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Another War: In the Skies Over Indochina

By HERBERT MITGANG

WASHINGTON—Fifteen years ago Graham Greene's English correspondent in "The Quiet American" strolled down Rue Catinat toward the Saigon waterfront and observed, "I could see lamps burning where they had disembarked the new American planes."

There has been one slight change since that time, shortly after the French made a dying effort to hang onto their colonial empire in Southeast Asia. Rue Catinat has been renamed Tu Do. It celebrates no famous victory by the ARVN, nor the success of the new American policy of Vietnamization, but only a vain touch of independence by the Republic of South Vietnam.

The role of American planes in Greene's novel—which took place during the years of official Washington brinkmanship in the 1950's—is recalled again because of the stepped-up air action over Vietnam in the weeks since Vice President Agnew's visit. And for a more important reason now: the reconnaissance, strafing by gunships and high-altitude bombing, added together, amount not to de-escalation but deeper involvement in all the shaky negotiations that once made up French Indochina.

Although President Nixon's foreign affairs report to Congress last month said that "our tactical air and B-52 operations have been reduced by 25 per cent," the half-hidden air war beyond the borders of South Vietnam has actually widened. United States Air Force, Army, Marine and Navy warplanes are on operations from the Gulf of Siam to the Gulf of Tonkin.

Overt and Covert War

Last month there was an admitted average of between 250 and 300 sorties (one aircraft over one target) every day. Not discussed openly, however, were the sorties originating within Laos against the North Vietnamese there. The B-52 bombings on the Plaine des Jarres are acknowledged but the lesser-known activities of transports and helicopters belonging to Air America and Continental Air Services, for the Agency for International Development and the Central Intelligence Agency, also entangle the United States in this twilight war.

Despite the announced bombing cutback, about 100,000 tons of bombs are dropped in an average month. B-52's take off from Thailand or make the long round-trip flight of over ten hours from Guam. The mean-

ing of this heavy bombing can be put in perspective by comparing it with the 500,000 tons dropped in the Pacific Theatre during all of the Second World War. When the total tonnage dropped in the Pacific theater Vietnam alone is added up, it exceeds by far the weight of all the bombing on every front against Japan and Germany.

Neither strafing by helicopter gunships nor attacks by fighter-bombers have been milk runs; more than 1,300 fixed-wing planes and nearly 1,500 helicopters have been lost over North and South Vietnam. Accidents and losses on the ground due to enemy action have accounted for another 1,600 planes and 1,900 helicopters. More important than the billions of dollars are the thousands of casualties involved.

At the Pentagon, the phrase often heard for the use of greater aerial firepower is "pre-emptive attack." Troop concentrations have been hit along the hundreds of miles of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos and on the infiltration routes within Cambodia. To an extent, reconnaissance and bombing in these "neutral" countries and deep across the border of North Vietnam have helped to prevent major of-

fensives against American and ARVN positions.

But the aerial incursions have heightened the military dangers. This has happened recently in North Vietnam—despite the so-called bombing halt in the Hanoi area. Reconnaissance plane losses have led, inevitably, to fighter escorts. How much combat is taking place in surface-to-air missile and MIG country is not mentioned in official communiqués.

Subject to Interpretation

Another phrase—Secretary of Defense Laird's "protective reaction"—is subject to a variety of interpretations at the Pentagon. "If you find out what it means," smiled a veteran pilot of the Vietnam skies, "let us know." He and others surmised that it could be stretched to mean retaliatory strafing and bombing almost anywhere in North Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

The familiar scenario of the Vietnam war calls up lines by another Englishman, Lord Byron, who wrote: "This is the patent age of new inventions/For killing bodies and for saving souls,/All propagated with the best intentions."

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