

Military Waging Air War as They Want

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By NEIL SHEEHAN

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WASHINGTON, June 9 — United States military leaders are being permitted to wage the air war as they want in Indochina—sealing off North Vietnam's coast and harbors with mines, followed by the systematic and relatively unrestricted destruction of military and industrial targets throughout the country.

President Nixon's two-month-old air war differs in major respects from the three-and-a-half-year bombing campaign waged by his predecessor, Lyndon B. Johnson. When Mr. Johnson was President, he and his senior advisers, in their phrase, "dribbled out" targets chosen at their Tuesday lunch-

con meetings.

In the current effort, as before, there are restricted zones at Hanoi and Haiphong as well as a so-called buffer zone along the China border that is about 25 miles deep. On the other hand, the military commanders are free to strike designated military targets in the restricted and buffer zones whenever they feel the need to do so. More important, they have been permitted to restrike these targets to maintain their destruction.

While most senior military leaders are optimistic, some of those interviewed on the bombing campaign are uncertain whether American air power can reduce the flow of supplies overland from China to the point where Hanoi can no longer

effectively prosecute the war in the South.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, it is understood, have made no promises to cripple North Vietnam's war-making capability within a given period. "There have been no specifics along this line," an officer familiar with their thinking said. "There are too many unpredictable."

Unlike the shifting objectives of President Johnson's campaign, which bore the code name Rolling Thunder, the goals of this air war are simple in concept.

Nixon Administration officials say they intend to deny North Vietnam any sea-borne goods that are essential to its long-

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term war effort. About 85 per cent of the 2.2 million tons it received last year from China, the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries arrived by sea, most through the now-mined port of Haiphong. American military leaders say the mining is reasonably effective.

Attack on Land Routes

Current plans also call for bombing by the Navy from aircraft carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin and by the Air Force to try to reduce the flow of weapons, ammunition, petroleum, food, clothing, medical supplies and other goods moving by alternate routes. The main routes from China consist of two railroads, the northeast line to Kwangsi Province and the northwest line to Yunnan, eight roads and the Red River waterway.

There are to be further attacks on those supplies as they are distributed throughout North Vietnam and moved toward the South through Laos and across the demilitarized zone.

In South Vietnam, meanwhile, a ferocious bombardment — on a par with the previous peak in 1968 — is attempting to eliminate the 150,000 North Vietnamese troops there and to destroy what supplies they have stocked in battlefield areas.

American and South Vietnamese fighter-bombers are flying more than 15,000 sorties a month there (a sortie is a flight by a single aircraft) and the six-engine B-52 bombers, each of which carries up to 30 tons of bombs, are averaging about 75 strike sorties a day.

Supplies and Morale

The goals are these:

A dearth of supplies will restrain Hanoi's onslaught in the South, particularly the advanced warfare with tanks and the lavish use of artillery and rockets that have prevailed since the offensive began at the end of March.

Sagging morale in the North caused by hunger and the hardships of constant bombing will force the North Vietnamese leadership to sue for peace in Paris on Mr. Nixon's terms.

The President, senior officers say, has given the military a reasonably free hand in the North to achieve those objectives.

Under the code named Operation Linebacker, in deference to Mr. Nixon's enthusiasm for football, the air war got under way in three phases. It began with strikes throughout the North Vietnamese panhandle below the 20th parallel on April 6, moved into high gear with a spectacular raid by B-52's and fighter-bombers against petroleum tank farms in the Haiphong and Hanoi areas on April 16, and then settled into a sustained campaign with the President's announcement of the mining of the ports on May 8.

Military leaders say that just after the April 16 raid Mr.

Nixon cleared to the Joint Chiefs a long list of targets throughout the North. The exact number is unavailable, but there are at least 200 in the northeastern corner of North Vietnam, including Hanoi and Haiphong.

Announced in Advance

The Joint Chiefs in turn cleared the list to the Commander in Chief, Pacific, in Hawaii and thence to the commanders of the Seventh Fleet and the Seventh Air Force.

The subordinate commanders decide what targets they ought to strike, to achieve the objectives of the campaign and simply report their intentions in advance.

The White House is apparently informed of strikes into the restricted zones by the advance warning to the Joint chiefs, but there have been no reports of interference with repeated raids.

The Longbien Bridge in Hanoi was attacked May 10 and 11. On May 18 a tank farm four miles northeast of the Hanoi center was bombed and Navy jets blasted away the center span of the Haiphong rail-highway bridge a mile from the city center on May 24.

The only military target in Haiphong to remain generally off limits is the dock area, where the foreign ships are trapped.

While precautions such as flying parallel to the border and keeping a close radar watch are being employed to avoid flights over China, two raids have been made within about 20 miles of, or less than a minute's flight time from, the frontier. The first occurred May 24 when Air Force Phantom jets knocked out six spans of the Langgiai rail bridge on the northeast line. Last Tuesday the Phantoms struck both a rail switching yard and a road bridge southwest of Langson, in the same area.

Silence on Casualties

To minimize civilian casualties, the listed targets are of a military or industrial nature. Pentagon spokesmen decline to answer questions about such casualties. There appears to be less concern with the civilians this time in view of the freedom given the air commanders and the attempt to cut off food, clothing and medical supplies.

The main tactical purpose of the bombing has been to keep the railroads from China cut and to destroy as much petroleum as possible. The power plants are being knocked out to impose hardship on the cities and impede the air-defense system.

If the North Vietnamese, as they are expected to, begin a full-fledged operation to truck supplies down the roads from China and to move material by barge along the waterways, the brunt of the bombing will fall on those, which are much more difficult to hit.

The advances in American technology since the 1965-68 campaign are encouraging military leaders. Such students of

air power as Robert B. Hotz, editor in chief of Aviation Week and Space Technology, believe that Operation Linebacker is a case example of technological advances making possible a major foreign-policy decision by a President.

The most striking advance is the availability of laser-guided bombs of 500 to 3,000 pounds, which can be directed with a precision only dreamed of in the past.

Signs of Few Misses

Reconnaissance photographs of petroleum depots show only a few craters around the targets to indicate misses. The Thanhhoa rail and highway bridge about 85 miles south of Hanoi survived all efforts at destruction in the first air war, its western span was crumpled in a single strike by Phantoms on May 13. The Haiduong rail bridge below Thanhhoa, which took four raids to destroy in the previous air war, did not survive the first attack this time.

An 850-pound television-guided bomb called the Walleye, which was available during the earlier campaign, is being used with greater effect by the fighter-bombers as a result of experience. Furthermore, Navy pilots flying the new A-7E Corsair attack plane have almost doubled their bombing accuracy with a computerized display device.

Another notable advance has occurred in electronic countermeasures, which have reached a Buck Rogers stage of wizardry. During the April 16 raid, when 17 B-52's flew at a level 30,000 feet over Haiphong to bomb the petroleum depots there, a fleet of electronic-countermeasures aircraft virtually blinded the North Vietnamese defenses by jamming the radar of the Soviet-made missile batteries and conventional antiaircraft artillery.

Scores of Shots, No Hits

Specially equipped F-105 Thunderchief fighter-bombers, called Wild Weasels, also homed in on the missile batteries and crippled their radar with Shrike missiles, which fly down a radar beam.

Without accurate radar direction, surface-to-air missiles are useless and conventional antiaircraft guns are severely

hampered. The North Vietnamese fired scores of missiles at the B-52's on April 16 without making a hit.

As a result, the North Vietnamese defenses are not as effective against the smaller fighter-bombers as before and the B-52's, whose bomb load is the nearest approach to a tactical nuclear weapon, can be employed with acceptable risk.

The guesses as to how long it will take, using the mining of the ports May 8 as a starting point, for a successful campaign to seriously impede the North's war-making capability run from two to six months and up.

The weakest link in the supply system is believed to be petroleum because large amounts are necessary to keep the trucks rolling to fuel the Soviet-built tanks operating in the South.

Prior to the mining North Vietnam was importing 30,000 to 40,000 tons of petroleum a month. Senior officers guess that it may have stockpiled a two-month reserve.

The determination of the North Vietnamese and their willingness to take punishment have made the American military leaders cautious in their assessments. "The enemy has a lot of options that he can exercise to string things out, depending upon the price he is willing to pay," an officer said.

U. S. Personnel Strained

Some officers believe that Mr. Nixon has pushed the air and naval build-up in Southeast Asia close to the limits in terms of strain on pilots and other personnel and close to what he can stand in the political repercussions from the economic costs.

On one day toward the end of May, for instance, the Navy had 13 of its 16 carriers at sea either in transit, on training assignment, with the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean or on missions in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Gen. John D. Ryan, Air Force Chief of Staff, distributed a special message to the men and their families on April 15 saying that he would try to bring them "home as soon as possible" because most of the

pilots and ground crews had served war tours and some had only recently returned.

Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird's surprise announcement before the House Appropriations Committee Monday that war costs might double during the fiscal year beginning July 1—to \$10-billion to \$12-billion—is considered only a preliminary projection. Some Congressional observers think the figure may run higher.

The military effectiveness of further escalating the air war by dispatching more aircraft is questioned by some senior officers. They note that commanders already have authority to strike meaningful military targets and the aircraft to make the attacks.

Shift on Targets Possible

They believe that if Mr. Nixon wants to escalate the war significantly in response to North Vietnamese ground initiatives in the South, he may have to begin attacking civilian targets—the cities and the flood-control dikes in the northern edges of the Tonkin Delta. Moreover, if the present campaign fails to achieve results, some officers would not be surprised if Mr. Nixon, having "made his commitment," changed his mind on such targets, perhaps after adequate warning to the North Vietnamese.

The B-52 raid on the Haiphong petroleum area on April 16 is regarded by senior officers as having as much a psychological as a military objective. Mr. Nixon, they believe, was demonstrating the destructive force he can loose if Hanoi does not come to terms. Three B-52's in formation can obliterate an area more than half a mile wide and nearly two miles long.

In the meantime, the military leaders are conscious that the President has put the air weapon to a greater test than ever and that the reputation of air power rides on the outcome.

"The President is retreating on the ground and advancing in the air," a Congressional student of military affairs said. "He's told the Air Force and Navy to go ahead and do their stuff. They'll prove themselves one way or the other this time."

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