

HANOI CHALLENGES AIR POWER OF U.S.

American Officials Troubled
About Growing Threat of

MIG's and Missiles

DEC 20 1971

NYTimes

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Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Dec. 19—The American air war in Indochina has entered a new phase, with direct confrontations between American and North Vietnamese planes.

For more than a year, most of the large-scale bombing campaign that is now the main arm of American combat involvement here has been aimed at trucks on the North Vietnamese supply trails in southern Laos. A smaller but still sizable number of missions is also flown in support of the Laotian troops battling the North Vietnamese on the Plaine des Jarres in northern Laos.

[The United States command refused to comment on North Vietnam's claim that four American planes have been shot down in the last two days, according to an Associated Press dispatch.]

Only in recent months has the enemy started to challenge the bombers over Laos with MIG-21 fighters. The Americans have retaliated in the past with large-scale raids on some airfields in North Vietnam and may do so again on a more massive scale.

Recently Navy and Air Force planes have flown over the airfields in reconnaissance missions of the kind that would precede a bombing attack and yesterday afternoon, according to the American command, a Navy plane on reconnaissance over the MIG airfield at Quan-

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lang in North Vietnam was shot at by two surface-to-air missiles. Both missed. Two other Navy planes retaliated with air-to-ground missiles. The results are not known.

High Air Force officials, who say they would like to continue to diminish the American combat role here and keep pulling planes and closing air bases, have expressed concern about the new threat posed by the MIG-21's and by surface-to-air missiles beyond South Vietnam's borders.

It is clear from these expressions of concern, and from President Nixon's past declarations that what happens on and over the trails will have a decisive effect on his future decisions on troop and equipment withdrawals from Vietnam, that the new phase in the air war could be a crucial one.

Up to now, United States Government agencies in Saigon have tried to hide these developments from public scrutiny. The war is one of the largest but least publicized military operations in history, known to the enemy but not to the American public. The only detailed and specific information on air missions outside Vietnam—all information about MIG's and missiles, for example—comes from pilots, who are not supposed to

talk about them. Some Air Force commanders consented to be interviewed, but most insisted that they should not be quoted or identified.

The focus of the air war has shifted to Laos over the last three years in an effort to restrict the flow of war supplies down the Ho Chiminh trail net-



The New York Times/Dec. 29, 1971
Symbols of planes mark U.S. bases in Southeast Asia

works. Officials say the effort has been 85 per cent effective, even though the American air arm, based in Vietnam, Thailand and on aircraft carriers in the Tonkin Gulf, is now made up of about 450 planes, less than half the number it had here at the peak of the American ground war in 1968.

During the last three months, North Vietnamese MIG-21's have dashed across the border into Laos on more than a dozen occasions. Late last month, one of them fired a missile at a lumbering, eight-engine American B-52 that was dropping bombs on the trail network.

In the last month, also for the first time in the war, the North Vietnamese have brought down American planes flying over Laos or on the border with Soviet-made SAM-2's.

The first downing occurred on Dec. 10, when one of the F-105 fighter-bombers that protect the B-52's was shot down inside Laos by a missile launched from the Mugia Pass across the border in North Vietnam.

Then, a week later, on the night of Dec. 17, a SAM fired from the same area brought down an F-44 escorting an unarmed reconnaissance plane flying South along the border. That one, too, went down inside Laos.

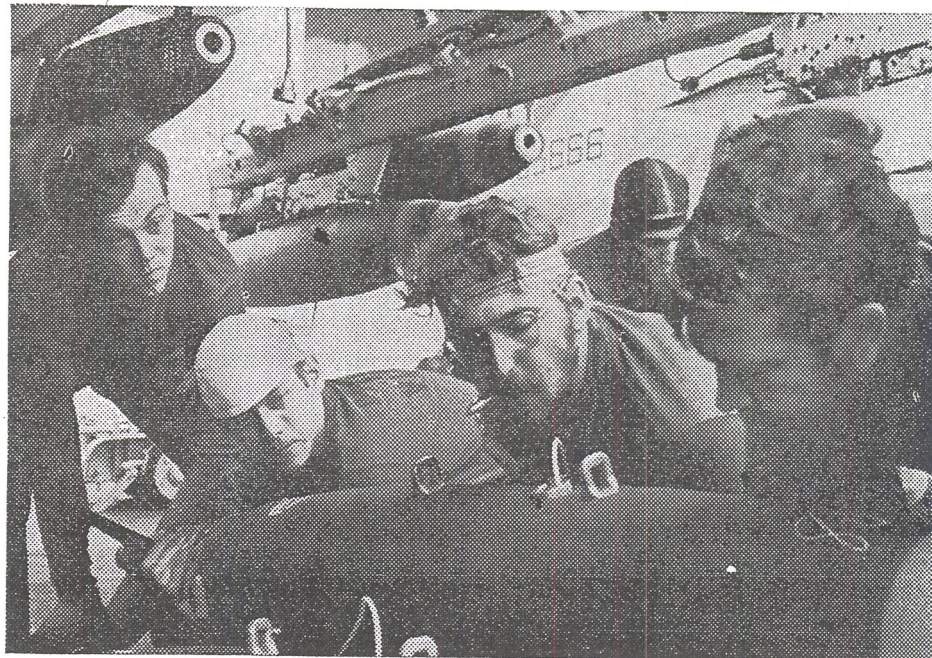
Air Force officials, from the Secretary, Robert C. Seamans Jr., down to fighter pilots, agree that the level of antiaircraft activity over Laos is greater and more effective this year than in the past. They say it is growing more dangerous every day as the North Vietnamese begin

their annual dry-season push down the trails toward Cambodia and South Vietnam.

The push has been somewhat smaller this year because the dry season came late. But even so, pilots interviewed recently said they could spot 100 to 200 trucks a night moving south.

The implications of Hanoi's continued determination to prosecute the war in the South were made explicit by President Nixon at his Nov. 12 news conference.

In announcing then that he would withdraw 45,000 G.I.'s in December and January, he said that future withdrawals would be determined first by the level of enemy activity, particularly on the infiltration routes. He said that if the trail activity continued to mount, "we will not only continue our air strikes, we will have to step them up."



The New York Times/Nancy Moran

Large bombs being loaded aboard an A-6 attack bomber on the carrier Constellation

There will still be 139,500 American soldiers in Vietnam on Feb. 1 under the current withdrawal plan. Included among them are the 31,000 Air Force men stationed in Vietnam but not the 26,000 airmen in Thailand, who fly the planes that do most of the bombing, or the 10,000 Navy men in the one and sometimes two carriers and associated ships in the Tonkin Gulf that are associated with the air war.

They have, as President Nixon said they would, increased the number of missions flown over the trail.

The increased use of the sluggish B-52 bombers seem to explain in part why the North Vietnamese have built up their missile and antiaircraft defenses on their western border, and why they are deploying a handful of MIG-21's occasionally at airfields in the southern part of their country, most often at Baithuong and Quanlang.

According to intelligence officers interviewed at Yankee Station, all the MIG's sighted over Laos have been the advanced MIG-21's carrying air-

to-air missiles. In the one known instance of an attack on a B-52, an incident never officially acknowledged by the United States command here, a MIG popped up near a B-52 formation flying at high altitude, and fired a missile, which missed badly.

American pilots in Danang who sometimes escort the B-52's said they thought the MIG's had never been so "aggressive" and that they would love to have a chance to shoot one down.

On Dec. 3, according to Navy pilots, an Air Force F-4 crew chased a MIG back across the border from Laos and got clearance to shoot at it, but lost sight of it and never attacked. None of this has been reported by the American command in Saigon.

A Navy pilot who flies A-7 attack bombers from the aircraft carrier Constellation said, "There's a lot more antiaircraft fire and SAM's these days, too. We really get hosed down at low altitude and we carry Shrike missiles in case we get a warning that a SAM site is tracking on us or firing."

Intelligence officers on the ship said that six or more SAM-2 missiles have been sighted on mobile launchers that move to different spots along the Laos-North Vietnam border.

Most often, they have been detected around the three mountain entrances of the trail into Laos — the Mugia, Bankari and Banraving passes.

The missiles, with a 30-mile range at 40,000 feet, can easily hit B-52's or escorting planes across the border in Laos, as one of them succeeded in doing to an F-105 on Dec. 10.

The antiaircraft gunsites are more generally scattered all along the principal trail routes and include high-altitude 37-mm. and 23-mm. guns also capable of bringing down jets.

The question remains: what can American military authorities do about these dangers. American forces began bombing North Vietnam in 1964, but President Lyndon B. Johnson halted the regular and sustained "Rolling Thunder" interdiction campaign there in November, 1968. Reconnaissance flights over North Vietnam have been continued since then, and American commanders have installations, and airfields that carry out "hostile actions" against these planes, or against bombers over Laos.

The number of these retaliations, called "protective reactions" by the American command in Saigon, has been mounting. There have been 97 such strikes inside North Vietnam announced so far this year.