

ATTACK BY MIG'S ON U.S. WARSHIPS IN THE GULF OF TONKIN REPORTED; SOUTH VIETNAMESE TOWN OVERRUN

APR 20 1972

NORTH IS HIT AGAIN

Enemy Said to Lose One Plane and Two Patrol Boats

NYTimes

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Thursday, April 20 — The United States command announced that American warships bombarding the coast of North Vietnam yesterday came under attack by MIG fighter planes and patrol boats in the Gulf of Tonkin.

The command said that, according to first reports from the American ships one MIG was shot down and two of the attacking boats were believed sunk. At least three North Vietnamese MIG's were said to have attacked the ships, which were reported firing at targets in the southern panhandle area of North Vietnam, 20 to 30 miles north of the demilitarized zone.

The reported air-sea action came as the United States command resumed the strategic bombing campaign against North Vietnam with more than 125 strikes, all in the southern panhandle below the 20th Parallel, according to informed officers. The resumption followed two days in which only a handful of bombing missions were flown in North Vietnam.

Report Is Preliminary

The command emphasized that its announcement on the MIG attacks was preliminary and "subject to modification." It said that preliminary reports indicated that one of the American ships was damaged and added that four United States crewmen were reported wounded.

The command said that the attack by at least three MIG's came at about 5 P.M. yesterday when an unspecified number of ships of the United States Seventh Fleet were bombarding shore targets in the panhandle.

The command said that one of the ships, the guided missile frigate Sterett, started firing at "several high-speed surface contacts" shown on the vessel's radar. It said the contacts "posed a threat to U.S. ships.

One MIG Reported Down

"Preliminary reports indicate one MIG aircraft was destroyed and two enemy surface craft were believed sunk by fire from the Sterett," the announcement said. "These reports indicate some damage to one U.S. ship, not the Sterett. Four U.S. Navy men were reported wounded."

This was believed to be the first time in the war that North Vietnamese MIG's had attacked American naval ships in the Gulf of Tonkin.

The Sterett, one of the Belknap class of guided-missile

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frigates, has both surface-to-air missiles for antiaircraft purposes and rapid-firing 3-inch and 5-inch guns.

It is one of a flotilla off more than 20 destroyers, guided-missile frigates and cruisers that has been engaged in shelling targets northward south of the demilitarized zone since the North Vietnamese offensive began 3 weeks ago.

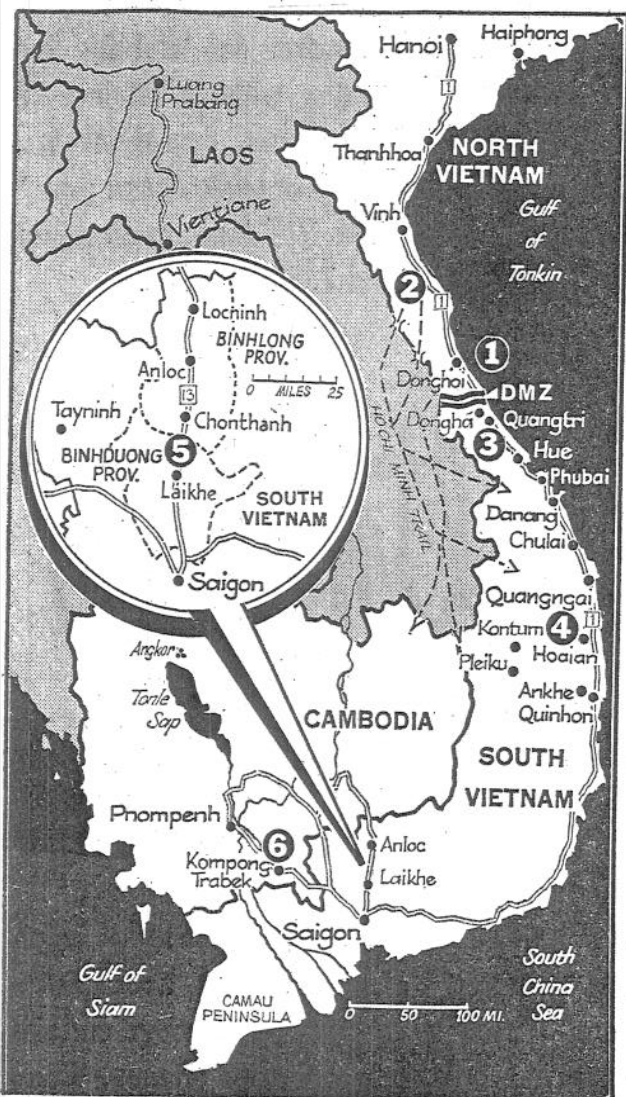
Information Limited

The command's announcement gave no further details on the report of the incident and said there were none available at the time the statement was given to correspondents, shortly after 2 A.M. today. "Additional details will be released when available."

The ships have been coming under attack from North Vietnamese shore batteries almost daily. One, the destroyer Buchanan, was reported hit by a round from North Vietnamese shore batteries on Monday. One sailor was killed and seven were wounded.

Another guided-missile frigate, the Worden, was operating in the northern port of the Gulf of Tonkin during the air raids over Haiphong early Sunday and was damaged by an explosion. The Pentagon suggested the next day that it might have been caused by enemy fire from North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the same area, but yesterday the United States command here said that examination of "ordnance fragments" on the ship, which has been towed to the naval base at Subic Bay in the Philippines, indicated it was "inadvertently struck by antiradiation missiles launched from friendly aircraft."

Antiradiation missiles are designed to home in on enemy radar installations.



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U.S. warships were reportedly attacked by MIG's and patrol boats near buffer zone (1). U.S. jets resumed heavy raids on North Vietnam's panhandle (2). Fighting flared near Quangtri (3), and Hoaian (4) was overrun by foe. On front north of Saigon, Laikhe (5) came under attack. In Cambodia, enemy units cut key Route 1 (6).

Official Silence Maintained

The United States command has maintained official silence about both the air strikes and the let-up in them during the two days that followed the weekend bombing of the Hanoi and Haiphong areas. Officers close to the planning say the let-up was decided on to give the Nixon Administration time to assess the effects on the North Vietnamese Government and on public and political opinion.

Since the weekend strikes, informed officers said, no raids have been flown as far north as Hanoi or Haiphong.

They reported that the targets for the increased number of raids in the panhandle area yesterday were "logistical" in nature. In the previous raids, beginning April 6, these included petroleum storage areas, roads, bridges and airfields.

American planes have also been hitting surface-to-air missile sites and anti-aircraft artillery positions just north of the demilitarized zone, to eliminate the threat they pose to American and South Vietnamese airplanes flying bombing missions in support of Saigon's troops below the zone.

B-52 Bombers Involved

The raids over Haiphong and the earlier strikes below the 20th Parallel last week involved B-52 bombers of the Strategic Air Command as well as smaller fighter-bombers, which flew 275 sorties in the North Vietnamese panhandle from April 9 to 15.

The number of B-52 raids has not been disclosed, although informed officials have said that 18 of the eight-engine bombers participated in the predawn

missions over Haiphong Sunday.

Any hope on the part of the United States Administration that the let-up in bombing raids over North Vietnam would bring about a reduction in the intensity of the current enemy offensive in the south appears to have been dashed by events of the last three days, with fresh attacks in two provinces on the central coast of South Vietnam and continued pressure on Quangtri Province in the north and Binhlong Province close to Saigon.

The weather over North Vietnam Monday and Tuesday was described by officers in Danang as "clear," so the halt was certainly not a result of the weather, as was the case at the beginning of the North Vietnamese offensive.

Missions Near Peak

The reinforced group of about 700 Air Force and Navy fighter-bombers and more than 100 B-52's flew a near-record level of missions Monday and Tuesday in support of Government troops fighting in the South, and air operations along the Ho Chi Minh Trail network in Laos have been cut by about two-thirds of their previous levels of several hundred strikes a day.

The Command's announcement on the Worden incident said:

"Although details have not been finally confirmed, in the professional judgment of Navy officials who have examined fragments found on the Worden, it now seems most likely that two antiradiation missiles were either inadvertently launched by friendly aircraft or malfunctioned upon launch and homed on radar emissions from the Worden, exploding close to the ship. One man was killed and nine others were injured, only one seriously, and the superstructure of the ship was penetrated by numerous small fragments."

The statement said further, "the Worden was hit at 3:35 A.M., 16 April (Vietnam time) while on station in the northern Gulf of Tonkin for air-sea rescue purposes, supporting United States aircraft conducting raids over North Vietnam. At the

time Worden was hit, both attack and support aircraft were in the vicinity of the ship. Since high-speed North Vietnamese surface craft were also present in the vicinity of U.S.S. Worden, it was necessary to await an examination of the fragments to rule out the possibility of hostile origin."