

The Air War Over Indochina

'Tip of the Iceberg'

By RAPHAEL LITTAUER

THACA, N. Y.—The American people are learning, many with surprise, that their President has been telling them the truth about his commitment of U.S. air power to the Indochina conflict. Mr. Nixon evidently means business with his bombers. However, the spectacular air strikes which occasioned this surprise are only the tip of the iceberg. The other nine-tenths of the monster are submerged—the ton-a-minute, workaday blasting of Indochina.

For the last year a team of researchers at Cornell University has been painstakingly collecting and collating the facts about the biggest air war in history. Their findings confirm what was known to some already: the U.S. has been systematically bombing not only Vietnam but all of Indochina.

The sustained campaign to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail is not a surgically isolated operation against purely military targets, as is so often claimed. Instead, for technical reasons, the ground-to-air duel entails widespread attacks on the surrounding regions, "protective reaction" strikes, and bombing of targets within North Vietnam itself. Escalation is built in.

The trend to computerized warfare increases remoteness and removes the last psychological inhibitions which might have had a humanizing influence. War crimes merge with warfare on the electronic battlefield. Indochina has in fact been our proving ground and the costly new technologies (over \$3 billion through June, 1971, perhaps reaching \$20 billion by the end of the decade) generates powerful new pressures for proliferation.

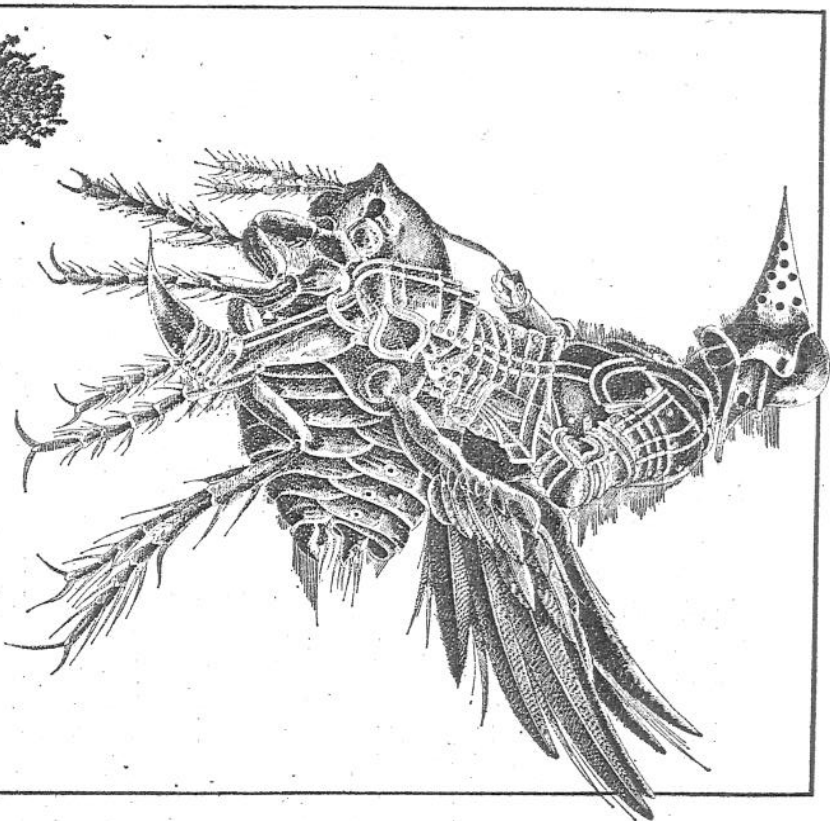
Territories under enemy control are

subjected to sustained bombardment to deny the enemy the fruits of his victory—the population resources he has come to control. An uglier phrase for this is *scorched-earth policy*. An unspeakable price is exacted from the people of Indochina in return for "saving them."

The threat of retaliation against North Vietnam, an explicit element of U.S. air war policy, requires frequent saber-rattling to maintain "credibility." The cost must be reckoned not only in the lives of the victims but in a hardening of positions on both sides. The Communists, after decades of struggle, are in no mood to be deterred. The U.S. closes off its options for more moderate, politically oriented policy choices. We back ourselves into a corner from which only a frustrated lashing out is possible.

The tip of the iceberg that came into public view in April was spectacular enough. The character of the air war had been changing, with B-52's delivering an ever-larger fraction of the bombs (more than half are now carried by the Stratofortresses).

One must know a little about these bombers to appreciate them fully. They carry over 100 bombs each, to a total of 30 tons, and shed them rapidly from close-formation flight at high altitude. The bombs explode in a dense pattern covering, for a typical mission of six planes, 1.5 square miles with 150 tons of explosives. Such a B-52 box of distributed tonnage is lethally effective. It is easy to calculate that the blast overpressure will exceed 3 PSI (pounds per square inch) everywhere within the pattern, enough to knock down any residential structures other than reinforced concrete. Six hundred



Murray Tinkelman/Lithophon

points will be hit directly by bombs, and all locations in the area will be within 125 feet of such a hit.

By way of comparison, the Hiroshima bomb covered 6 square miles to 3 PSI—just four times the area

of the B-52 pattern. Of course there were radiation effects as well as blast at Hiroshima.

The nighttime retaliation raids against Haiphong and Hanoi included enough B-52's for three such 1.5-square-mile missions. The Red River delta is the most densely populated region of Indochina. No wonder these raids, which included about 75 fighter-bombers as well, caused a certain repugnance in the American public. In a saner moment such acts of retribution would be recognized as essentially un-American.

But the tip of the iceberg is not all, and unfortunately we are less aware of the rest. Over 130 B-52's are now working in Indochina, completing more than ten such six-plane missions (or their equivalent) every

day. The number of fighter-bombers is soaring so rapidly, both on land and at sea, that current figures do not stay current for long. America is dumping over 3,000 tons per day in this regular exercise. The dollar cost can be reckoned conservatively at \$20-million per day. But who would count dollars when confronted with the costs imposed on the hapless recipients of this cargo?

The monotonous regularity of the day-to-day bombing does not make it very newsworthy. It seems possible, when the spectaculars have run their course, that the base of the iceberg will once more fade from public view. Perhaps we should remind ourselves then, of the fate of the unsinkable Titanic.

Raphael Littauer, professor of physics at Cornell, coordinated the first university interdisciplinary research on the air war last year. It is published this month as a book, "The Air War in Indochina."
