to fight the heavy infantryman's battle, and it should not be used against strong anti-aircraft fire. That's murder."

Many of the men who do the actual fighting agree that Army helicopters should back off a bit in Laos. "The high command hasn't realized that we're fighting a conventional war out there," says a Huey crewman. "It's no good sending in choppers, because they're not built to tangle with those defenses." Says an officer: "You just can't use the helicopter as a close-support infantry weapon under these conditions. The Army has got to change its tactical use of helicopters. The trouble is that the boys have found a new way of going to war, and they don't want to change it." Not yet anyway. But if the first taste of conventional warfare in Laos is any indication, the Army may have to reappraise some of its grand designs for fighting land wars from the sky.

P.S. TO A BRIEFING

Two weeks ago, in an attempt to rebut charges that the South Vietnamese invasion of Laos had produced only meager results, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird called upon Lt. Gen. John Vogt—known as "the best briefer in the Pentagon"—to present the Administration's case to the press. At a news conference, Vogt proclaimed that one of the major achievements of the drive into Laos had been the destruction of a vital enemy oil pipeline. To dramatize his point, Vogt displayed a 3-foot length of pipe which, he said, had been ripped out of the oil line. Technically, that was true. But last week, under questioning from reporters, Laird admitted that the particular piece of pipe brandished by Vogt had not been seized during the current Laos invasion but had been brought back months ago by a South Vietnamese intelligence team.

Wally McNamee—Newsweek

Vogt displaying pipe