

OUR MAN IN VIET NAM

Yom Kippur at the Viet Front

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(2) Tan Son Nhut, Viet Nam, Sept. 24—The destinies of more than 2,000 Jewish soldiers were sealed in the Book of Life tonight as twilight over Viet Nam ushered in the holiest day of the Jewish year.

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, was celebrated here by over 500 soldiers arriving from jungle war zones by helicopter, by truck convoy, by hook or crook. Other services were held in Da Nang and Pleiku.

The men's faces were somber as they stacked their M-16 rifles in the pews of Tan Son Hut chapel and donned prayer shawls. They came in sweat-soaked fatigues and mud-splattered boots. Many brought their war wounds with them and had trouble fitting their skullcaps on heads already covered with gauze.

Capt. Alan Greenspan, one of three Jewish chaplains in Viet Nam, cradled in his arms a photostatic-copy Torah, part of a collapsible Army-issue synagogue kit which he regularly carries to the field for front-line sabbaths.

He is everywhere where they need him, it seems, in battles, in hospitals. And on this day in

their lives were made poignant by the prayer. "On Rosh Hashanah their destiny is inscribed and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many shall pass away and how many shall be brought into existence, who shall live and who shall die?"

The white skullcaps were in short supply because of the unexpected number of worshipers arriving earlier in the day, and local seamstresses were hastily summoned to sew together new ones.

"The first Viet Nameese yarmulkas in history," announced Rabbi Greenspan. Before services began at dusk he stood outside chatting with the first handful of GIs to be greeted from the field.

Two men were killed by sniper fire in the cargo plane that brought sp-4 Robert Freshman, 23, of Oceanside, L.I., to this "sabbath of sabbaths." It took 10 hours for PFC Yoram Stein, of 325 W. 93d St. to make his way down from Cu Chi on a minesweeper convoy.

Some of the men like PFC Mark Scott, of 232 E. 169th St., The Bronx, and PFC Rubin Fidler, of 42-65 Kissena Blvd., Flushing, brought with them their religious anxieties over the war. "Biblically," Greenspan told them, "men of God fought wars. Moses was not only a man of peace, he had to fight battles."

"Why are we here?" asked Stein.

"A Jew in Viet Nam is what he has always been," said the Rabbi, "a fighter and a champion of the rights of man."

"Whose side is God on?"

"God judges all mankind," said Greenspan. "We feel that God's on our side and I believe it."

The men went inside and bowed their heads for the Kol Nidre supplication by Cantor Nathaniel Berman, a 21-year-old PFC, of 25 Lefferts Ave., Brooklyn.

"Hear, oh Israel," he intoned in Hebrew. He hesitated until the ear-splitting roar of a fighter jet droned over the horizon, "the Lord, thy God, the Lord is one."

The men began their fast. It will end at sundown tomorrow with bagels and salami provided by the Jewish Welfare Board. In the morning they will weep at yizkor, the memorial prayer for the souls of Jewish soldiers who have fallen in the war. They will beat their chests as a sign of confession and tomorrow at sundown, as a ram's horn sounds a solitary note over the bleak runways and quonset huts of Tan Son Nhut, the celestial book of accounts will close.

The men will return to the war.