

The Ho Trail Is Back

To Normal

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American fighter and observation pilots who fly regularly over the Ho Chi Minh trail report that North Vietnamese traffic is continuing normally along the road network now that the South Vietnamese have wound up their 44-day operation inside Laos.

Pilots of the 130th Tactical Fighter Squadron at the air base here said in interviews that North Vietnamese trucks are driving northward and southward again along the full width of supply trails that were cut by South Vietnamese troops during the invasion of Laos that ended on March 24.

The pilots also said that anti-aircraft fire, which had been diverted away from fighter-bombers against American helicopters supporting the operation, is

See Back Page

From Page 1

"right back to where it was before."

During the South Vietnamese operation, they said, it had become relatively safe "to approach such heavily defended regions as Sepone at low angles, but Sepone is again bristling with large caliber anti-aircraft artillery, the pilots reported.

Forward air controllers of the 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron reported that in the region immediately south of the area of the trail-cutting operation North Vietnamese traffic had, if anything, increased during the ground fighting.

This would indicate that the supply system is so well stocked that there are enough arms, ammunition and other goods in the underground depots along the trail to have sustained heavy traffic during the more than six weeks of fighting, which precluded resupplying of the depots from North Vietnam.

Traffic on the Ho Chi Minh trail does not move in the same truck straight from North Vietnam through Laos into South Vietnam or Cambodia. Many depots line the trails, and each truck usually shuttles up and down the same short stretch of road.

STOCKPILES

Thus, even during the fighting, supplies that were stocked south of the combat area kept moving from the depots into South Vietnam. The only difference the forward observers noted was that during the fighting loaded trucks moved northward for the first time to supply the North Vietnamese troops engaged there.

The fighter pilots said reports that the South Vietnamese operation, called Lam Son 719, had been a failure were wrong as far as they were concerned. For the first time, they said, the Communist troops were massed and brought into the open to offer concentrated targets for bombing.

"During the operation we had some of the most enjoyable flying in a long time," said one of the pilots, Captain Bill Hohwiesner.