

Hanoi Overflights

—The Secret War

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HONG KONG—In the months just before the American evacuation of Saigon, a cloak-and-dagger air war went on over North Vietnam, involving U.S. spy flights and Soviet-supplied anti-aircraft missiles.

The details of this struggle over Hanoi remain secret. The general outlines, however, have been confirmed by several American officials. None, perhaps, was aware of the full story but they agreed on the essential points.

The struggle revolved around American reconnaissance flights by the SR-71, the super spy plane that flies so high and so fast that it had never been threatened by the missiles at Hanoi's disposal. The Soviet Union had long given tacit recognition to the existence of these flights.

After the Paris agreements of 1973, the United States cut back sharply on such spy flights. In turn, the Soviet Union, which had always played a significant role in Hanoi's air defenses and had kept technical experts on the scene, imposed a veto of North Vietnamese use of missiles against the spy flights that did take place. Hanoi had few missiles at the time—having fired almost all they had previously in B-52 raids that preceded the Paris agreements.

In December of 1974, as North Vietnam's military buildup aroused ever greater apprehension in some intelligence circles, the SR-71 flights were increased. This apprehension became more pronounced after the battles in

January which resulted in the loss of Phuoclong Province to fresh North Vietnamese troops, who were evidently getting into position to threaten Saigon itself.

At this time, the chief of staff of the Soviet armed forces, Gen. V. G. Kulikov, visited Hanoi. Official sources claim to have information that Kulikov removed restraints on the use of Soviet anti-aircraft missiles. The number of missiles had been greatly built up after the Paris agreements and the old "flying telephone poles" had been improved with modifications. Kulikov's visit was followed by another ranking Soviet visitor—Deputy Foreign Minister Nikolai Firyubin, who confirmed earlier military agreements.

The SR-71 flights began to take on new patterns. Normally, the plane operates at altitudes higher than 12 miles. However, some flights, according to one official, now dropped down to levels close to the plane's margin of safety from missiles.

The purpose apparently was to tempt the North Vietnamese into disclosing missile locations. The highly sophisticated SR-71 also could have obtained valuable information on electronic defenses on occasions when the North Vietnamese turned on their radar and other electronic gadgetry connected with the missiles.

It is not known whether any missiles were actually fired at the SR-71s. The planes did, however, get a lot of electronic intelligence, it was learned.