

Post 1-3-72

Skies Still Hot Over North

Pilots Note Heavy Antiaircraft Fire in Raids

ABOARD THE USS CORAL SEA, Jan. 2 (AP)—Navy pilots who participated in the five-day bombing campaign against North Vietnam say it has done little to suppress the enemy's antiaircraft defenses.

"I don't think the bomb damage we inflicted was worth it. Whether we accomplished anything politically I don't know," said Lt. Rusty Scholl, 29, of Bellaire, Tex.

Scholl's roommate aboard the carrier Coral Sea was shot down by a surface-to-air missile and captured inside North Vietnam last Thursday.

A squadron commander who had just returned from a mission over Laos, Cmdr. R.G. Ehrman, 41, of Washington, D.C., said it was "no different" from the strikes he flew against the Ho Chi Minh Trail before U.S. planes struck North Vietnam in force.

"Frankly, I don't know what effect our bombing had, the cloud cover was so thick," he said. "But we're always going to have hot spots out there. I haven't noticed any difference flying over Laos."

Ehrman, a veteran of five combat tours in Indochina, added: "The North Vietnamese used to take their antiaircraft guns away from some areas during the monsoon season, but now they appear to be leaving them in place all year around."

Most pilots aboard the Coral Sea have had more than one duty tour in the war zone. All noted a significant buildup in Hanoi's air defenses since the carrier returned to Yankee Station, off the coast near Danang, three weeks ago.

Lt. Merrill York, a 26-year-old A-7 Corsair pilot from Milwaukee, Wis., agreed that North Vietnam-

ese antiaircraft defenses were still active, but said the recently concluded bombing campaign "had to affect their supply capability. We knocked out a lot."

"Every time we fly over Laos we hurt them some more," he added.

One of the smaller attack carriers in the Tonkin Gulf, the Coral Sea is a never-ending hive of activity. Night and day, bomb-laden jets are catapulted into the sky, returning empty two hours later.

"You lose all track of time," said Lt. Rick Bradley, 25, of Westford, Mass. "When you fly a lot, Sunday is the same as Monday. We fly in Laos and over the gulf, off the North Vietnamese coast."

Many of the pilots on the Coral Sea have friends or acquaintances killed or cap-

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**U.S. Sends
B-52s to Aid
Laos Defense**

SAIGON, Jan. 2 (AP)—U.S. B-52 bombers have been sent over northern Laos to beef up America's air support of Laotian troops resisting a North Vietnamese offensive, military sources disclosed today.

The B-52s were ordered into the area 10 days ago when 15,000 to 20,000 North Vietnamese troops were overrunning the Plain of Jars, the informants said.

American F-4 fighter-bombers were known to have been previously committed to northern Laos. The military sources said the B-52s were summoned when North Vietnamese successes in the Plain of Jars appeared to threaten the guerrilla army of Gen. Vang Pao, based at Long Cheng, north of Vientiane.

Pao's army is backed by the Central Intelligence Agency, which maintained sophisticated electronics equipment at Long Cheng. The equipment has been dismantled as a precautionary move, the sources said.

Four of the 10 American planes which the U.S. Command says were lost over Laos and North Vietnam during the

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Pilots Talk About 5 Days of Bombing

PILOTS, From A1

tured in North Vietnam. But many consider combat missions "the easy part."

"If you've ever had to

make a night landing on a heaving deck you'd know what I mean," said Bradley. "You can never become conditioned to losing friends, but you have to maintain confidence in yourself.

"If any pilot here thought he was going to get launched off a ship and hit by a SAM he wouldn't go."

Ehrman said the "thought of danger is always in the back of a pilot's mind but I don't let myself think about it when flying."

The pilots say flying over Laos is much easier than North Vietnam because there's more cover, the terrain is easy to hide in and the chances of being rescued are better.

"In North Vietnam it's all flat and populated. They can grab you as soon as you come down," said Scholl.

Do they feel that the bombing affects chances of a POW release?

"They can hold the POW threat over our heads for a long time, but I don't think they'd free them if we stopped," said Bradley. "There has to be some action taken somewhere and I guess we're taking it."

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last three weeks of December were flown in support of the CIA-backed army.

The 10 downed planes represented the heaviest tactical aircraft losses suffered by the United States since the bombing halt of Nov. 1, 1968. A total of 13 crewmen were listed as missing while six were rescued. North Vietnam reported it has captured seven of the crewmen and has named two others who it says were killed.

The U.S. Command said today there were no American tactical fighter-bomber or B-52 strikes in South Vietnam, and informants reported that heavy American air attacks were being concentrated in Laos.

These sources said about 400 fighter-bomber strikes and 50 B-52 strategic strikes were flown in Laos yesterday and today against North Vietnamese supply lines leading to several fronts in Indochina and in support of Royal Laotian forces.

The 7th Air Force officially acknowledged that a fourth U.S. plane was shot down by enemy gunners during five days of raids last week over North Vietnam. The acknowledgement came after Radio Hanoi said the plane had been downed and the pilot captured.

The U.S. Command earlier acknowledged the loss of three jets during the raids from Dec. 26 through Dec. 30.

The Air Force said the fourth plane was a light reconnaissance plane shot down Dec. 26 over Laos while directing F-4 Phantoms on bombing strikes. It said announcement was withheld pending completion of a search and rescue operation.