



The New York Times Feb. 22, 1971
 Enemy routed South Vietnamese unit in area (shaded) where Saigon is trying to close off Ho Chi Minh Trail.

On Ho Chi Minh Trail

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 Special to The New York Times

HONG HA HA, Laos, Feb. 21—On the stony spine of a craggy ridge well within the labyrinth of roads and paths that make up the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the Third Regiment of the First South Vietnamese Infantry Division has established its command post.

Two of the principal eastern branches of the trail system wind through the beautiful and desolate mountain landscape. The Thac River winds through the wooded mountains, cutting across the roads and bypasses here and there.

Everywhere there are craters, reminders that until the South Vietnamese, supported by

American air power, drove across the border on Feb. 8 this was the most heavily bombed area of the Indochina war and perhaps of all wars.

But the roads themselves are intact and could be used by the North Vietnamese if the United States Air Force would let them or by the South Vietnamese who are now here if the woods were not full of marauding groups of enemy soldiers.

The contrast between the battered landscape and the well-kept roads indicates the magnitude of the engineering feat that the Ho Chi Minh Trail

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represents even for the worst enemies of the North Vietnamese who built, maintained and used it: the pilots of the United States Air Force who have toiled so hard for so long to close the trail.

A group of fliers chatting about the Ho Chi Minh Trail at a fighter base in Danang spoke admiringly of the speed and daring with which the North Vietnamese and the Laotian laborers they conscripted repaired the roads. Repairs are made even while the planes that assess bomb damage after missions are overhead.

The pilots said that despite the partial cutting of the trail by the South Vietnamese, there has been no letup in the traffic on the remaining branches. The traffic, authoritative Air Force sources said, is heavier this year than it has even been before.

At this time of year the electronic sensors that record the number of vehicles using the trail usually register about 1,000 trucks a day going south or north. But several times in the last two weeks the number has reached 2,000, the sources said.

7,000 Trucks Destroyed

They added that traffic is heavy now because the best part of the dry season is coming to an end and the North Vietnamese always make their maximum effort at that time. Intelligence officers were reported to be telling pilots in briefing that since the South Vietnamese advance to the eastern flank of the trail there has been a significant increase in traffic of its western arteries.

Air Force sources said that so far this dry season their planes and gunships had demolished about 7,000 trucks, which they said puts them 2,000 ahead of the number destroyed by this time last year. The sorties are flown mainly by F-4 Phantom fighter bombers and C-119 gunships based at Danang and elsewhere in South Vietnam and by B-57's and C-130 gunships based in Thailand.

In addition, the enormous B-52's of the Strategic Air Command, based at Utophau, Thailand, are loosing vast quantities of bombs on the trail network.

None of this was apparent today at this fire support base, which houses in addition to the regimental command two batteries of howitzers and one battalion of deeply dug-in troops.

A menacing silence hung over the mountains nine miles south of route 9, the axis of the South Vietnamese push. The two other battalions of the regiment, who are out searching the area for enemy troops

and supplies, have reported no significant contact with the North Vietnamese for two days.

The only fire encountered by a South Vietnamese helicopter on its way to this hilltop was a friendly artillery round that cut across its line of flight and crashed into a hillside.

And yet, despite the calm, doubt seems to hang over the South Vietnamese offensive. A senior American adviser with the First Division said he did not know whether the South Vietnamese would try to make Tchepone, a vital road junction on the trail ahead of the forward units. Until now, Tchepone had been assumed to be a principal objective.

The trail region looked as deserted as it is often said to be by Laotian officials, particularly Premier Souvanna Phouma. But the American pilots who know the area well said they see many little fires at night. They think they are at the places where Montagnards and perhaps the many conscripted laborers who work on the trail live.

The pilots said they never bombed villages "as such," but one, Capt. Dave Krueger of Green Bay, Wisconsin, said:

"Much of the time we can't even see what we're hitting."

Phantoms are capable of speeds of around 500 miles an hour.

Tonight, Captain Krueger and other pilots are spending about five hours in their Phantoms circling the Ho Chi Minh Trail at about 15,000 feet while 6,000 feet below two C-119 gunships are turning their guns and cannons on trucks below.

The fighter bombers' mission is to swoop down on enemy guns that fire on the slow and vulnerable gunships and to destroy them with their bomb loads of about 6,000 pounds. If they have no occasion to attack ground positions, they inquire of ground control what other targets they should strike.

While in the air, they return twice to a tanker plane on station nearby and refuel. Each plane will burn up about 40,000 pounds of fuel tonight.

The war of the Ho Chi Minh Trail goes on, on land as well as in the air. At the First Division command post at Ham Nghi, near Khesanh just inside South Vietnam, American helicopters touch down in ceaseless flow. Few stay long enough to stop their rotors.