

Unused Airplanes Captured on Ground

By George C. Wilson
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South Vietnamese commanders held back their air force, fourth largest in the world, to save planes—only to have the North Vietnamese capture hundreds of them on the ground.

American intelligence officials estimated yesterday that at least 200 to 300 helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft have been captured so far—some of them all ready to fly.

Lost along with the aircraft is the weaponry that goes with them—millions of dollars in bombs, napalm and other munitions. The Danang air field, captured by the North Vietnamese, was a giant storehouse for

their munitions and aircraft spare parts.

Yet, as far as Pentagon sources can determine, the full power of the Vietnamese air force has never been unleashed during the Easter offensive that threatens to bring down the Saigon government.

U.S. Air Force leaders—including Gen. David C.

Jones, chief of staff, and Gen. John W. Vogt Jr., who worked with the Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) as the last U.S. Air Force commander in Vietnam—offered two explanations.

Jones said that before the North Vietnamese launched their current offensive, VNAF commanders held back from bombing enemy

supply centers and other targets in South Vietnam for fear of losing aircraft the United States would not replace.

Vogt, who is now commander-in-chief of U.S. air forces in Europe, said in a telephone interview yesterday from his headquarters in Ramstein, Germany, that the VNAF did not centralize control, as the U.S. Air Force did in Vietnam, but divided it up among four different ground commanders.

With that kind of split control, Vogt said, "you have problems."

Jones' comments about holding back on bombing enemy targets were made

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U.S. Viet Diplomacy 'Futile'

The Ford administration acknowledges that all diplomatic attempts to halt the onrush of Communist forces in South Vietnam "have been futile so far." The President's press secretary concedes that no U.S. diplomatic initiatives in Vietnam are currently under way.

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before the Senate Armed Services Committee in February when the Communist buildup in South Vietnam was under way. He said South Vietnam's air commanders are reluctant to expose themselves to some

of the area because they are concerned about attrition."

He added, however, that the South Vietnamese pilots he had visited during a recent tour had the desire to get into those areas."

Air Force officers said the decision of when and where to bomb is not under any single commander in South Vietnam because President Nguyen Van Thieu has been determined to prevent another political rival from emerging from the air force command, as did Gen. Nguyen Cao Ky.

Thieu gave the ground commanders of the four separate military regions of South Vietnam partial control of the air force. Each commander was in charge of the aircraft based in his military region—meaning all four would have to agree be-

fore the full power of the Vietnamese air force could be concentrated on one target.

Vogt unsuccessfully pressed Saigon government officials while he was in Vietnam to adopt the single commander system of the U.S. Air Force.

He said yesterday that he does not have enough information about the Easter offensive to theorize what problems the split command of Vietnam's air force may be causing the defenders. But the general added that under such a setup there are inherent difficulties.

Also, Vogt said of the VNAF, "They are a young air force," and one without sophisticated fighter-bombers like the F-4.

Vogt said the VNAF does not have the electronic aircraft defenses that the U.S. Air Force used while in Vietnam to foil North Vietnamese anti-aircraft guns and missiles.

As a result, the general said, the relatively unsophisticated F-5 and A-37 warplanes the South Vietnamese fly had to go up against "sophisticated" air defenses that Hanoi sent into the south.

The combination of American and Vietnamese air power, Vogt said, turned back the Communist Easter offensive of 1972.

Under former President Nixon's Vietnamization program, the VNAF was supposed to grow to a force of about 62,000 men, 60 squadrons and 2,000 aircraft—half of them helicopters.

Also, under the 1973 peace treaty, the United States was allowed to replace any aircraft the Vietnamese lost—thus preserving the ranking of the VNAF as the fourth largest air force in the world in terms of sheer numbers of aircraft, though not striking power.

Before the Easter offensive, the VNAF never achieved the strength envisioned by Air Force planners because of lack of replacement, maintenance and spare parts problems and combat losses.