

Carrier Pilots Off Vietnam Still Eager for Action

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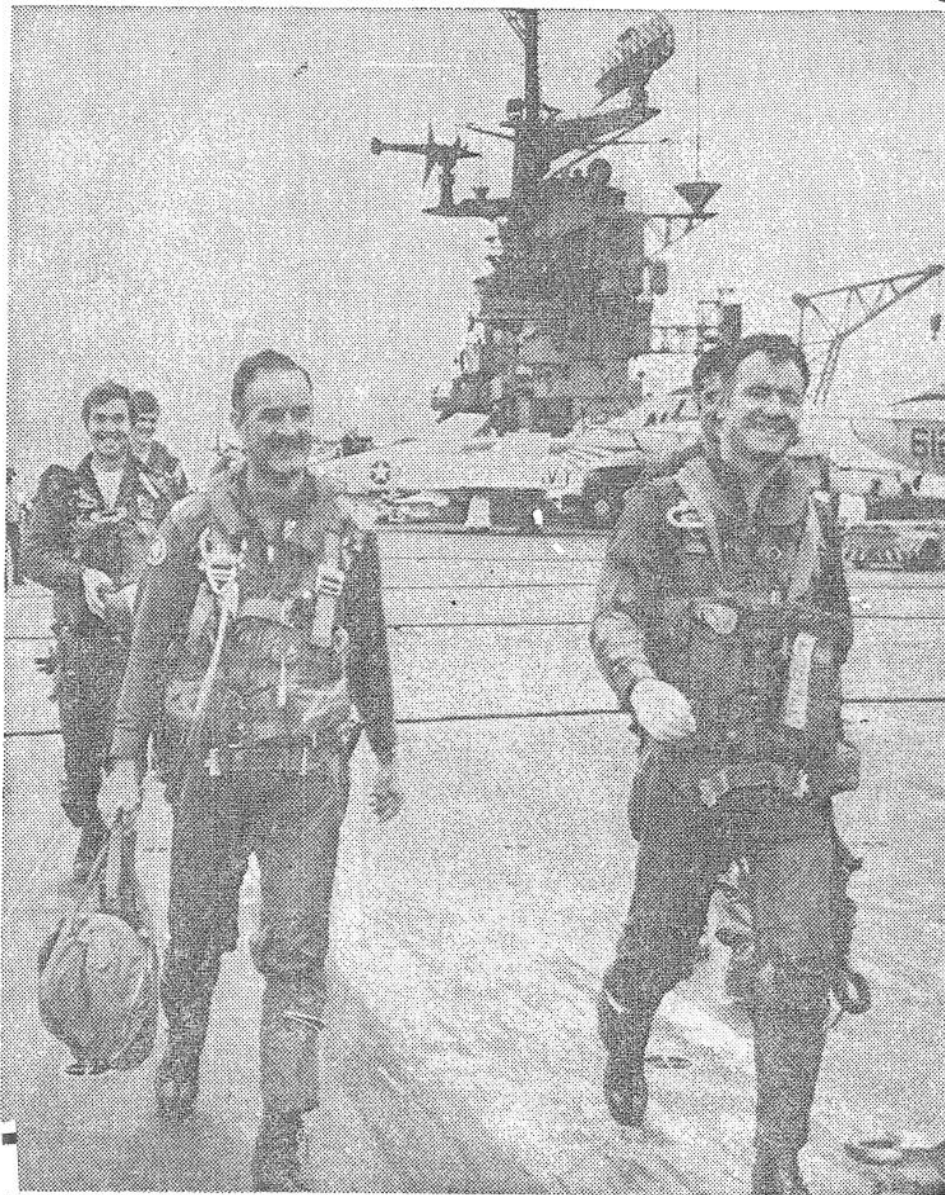
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ABOARD U.S.S. CORAL SEA, in the South China Sea, Jan. 7, —The Indochina war and its complexities seem far away from this thousand-foot-long floating air base. What matters to the hundred or so pilots aboard is not the policies of Washington and Hanoi but years of training for and masculine pride in a dangerous and exacting profession.

It all comes together at the moment of unimaginable power and speed when a jet plane is catapulted off the deck and streaks westward toward the coast 60 miles away with more than two tons of bombs and rockets slung under its wings for targets on the Ho Chi Minh trail and sometimes for North Vietnam.

"Whatever our feelings about the war, we're still out here and we're still dropping our bombs—and we enjoy it," said Lieut. (jg.) D. L. Mendenhall, a 24-year-old bombardier-navigator on an F-4 Phantom.

The pilots of this carrier and the two other flattops of the United States Seventh Fleet and those at air bases in Thailand and South Vietnam are the last real fighters of the dwindling American force in Indochina. From indications here and in Washington, they will play an increasingly important and dangerous role, for President



F-4 Phantom pilots on carrier Coral Sea in the Tonkin Gulf, off coast of North Vietnam

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HANOI IDENTIFIES PRISONERS: Photo just released by North Vietnam shows identification cards of Capt. Lawrence Gene Stolz and First Lieut. Dale Francis Koons, whose plane was reportedly shot down over Thanhhoa on Dec. 26. Branch of armed forces is unknown. A revolver, a phrase book and a survival manual are also displayed.

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Nixon has repeatedly declared that American air power will continue to be used to protect the remaining United States Forces as well as the program of turning the burden of the fighting over to the South Vietnamese.

At Least 4 Jets Lost

That policy was underscored during the five days after Christmas, when Navy and Air Force jets flew raid after raid against North Vietnamese airfields, antiaircraft sites and supply depots. The raids cost at least four American jets, one from the Coral Sea. Only one of the eight pilots who went down was rescued.

Few of the fliers on this ship want to go through such raids again.

"It was sheer insanity," said a Phantom navigator who did not want to give his name. "The clouds were so solid we couldn't see the ground, but the SAMs could still see us."

Other pilots reflected the widely held view that the bombing was not successful because of poor timing and bad weather. "It was a farce," one of them remarked.

Despite President Nixon's recent statement that the United States would have to keep open the possibility of air strikes against the North Vietnamese, most of the Coral Sea's pilots believe that their task will be to bomb enemy supply trucks on the less well-defended Ho Chi Minh Trail system in Laos.

"Everyone is looking for more action, but nobody wants to get

shot at," said Lieut. David Palmer, 27, an Annapolis graduate from Hackettstown, N.J., who pilots a Phantom.

A few of the fliers had tours of duty in the period from 1966 to 1968, when the United States regularly bombed the North. None want to go back to that.

"In the old days if you came back out you'd say, 'Well, hello again,'" Lieut. Cmdr. James Burton Souder related. The 31-year-old executive officer of a Phantom squadron recalled daily flights over areas infested with antiaircraft batteries.

Despite the dangers they still face over the less heavily defended Ho Chi Minh Trail, the pilots compete fiercely for a chance to fly. Asked why they are so eager, they explain that it is fun to fly and that flying is what they were trained for.

"We fly because we like it," said Lieut. Merrill York, 26, the pilot of an A-7 bomber. "It's exciting and challenging, and that's what we're trained to do."

"It borders on an ego trip most of the time," Lieutenant Palmer, the Phantom pilot, said. "You've got to be an aggressive, confident guy to do this job."

Commander Souder asked, "Does it do any good?" He answered himself: "Nah!"

"Do we drop some bombs?" he continued. "Yeah. Do we burn a few trucks. Yeah. But it won't make any difference after we've left."

Another pilot commented: "I think history will show that we should never have been over here. I would rather be in San

Diego in a state of readiness for a war that might in some way be justified."

Then with a rush of pride, he said: "But we're doing a damn good job of the dirty job we've got to do."

Several of the crewmen acknowledged that they had to juggle doubts about the effectiveness of the bombing and their role in the war with their affection for the Navy and for flying. The conflict does not seem to be quite resolved one way or the other.