

U.S. Bombing In Viet Exit Is Reported

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By George McArthur
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HONG KONG, June 7—American warplanes conducted heavy bombing raids in South Vietnam on the day of the American evacuation from Saigon, according to authoritative sources. The raids were mounted at least partly from bases in Thailand.

The raids were of such magnitude and sensitivity that they were almost certainly cleared personally by President Ford.

Despite congressional strictures against direct American military involvement in South Vietnam, the raids were ordered April 29, when the evacuation of Saigon was clearly in peril. They were evidently intended to demonstrate conclusively to Hanoi that the United States lacked neither the will nor the strength to protect the evacuation.

"It was a very heavy commitment," said one source with access to official after-action reports.

[White House press secretary Ron Nessen denied today that U.S. planes had conducted any bombing raids in South Vietnam on the last day of the American evacuation from Saigon.

"The National Security Council says it is absolutely not true," Nessen said in response to an inquiry.

(At the Pentagon, Asst. Secretary of Defense Joseph Laitin also denied the report. Laitin said he had checked "with the highest authority"—presumably meaning Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger—and that "it's not true."

(Both officials said U.S. planes had provided tactical air cover during the evacuation of Saigon. According to Nessen, "There was a little firing" by the U.S. planes "but not much."

(Laitin said reports received

by the Pentagon indicate that U.S. planes had dropped two bombs during the evacuation operation—one on an anti-aircraft site near Saigon and the other at a similar installation, about 50 miles away.]

It is not known whether Thailand's agreement was obtained for use of the bases for the raids. Only two weeks later, the Thais protested strongly when the bases were involved as a staging area for Marines flown in to support the Mayaguez response.

The raids, conducted in greatest secrecy, have not become publically known until now because they were directed at military installations in remote areas and because, for reasons of their own, the

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North Vietnamese authorities have not publicized the strikes.

These were the only known bombing strikes by American planes within South Vietnam since the Paris agreements were signed in January 1973.

They were conducted largely against missile sites protecting Communist supply bases deep in jungle areas. These roughly paralleled Communist supply routes along the Laotian and Cambodian borders. Hanoi's seeming re-

luctance to publicize the raids may stem from the fact that the installation of sophisticated radar-directed missiles in these areas was in direct violation of the Paris agreements.

Another possible target was the petroleum pipeline system that North Vietnam had extended well south of the Central Highlands during the period following the Paris agreements. At any rate, the North Vietnamese are known to be having difficulties with the pipeline system—difficulties not evident before the bombing.

It is not known whether any American planes or pilots

were lost or hit during the one-day bombing operation.

On that final day, American authorities announced that jets from the American naval task force off the Vietnamese coast were "covering" the evacuation. These planes were seen in the Saigon area and over the helicopter corridor from Saigon to the South China Sea. On at least one occasion they buzzed a helicopter evacuation site near Saigon that appeared to be threatened. They may also have made few strafing runs on occasions when some American evacuation helicopters did receive ground fire.

However, the widespread bombing raids appear to have been made by Air Force planes from Thailand. These were from the base at Udorn and the main headquarters field at Nakon Phanom.

At that time, American air strength in Thailand totalled about 350 planes, about half of them jet fighter-bombers available for combat.

The raiding aircraft may also have involved swing-wing F-111 aircraft based at Korat, but sources available were unable to confirm this.

It is unclear exactly when

the raids were ordered on April 29.

The first covering planes that came over the coast from the fleet had virtual "no-shoot" orders.

At that time, American Ambassador Graham Martin still held hopes that negotiations might halt the North Vietnamese tanks already on the outskirts of Saigon.

By noon Saigon time, how-

ever, the tension at the American embassy compound in Saigon had notably increased. It was clear that the final evacuation—which had not started in earnest at that time—would be a fiasco if the North Vietnamese decided to use their full military force immediately.

Some sources claim that the Americans and the North Vietnamese, in those last hectic hours, had reached an "understanding" that the evacuation would go off virtually unhindered—as finally proved the case.

By early afternoon, however, military intelligence authorities intercepted an uncoded North Vietnamese communication ordering a bombardment of the Saigon presidential palace by 130-mm. guns already in place around

the capital. The bombardment was to begin at 6 p.m. and would include at least 200 shells.

Some authorities thought the message was a bluff. Others worried that other coded messages might order even heavier bombardments in other parts of the city; and even a barrage against the palace, hardly four blocks from the embassy, would scatter shells over a wide area, since the gunners could not

have established accurate ranges at that time.

A representative of the American embassy was sent immediately to the nearby home of Saigon's one-day president, Gen. Duong Van Minh, the long-time opposition figure who had direct radio contact with the North Vietnamese. What Minh messaged the Communist authorities is unknown but at any rate the barrage did not take place.

Meanwhile, however, the American bombing raids had already been ordered.

Hanoi's reluctance to publicize or protest the bombing raids may be connected with secret exchanges that took place on April 29 and earlier.

In the past, notably in Cambodia, the Communist forces refrained from publicizing American bombing raids although it would have seemed in their interest to do so.