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U.S. DOUBTS JETS SANK A 'LIFEBOAT'

Admits Attack Off Vinh, but
Disputes Peking's Charge

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Aug. 25 (UPI) — The United States command said today that it had no evidence that a 30-foot boat sunk by American warplanes off the North Vietnamese coast was a lifeboat from a Chinese merchant ship.

China broadcast a strong protest yesterday, saying that five Chinese sailors were killed Tuesday when American planes bombed a lifeboat from a Chinese merchant ship near Honngu Island just off Vinh, a major North Vietnamese port 137 miles north of the demilitarized zone.

The command acknowledged that Navy fighters from the aircraft carrier Oriskany sank "one 30-foot supply water craft" in that area Tuesday. Officers said, however, that "we have no evidence to indicate that we attacked a lifeboat."

American spokesmen said that pilots and operations officers believed the boat was carrying supplies from a Chinese freighter anchored near Honngu Island in an attempt to circumvent the American mining of Vinh and six other ports.

"These lighters are not attacked until they are well clear of the freighters," a spokesman said. "We do not target third-country shipping."

A statement from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, transmitted abroad by Hsinhua, the Chinese press agency, said that "on Aug. 22, 1972, U.S. aircraft brazenly bombed a lifeboat of the Chinese merchant ship Hung Chi No. 151, which was anchored off the shore of Honngu Island of Nghean province of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, destroying the lifeboat and killing the five Chinese crew members."

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Aug. 25—The Pentagon confirmed today that on occasion United States warplanes have been given permission to bomb targets in North Vietnam close to the China border.

On at least one such occasion, Chinese jets were scrambled when an American plane strayed quite close to the border, but there was no shooting and no border violation, according to Jerry W. Friedheim, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs.

Asked to comment on a dispatch in The New York Times today on the subject, Mr. Friedheim conceded that there had been recent instances in which American air controllers had warned jet pilots that they were on a "heading" that would quickly take them across the China border, and to turn away.

Mr. Friedheim declined to confirm that there is a 25-mile buffer zone along the border in which American planes cannot operate without special permission from Washington. Other sources have said privately that there is such a zone.

"If there were a buffer zone, I wouldn't want to discuss it here," Mr. Friedheim said. "I wouldn't want to tell North Vietnam where it might have a sanctuary."

Mr. Friedheim dismissed a Chinese complaint that American warplanes had bombed a lifeboat from a Chinese merchant ship anchored off the North Vietnamese island of Honngu.

A 30-foot boat was attacked, he said, but it is "most unlikely to us that it was a lifeboat." There was no sign of a troubled ship, he said, but there were signs of small boats moving supplies toward shore.