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Sensors Don't Bleed

By HERBERT MITGANG

WASHINGTON—At the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, Henry V's longbows helped to "stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood," and carry the day against the French. Through the centuries, the distance has continued to widen between warriors, until now in our own time proxy war is carried out by sophisticated weapons—and by Vietnamization.

In the Battle for the Ho Chi Minh Trail in 1972, electronic technology and computers many unseen miles away will order American gunships and bombers to deliver what Shakespeare called "the blast of war" against North Vietnamese trucks and porters carrying supplies through the network of jungle trails.

Christmas and New Year may bring a temporary respite; later Tet, the lunar New Year, will punctuate the landscape of war with unreal truce. Then the scouting and shooting will continue again. Despite the announced withdrawals, some 200,000 Americans will be involved as another year of war closes. Aside from the ground troops who depart with televised fanfare, there are the seldom-mentioned 13,000 Navy men on carriers and other ships off South Vietnam and 26,000 Air Force men in Thailand.

The end of the monsoon season means intensification of what airmen at the Pentagon call the "interdiction season." From now till early May on the dried terrain, North Vietnamese trucks and bicycles and foot soldiers will be on the move into Laos and Cambodia, storing their arms and food and energies for expected attacks in South Vietnam.

In response, picking up signals relayed from the Trail, an I. B. M. 360-65 computer at the Air Force's Infiltration Surveillance Center in Thailand fixes targets and sends forth printouts as impersonally as next month's bills. Then strike orders go out to American fliers at ground bases and on Seventh Fleet carriers. Without their blocking and destroying missions, there could be no Vietnamization.

The "electronic battlefield" is the method of substituting keen sound and seismic devices for visible and endangered human patrols that lead to casualty lists. These man-sized hearing aids are dropped along the three main passes in the Laotian out-country through which the North Vietnamese infiltrate. Camouflaged, they hang suspended in trees or self-planted in the ground, giving off signals. Each of these devices has a signature location; its signals are picked up whenever anyone on the Trail walks by or trucks are vibrating. A drone aircraft relays and processes information along the "bugged" passes.

Meanwhile, back at the computer, still more sophisticated tasks are performed. Patterns are determined and planes are told where to release their bombloads. These may be "smart bombs," laser or TV-guided, or dumber conventional ones that can still obliterate an area and every living person or animal in it. Airmen at the Pentagon, veterans of the war against the Trail, put great faith in sensors so delicate they can reveal whether a man is carrying a rifle.

The "body count" has been replaced by the "truck count," though no official mention is made of occupants or a "truck driver count." Air Force sources say that in the dry season in 1969, one of every three tons of war supplies got through; that last year only one out of ten tons evaded the bombers. The claim is made that 14,000 trucks have been "killed" this year, but a Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff report discounts this figure by 30 per cent and other sources believe that, live or dead, there are not this number of trucks in North Vietnam. But the battles go on with the help of American firepower above Laos and in Cambodia.

In the continuing war in the air over four nations in Southeast Asia, there is little doubt that the combination of cunning electronic sensors and skillful American fliers fighting an equally courageous and respected enemy has staved off the supplies needed for major battles in South Vietnam.

The automated death that continues —"wiring down the war," the Washington Monthly called it—is costly and covert. Senator William Proxmire, the Wisconsin Democrat, says that the "electronic battlefield" program so far has cost $3.25 billion. He questions "mindless applications of new technology just because it exists." And he adds, "if this system has been so effective in disrupting enemy supply lines, why are we now engaged in the support of South Vietnamese ground operations designed to disrupt those same supply lines?"

Pentagon planners, under orders to lower the casualty rate though not necessarily the American involvement supporting Vietnamization during the Presidential season, regard the sensors standing silent vigil as crucial in the Trail war. "That thing," a command pilot said, referring to a sensor, "can work twenty-four hours a day, it can't tell anything if captured, it doesn't bleed, and if it dies out there in the jungle, you don't have to write a letter home to the wife or parents."

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