

U.S. Discloses an Encounter Monday

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With Enemy Naval Craft in Gulf of Tonkin

One Hanoi Patrol Boat Believed Sunk in Clash

By CRAIG R. WHITNEY
Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Friday, April 21—Another encounter between North Vietnamese and American naval vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin was reported yesterday by the United States command.

In a delayed report, the command said two high-speed North Vietnamese patrol boats were fired upon early Monday by the United States destroyer Hamner off the coast of North Vietnam's panhandle. One of the boats was believed sunk, the command said, and the other was believed damaged.

This incident and an attack by North Vietnamese MIG aircraft and patrol boats on American warships reported Wednesday are cited by United States military analysts as evidence that North Vietnam has now begun to challenge the Americans directly in the Gulf of Tonkin for the first time since 1964.

Bombardment Was Halted

They have been able to do this, the analysts say, partly because American naval bombardment of coastal defense radar and artillery sites had been suspended from 1968 until recently and partly because it was decided in Hanoi sometime in the last year to use the MIG's more adventurously than before, in conjunction with the Communist offensive in the South.

Precisely when the North Vietnamese began their new moves is not entirely clear because the United States Navy and the command in Saigon began reporting them only this week. However, the latest sequence of events appears to be this:

At 3:55 A.M. Sunday, while United States B-52's and fighter bombers were engaged in raids near Haiphong Harbor, North Vietnamese patrol boats moved out into the Tonkin Gulf toward the guided missile frigate Worden. The frigate was fired on by mistake by American planes flying overhead, and one sailor was killed and nine were injured by two air-to-ground missiles at first thought to have been fired from enemy torpedo boats.

Early Monday morning, off the North Vietnamese coast between the demilitarized zone and the 20th Parallel, the destroyer Hamner fired on two high-speed North Vietnamese patrol boats in the incident reported today. One of the boats disappeared from the Hamner's radar screens under fire and was believed sunk. The other was said to have raced around erratically and was believed damaged.

On the same day, the guided missile destroyer Buchanan was hit by North Vietnamese retaliatory fire as it was firing at targets in the lower panhandle. One crewman was killed and seven were wounded, and the ship put into harbor in Danang for repairs.

At 5 P.M. Wednesday, two North Vietnamese supersonic MIG fighter-bombers dashed out past the coast over a group of American warships — the cruiser Oklahoma City, Vice Admiral William P. Mack's Seventh Fleet flagship, and the destroyers Higbee and Lloyd Thomas—that were bombarding coastal defense sites 20 miles north of the demilitarized zone. A bomb from one of the planes scored a direct hit on the after gun turret of the Higbee, wounding three sailors and destroying the gun mount. Another ship, the guided missile frigate Sterett, shot down a MIG with a Terrier missile and also fired on North Vietnamese patrol boats in the area, sinking two of them.

Fleet Massed by U.S.

Since the start of the North Vietnamese offensive in the South at the end of last month, the United States Navy has massed more than 25 ships in the Gulf of Tonkin to counter it, both above and below the demilitarized zone on the border between South and North Vietnam. Fifteen destroyers and three cruisers are now assigned to naval bombardment missions.

This is a larger force than had been committed to shore bombardment operations in Vietnam at any time since the height of American involvement in the war in 1968. But never before had North Vietnamese counterattacks been as successful as they have been this week.

Yesterday the Higbee pulled into Danang and tied up at a pier beside the damaged Buchanan.

Since the American Naval bombardment of North Vietnam resumed on April 6, both ships and warplanes have been reported striking targets in the North daily.

is a defensively oriented force that has, according to American intelligence, a fleet of about 40 light combatant vessels—high-speed patrol boats armed with missiles, motor torpedo boats and motor gunboats.

"The indications are that the naval gunfire is hurting them, and this is how they are reacting," one officer said.

He said the North Vietnamese could keep their aircraft close to the ground over land "and then suddenly appear on the ship's radar screens almost before you can do anything about them."

"The fact that the Sterett was standing out farther offshore beyond the destroyers yesterday gave her time to react and shoot down the MIG," he added.

The guided-missile frigates, including the Sterett and the Worden, have the principal role of air defense both for surface ships in the Tonkin Gulf and for American planes flying overhead that might come under attack by North Vietnamese MIG's.

Query Put to Pentagon

The confusion surrounding Sunday's incident when the Worden was struck began with secret "flash" messages from the ship immediately after she was fired upon. One of the first such messages indicated that the ship's officers believed she might have been hit by a missile from a North Vietnamese patrol boat. At the time the Worden was supporting the American planes bombing Haiphong.

Word of that message got to a newsman, Joseph Fried of The New York Daily News, late Monday afternoon, Saigon time, and a few hours later, in Washington, a Pentagon spokesman was asked about the report. He said that apparently the Worden might have been under attack and hit by one of the enemy boats.

About 50 air strikes were flown there yesterday according to the United States command.

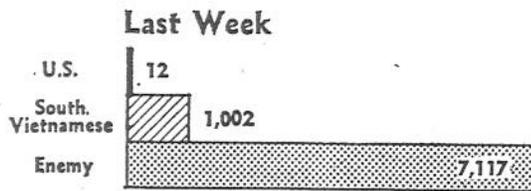
In 1967 there were unconfirmed reports that the North Vietnamese might have Soviet-made Styx surface-to-surface missiles which are capable of sinking ships. But so far none has been reported sighted and until the MIG's flew over the American warships yesterday the North Vietnamese had used only artillery to fire at the destroyers.

The North Vietnamese Navy

Casualties in the Vietnam War

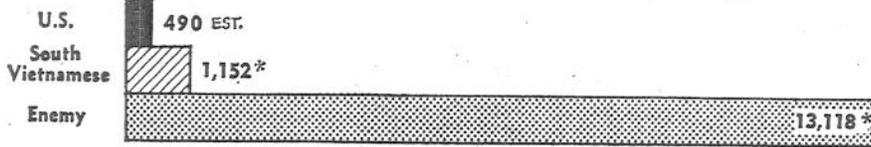
KILLED IN COMBAT

Source: Allied Command in Saigon



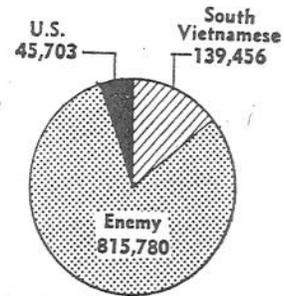
1968 Tet Offensive

Week of Feb. 4



*Highest weekly toll

TOTAL WAR DEAD



The New York Times/Barbara Gluck Troaster

The family of a South Vietnamese soldier killed in the war mourning at his funeral Wednesday in the Bienhoa Military Cemetery northeast of Saigon. Chart compares last week's war casualties, released yesterday in Saigon, with those during the second week of Tet offensive in 1968. New South Vietnamese death toll was highest since Tet.