

Probe of Reported U.S. Air Attacks

By George McArthur
Los Angeles Times

Washington

After the traumatic evacuation of Saigon ten weeks ago, The Los Angeles Times published a story quoting an unnamed American official as saying American planes from Thailand had engaged in a last round of bombings in South Vietnam.

The story was denied in unequivocal terms by both the White House and the Pentagon.

The Times story of June 8 said a significant number of planes from Thailand made bombing raids in South Vietnam on the day the Americans were being evacuated from Saigon. The story said the raids almost certainly had White House approval since they challenged congressional strictures on military operations and were additionally certain to increase the wrath of already sensitive Thai authorities.

The Times, after a lengthy investigation, now believes that parts of that story were wrong and other parts of that story were wrong and other parts open to question.

(In Los Angeles, Times editor William F. Thomas said the June 8 story "never should have been published, in light of the strong denials, without further checking.

("The reporter (McArthur) had every reason to believe his source, who was in a position to know and who had not been wrong before, but we here should have alerted McArthur that the specific nature of the denials demanded more investigation," Thomas said.

("That alert was not deliv-

ered, McArthur was left out on a limb, and the blame is entirely the Times' for publishing what appears to be at least a misleading story.")

The large number of military, diplomatic and intelligence officials contacted in Washington almost unanimously support the White House and Pentagon denials. The Times is convinced that the White House did not know of any significant bombing raids that day and certainly did not order them. It is equally convinced, however, that a great deal happened that day that the White House did not know about.

The Times' principal source was an official who had no reason to mislead, had been candid in the

past and was in a position to have a great deal of information across a broad range of activities. He relied in part on information from other people. In this case these people included American officers who dealt with military matters of top security. These officers had photos of bomb damage in the Saigon area, around Cam Ranh Bay, near the airbase town of Phan Rang and in the large base area some 100 miles above Saigon where the Communist Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) was headquartered.

These officers were speaking of American planes — though they could have been confused by the last-day operations of the South Vietnamese Air Force. They related that the Americans who flew that day were under orders not to shoot unless they were shot at; but these officers said it was common knowledge among pilots that day that "they would not be judged too strictly."

The Pentagon will not reveal the precise "rules of engagement" applied that day on the grounds that similar situations might arise again at some time in the future and that potential enemies might find such knowledge useful. The Pentagon says, however, that the orders "clearly limited the expenditure of ordnance to circumstances of self defense. No offensive operations were authorized and none conducted."

On that day American Air Force planes and helicopters from bases in Thailand flew about 200 sorties as "cover" for the evacuation of Saigon (naval jets from carriers in the South China sea were also in the air in force). Of the Air Force sorties, 125 were by tactical jets — loaded with rockets and bombs.

The Pentagon stated that this armada "expended ordnance" on only a few relatively insignificant occasions that day.

There was one helicopter strafing attack near the Saigon oil depot at Nha Be and a bombing raid by two Phantom jets near Bien Hoa in which four bombs were dropped, according to the Pentagon.

The Pentagon version is borne out indirectly by the silence from North Vietnamese sources. Hanoi has never publicly complained of any bombing on that last day.