

Bombing Ho Chi Minh Trail Is Harder

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Defenses Bolstered

NYTimes
By CRAIG R. WHITNEY

Special to The New York Times

DANANG, South Vietnam, March 19—“The bad guys have gone 20th century,” the young Air Force pilot said. He was still shaken by a barrage that North Vietnam antiaircraft gunners on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos had aimed at his small observation plane.

First Lieut. Robert Schur of Bricktown, N.J., had brought his twin-engine OV-10 Bronco back unscathed to Danang, the largest remaining American air base in Vietnam, but he was concerned about the heavy fire and his concern is shared by senior United States commanders in Vietnam.

The officers say that the North Vietnamese are defending their infiltration and supply routes in southern Laos with more determination and imagination than ever before, and counterattacking more effectively, with more up-to-date weapons, the American aircraft that range over them every day.

Until late 1970, the American bombers that drop hundreds of tons of bombs on the North Vietnamese truck traffic, supply dumps and antiaircraft sites on

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3 U.S. Airmen Rescued in Battle in Laos

NYTimes

By The Associated Press

MAR 20 1972

SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 19—More than 50 United States planes attacked enemy troops for 24 hours to cover the rescue today of three downed American airmen on the Ho Chi Minh Trail network in southern Laos.

American officials said that two Air Force planes had been shot down—the one that touched off the rescue operation and a second downed just after the operation began.

One of the rescued airmen, Capt. Stephen L. Boretsky, 29 years old, of Bristol, Tenn., said that the American planes

covering the rescue had been dropping bombs so close to him that he had “felt the sharpnel falling from the air bursts.”

Another, First Lieut. David G. Breskman, 24, of Villanova, Pa., narrowly avoided capture by killing an enemy soldier with a .38-caliber revolver.

“I was trying to find a hiding place,” Lieutenant Breskman said at his base in Thailand. “I saw him coming and I just sat real still and watched him come.”

“He kept coming closer and closer and when he got where I

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Associated Press

Aboard copter, Capt. Stephen L. Boretsky drinks from canteen after being rescued from the Laotian jungle.

THREE U.S. AIRMEN RESCUED IN LAOS

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couldn't miss, I fired. He was about 10 feet away. I fired four shots. He didn't fire at me," he continued.

"He was wearing a khaki uniform. He didn't look like a guerrilla. He was about my age. I was in my camouflaged flying suit and this is hard to see. I was hoping he would go away, then I wouldn't have to worry about him. I didn't know he was alone."

Copters Driven Back

Air Force officers said rescue helicopters had been driven back twice by heavy anti-aircraft artillery and small-arms fire before one lifted the two airmen to safety through 150-foot trees by means of a ladder called a jungle penetrator.

The third pilot, who was taking part in the rescue, was recovered almost immediately after his propeller-driven A-1 fighter-bomber was shot down. He was not identified.

All three were reported in good condition. Lieutenant Breskman suffered a sprained ankle.

Air Force four-engine C-130 transport planes, refitted for use as gunships with television and infrared night-sighting devices circled above Captain Boretzky and Lieutenant Breskman through the night laying down protective fire.

The two airmen hid from surrounding enemy troops. Throughout the night Lieuten-

ant Breskman, using his pocket radio, directed the gunships and fighter-bombers onto the enemy positions around him.

Air Force officers said the area, near Route 23 about 40 miles southwest of Tchepone was filled with anti-aircraft artillery.

Captain Boretzky and Lieutenant Breskman were shot down shortly before noon yesterday in their OV-10 light reconnaissance plane while flying low-level spotting missions for jet fighter-bombers along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, North Vietnam's supply line to the south.

Carrier Planes Diverted

Navy planes from the Seventh Fleet carriers were diverted from planned strikes against the trail network in efforts to suppress the enemy fire during the rescue operation.

The loss of the two planes raised to 8,137 the number of United States aircraft reported lost in the Indochina war since Jan. 1, 1961.

The Saigon command, meanwhile, disclosed additional details on the fourth major battle last week in an area between Hue and the Ashau Valley in the northern quarter of South Vietnam.

Headquarters said 42 South Vietnamese soldiers had been wounded in a 300-round mortar barrage and a ground assault by as many as 800 North Vietnamese troops yesterday against positions around Fire Base Bastogne, 19 miles southwest of Hue. The Saigon command said 180 North Vietnamese troops had been killed in the daylong fighting.

Also in the northern sector, South Vietnamese infantrymen reported killing 19 enemy soldiers in a series of clashes about 25 miles south of Danang. One South Vietnamese soldier was killed, the command said.



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U.S. rescued three pilots in southern Laos (cross). Flier's say enemy's defense of infiltration and supply route in Laos has been vastly improved.

THE NEW YORK TIMES, M

Bombing of Ho Chi Minh Trail Grows More Perilous

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the twisting dirt roads of the trail went largely unchallenged, except in the critical mountain passes at the entrance to the trail.

But then the enemy began to fire surface-to-air missiles across the border at the bombers over Laos. With the advent of this year's dry season, the firings became more frequent and significant numbers of missile launchers and heavy-caliber automatic antiaircraft guns were moved farther south along the trail and deeper inside Laos than before.

The enemy has also been more aggressive in challenging American reconnaissance planes flying over Laos, and has counter-attacked vigorously when United States aircraft have flown north of the demilitarized zone to attack long-range guns and airfields for MIG-21 fighters, which also began challenging American air power over Laos for the first time late last year.

The change in the air war over Laos, where the majority of all American missions are flown daily, was put this way by First Lieut. Ray Noftinger of Roanoke, Va., a forward air controller: "The air defenses out there are so heavy now that there are certain areas we just don't fly in. We just don't have unchallenged air superiority any more in some parts of Laos."

More and More Difficult

Neither the forward air controllers nor the fighter-bomber pilots at Danang believe that their effectiveness has deteriorated yet, but they say it is becoming more and more difficult for them to operate over Laos.

Informed officers say that these developments have made it difficult to continue reducing the size of the American air effort, as long as one of its prime objectives continues to be buying time for South Vietnamese and Cambodian forces at the southern end of the Communist trail system and to allow American troops to withdraw.

American air power in Southeast Asia is about half the size it was at the height of United States involvement in 1968 and 1969. The cutback has been most visible in Vietnam, where it is easily observed. Most of the 450-plane bomber fleet is not here but on carriers and on bases in Thailand.

In mid-February, as fears of a North Vietnamese offensive grew, the air fleet was temporarily increased, with deployment of about 20 extra B-52's to Guam and the assignment of three rather than two carriers in the Tonkin Gulf off the coast of Vietnam.

Now 2 Carriers

There are now two carriers—the Constellation and the Kitty Hawk—again, and B-52 missions are back to more normal levels. The fleet of about 40 B-52's flies from Utapao and the gunships mainly from Nakhon Phanom, both in Thailand. Fighter-bombers and gunships also fly from Ubon, Udorn, and Korat in Thailand.

There remain only three F-4 squadrons totaling about 70 planes in Danang, plus about 100 smaller observer planes and a squadron of 20 AC-119 gunships. The only other American fighter-bombers are two squadrons of A-37 light attack planes at Bienhoa, near Saigon.

"Last year, they mainly shot at night, but this year they shoot missiles, guns, everything, even during the daytime," one of the observation pilots said. "The high threat areas are no longer just around the passes from North Vietnam into Laos but now they're along all the main roads, intersections, and river crossings on the trail."

The observation pilots, who describe themselves as "the men who really run the air war," find many of the targets that the generals and colonels at their computerized command centers at Tansonnhut air base in Saigon and the five airfields in Thailand order the pilots to strike. Even though many targets are also discovered by electronic sensors that are planted along the trail from airplanes, the effectiveness of the observers is critical to the success of all visual bombing.

Forced to Fly Higher

"When we spot a truck, it's bush," an observer pilot said, "bush," an observer pilot said, "because they camouflage them. Now we have to fly at a higher altitude, so we can't see as much."

Lieut. Col. John P. O'Gorman of St. Louis, commander of the 421st Tactical Fighter F-4 Squadron here, said: "We've had to change our tactics some, and bomb from higher altitudes, but they're getting much more sophisticated in their firing techniques, even at night when they fire by sound, and they don't seem to worry about expending ammunition."

In the past, American officials have estimated that bombing and night strikes by gunships with sensors and rapid-firing aerial cannon have destroyed all but 15 per cent of the supplies that entered the trail through the Mugia, Bankarai and Banraving passes.

But pilots now point to the lavish expenditures of anti-aircraft ammunition and missiles deep along the trail network, even south of the trail junction city of Tchepone, which for a few days a year ago was held by South Vietnamese forces in their cross-border operation but is now one of the highest-threat areas for planes in Laos.

"At night they just shoot away, and they used to be more careful and would run out of ammunition quickly," Colonel Ogorman said. "They're able to move that much ammunition down the trails despite the bombing."

Air Force officers point out that the North Vietnamese can concentrate their air defenses on the trail because most of the time their supply movements inside their own country are immune from air attack.

The United States has stepped up its pre-emptive and retaliatory attacks in the North. Including a large raid by 125 planes on Feb. 16 and 17, Air Force and Navy bombers have made 97 raids in North Vietnam so far this year—almost as many as in all 1971, when there were 101.

The increased number of missions and the stronger North Vietnamese defense have cost the Americans 31 multi-million-dollar planes between

November and mid-March. Seven of them were brought down by missiles in Laos and North Vietnam. In all of last year's dry-season bombing campaign, no American planes were shot down by the missiles. This year, nearly 150 missiles have been observed in pursuit of the warplanes, compared with 11 in all of last year's campaign.

Few Strikes in South Vietnam

American planes fly few missions inside South Vietnam these days, and most of those are B-52 strikes of one to three planes per mission, each plane dropping 30 tons of bombs. Such saturation raids are usually directed at suspected base areas or troop concentrations.

Most missions inside South Vietnam are flown by the Vietnamese Air Force, which has two squadrons of A-37's and half a dozen F-5's in Danang. The F-5's were brought here only recently, as part of what American advisers describe as a plan to guard against the possibility that North Vietnamese MIG's might try to raid Danang.

Since MIG's began to be more active over North Vietnam and Laos, the possibility of a raid has begun to seem less remote. In two air-to-air battles over North Vietnam in February and at the beginning of this month, American planes shot down two MIG's. One of them, in turn, downed an American bomber and indirectly caused the loss of three others over Laos last December.

It is hazards like these that cost fighter pilots \$40 a month for \$25,000 of flight insurance, written by private companies.

But the observer pilots whose job it is to draw fire have none. "There is not a company in the States that will write flight insurance for us," one of them said.