

# U.S. Confirms the Loss Of Four Jets Over Laos

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By CRAIG R. WHITNEY DEC 21 1971  
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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Dec. 20—Four United States jet fighter-bombers were shot down over northern Laos this weekend, and the American command here said at least one of them was apparently destroyed in an air-to-air engagement with a North Vietnamese MIG-21 that flew across the border to challenge them.

Hanoi had previously reported the downing of the four planes, but the United States command refused to comment until today's announcement.

The last previous time a fighter-bomber was shot down in air-to-air combat with an enemy MIG was in June, 1968.

According to informed officers, the loss of a plane apparently to a MIG has had an immediate effect on the bombing campaign—the B-52 bombers have been ordered not to fly into areas most threatened by the MIG's.

The command's announcement during the night said that one of the three F-4 Phantom jets that were shot down over Laos in a two-hour period Saturday afternoon was believed to have been downed by a MIG, and that the reasons for

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the loss of the two others were unknown. A fourth Phantom was shot down by anti-aircraft fire along the Laos-North Vietnam border east of the Plaine des Jarres yesterday, the command said.

The loss of three warplanes Saturday afternoon was the heaviest in a single day since December, 1967, at the height of the sustained air war against North Vietnam that was called off in November, 1968. The command delayed its announcement while search and rescue operations were under way for the downed crewmen. Two were safely plucked out of the jungle Sunday afternoon but the six others were declared missing. [North Vietnamese officials in Paris reported the names of four Americans they said were captured when the planes were downed.]

North Vietnamese reaction to continued American bombing of their Ho Chi Minh supply trails in the southern Laos panhandle has been building up for weeks.

## No U.S. Steps Reported

The United States command has not announced any retaliatory actions, which in the past have included strikes by hundreds of airplanes, against the airfields from which the MIGs have been flying, near Hanoi, Haiphong, Quanlang, and Baihuong. Bad weather has hampered air operations over North Vietnam for the last two days.

Indications have been growing for weeks that North Vietnamese MIG activity was becoming more intense. In late October and early November, the Communists improved three airfields in the southern part of



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Cross indicates general area where the U.S. jets were believed shot down.

the country and shortly afterward began deploying a total of about a dozen of the supersonic fighters to them occasionally.

Then, for the first time in the war, they began crossing into Laos, occasionally making passes at American warplanes over the trail and, in late November, one of them fired an air-to-air missile at a B-52, but missed.

According to the command's spokesmen, the aircraft downed over the weekend were all flying missions in support of ground operations on the Plaine des Jarres when they were shot down.

No precise location was given but the Jets were thought to have gone down east of the Plaine des Jarres, 100 miles southwest of Hanoi.

North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops have mounted heavy attacks against American-supported Royal Laotian forces on

the plain, and over the weekend they overran the town of Muong Soui.

The North Vietnamese said that they shot down four aircraft over the weekend but asserted it happened in North Vietnam—three of the planes in Nghean Province, which is east of the area where the United States command says the planes crashed, and the other in Vinhphu Province, northeast of Hanoi.

Command spokesmen said that all the bombers "were down in Laos," but other authoritative sources said it was quite possible, given the speed and the range of the supersonic Phantoms, that they might have been hit over Laos but went down in North Vietnam, or even at sea.

"We know one of them may have been attacked by a MIG," one military officer with authority to speak for the command said. "But we're not too sure about the others. It looks like they were shot down in Laos, and there definitely was a MIG in the air there."

In the mounting air action, on Sunday afternoon, the command said, an Air Force F-105 fighter-bomber flying over Laos fired a missile across the border at a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft radar site 90 miles southwest of Hanoi because the radar was tracking the plane.

Saturday afternoon, a Navy plane on reconnaissance mission over North Vietnam was the target of two Soviet-built SAM-2 surface-to-air missiles fired from sites near the MIG airfield at Quanlang, in Nghean Province. The aircraft was not hit, according to the command.