

# U.S. Decides to Bar Some Data On Aircraft Involved in Bombing

By FOX BUTTERFIELD  
Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Wednesday, March 8—Amid reports of continuing heavy American air strikes on North Vietnam, the United States command here said today that it would no longer disclose information on the number of American aircraft involved in the raids.

Col. Phillip H. Stevens, the chief of the command's information office, said that the change had been ordered because "to continue to reveal the number of aircraft would be useful to the enemy and endanger the lives of U.S. pilots."

In what was reportedly the biggest air battle in Indochina in three years, American jets yesterday engaged five MIG jets 170 miles north of the demilitarized zone, shooting down one of the enemy planes.

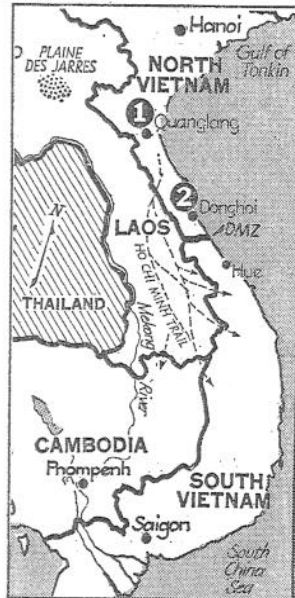
Other United States planes carried out six bombing raids, described as "protective reaction" strikes, on North Vietnamese antiaircraft and missile-radar sites yesterday. All the planes returned safely to their bases, the United States command reported, although the Hanoi radio contended that two of the jets had been shot down.

### 86 Raids This Year

The strikes — labeled "protective reaction," meaning that the American pilots believed they were going to be attacked by antiaircraft or missiles—brought the number of raids on North Vietnam this year to 86, equal to the total for all 1971. Twenty of the strikes have come in the last six days.

Change in policy, coupled with the intensification of the air war in the last week, prompted speculation in Saigon that the command may be planning a stepped-up bombing campaign against North Vietnam similar to the five-day bombing last Christmas.

The North Vietnamese Army newspaper, Quan Dai Nhan Dan, charged that during the raids last week, civilian areas had been heavily damaged and that "many civilians, mostly women, children and old people" had



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A major air clash was reported over Quanglang (1). American bombers struck near Donghoi (2).

been injured.

Since 1964, when American bombing of North Vietnam began, the command has never announced exact statistics on the total number of American planes involved in a particular raid, but has given only the number of missions.

### Newsmen Deduced Number

A mission may consist of one or more aircraft. However, American officers have usually told newsmen "for background" that is, not for attribution—the number of planes flown in a given mission over North Vietnam, enabling the newsmen to deduce the total number involved.

In making the change today, Colonel Stevens said that officers would no longer even be allowed to give the number of missions flown over North Vietnam by fighter planes when they make "protective reaction" strikes.

The command does not announce the number of missions flown in bombing strikes against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos or against targets in Cambodia.

Colonel Stevens said that he

had made the change in policy. "I have sufficient latitude to operate in this matter," he said in reply to a question about how he could deny information on the bombing of North Vietnam.

### MIG Reported Downed

Yesterday's dogfight began, the command said, when an unarmed Navy RF-888 reconnaissance aircraft and its F-4 Phantom fighter escorts were fired on by North Vietnamese anti-aircraft guns and were attacked by surface-to-air missiles and four MIG-17's and one MIG-21 over the Quanglang airfield.

The enemy jets fired at least two air-to-air missiles at the American planes, the command said, and the Phantoms responded with six missiles, one of them hitting a MIG-17 and sending it crashing into a hillside. Meanwhile, the command reported, Navy A-7 and A-6 fighter-bombers conducted a "protective reaction" strike against the antiaircraft and missile sites.

The other bombing raids were carried out in the vicinity of Donghoi, the first major North Vietnamese city above the demilitarized zone.

American officials have said that the raids are necessary because the North Vietnamese have been moving their radar and missile batteries closer to the DMZ to protect supplies moving south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

### Policy Change Denied

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WASHINGTON, March 7—A Pentagon spokesman said today that he knew of no change in the policy of announcing the number of planes that take part in strikes in North Vietnam.

Since late 1968, the spokesman said, the United States has announced instances when a reconnaissance plane was fired at and its escorts fired back. But the number of planes, as a matter of policy, has not been revealed, he said.

The exception, he added, has been in the case of several large "reinforced protective reaction" air strikes, where the number of planes in each case has been given after the termination of the raids.