

Sensors Give a Thai Air Base an Ear To the Ground of Ho Chi Minh Trail

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NAKHON PHANOM, Thailand, Oct. 22—The infiltration of North Vietnamese troops and war material through Laos and Cambodia into the western flank of South Vietnam appears to have dropped almost to the vanishing point, according to American pilots at this base adjoining the Ho Chi Minh trail.

"There just don't seem to be lucrative targets out on the trail anymore," said First Lieut. John McNabb of San Antonio, Tex.

Lieutenant McNabb, who has flown more than 200 missions in his eight months here, added that "the inactivity is getting me down."

In quantitative terms, it is not clear how much activity has declined along the 18,000-square-mile trail network since the North Vietnamese offensive into the South began on March 30.

Newsmen were permitted access to this base yesterday for the first time since it was built in 1964. But they were shown only those parts of the base that are not involved in the surveillance of infiltration routes, and officials declined to discuss that operation at all.

The newsmen were permitted only a seven-hour visit to the base, on the ground that this was all the time that the Thai Government had authorized. No Thai officials were in evidence during the tour, however.

Despite the unwillingness of officials here to discuss the Ho Chi Minh trail in specific terms, they left the clear impression that it was scarcely being used at present. During the monsoon season, Communist activity in the area is always sharply curtailed, and the current season has been particularly wet.

But sources here seemed to feel that other factors, including Communist speculation that a cease-fire is at hand, could be involved.

It seems clear that the North Vietnamese cannot be planning any major offensive soon in the provinces around Saigon or in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam. Such campaigns would ordinarily be preceded by major activity along the infiltration route.



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Pilots at Nakhon Phanom (1) say infiltration via Ho Chi Minh Trail has almost halted. Saigon said foe seized Buonkhi (2). U.S. jets struck allies by mistake near Quanloi (3). Enemy barrage hit U.S. base at Bienhoa (4).

It is the forwardmost American air base in Indochina and thus well suited for reconnaissance, the rescue of downed airmen and other special operations.

Surveillance of the trail since 1967 has been carried out mainly by electronic sensors dropped by planes all over the infiltration area. The sensors, which cost about \$1,000 apiece and are bobby-trapped to explode if detected, are dropped by parachute into treetops or are embedded in the ground.

Some pick up sounds while others detect the ground vibration caused by vehicles or men. All have radio transmitters monitored here. The sound detectors are said to be so effective that on one occasion monitors have eavesdropped on a jungle seduction involving a North Vietnamese soldier and a woman auxiliary more than 100 miles away.

1970 Was a Peak Year

One period of peak activity along the 5,000 miles of jungle roads and paths that make up the Ho Chi Minh trail was the dry season of 1970, when intelligence experts estimated that 30,000 enemy trucks were sighted and 23,000 were damaged or destroyed by American planes.

The main source of intelligence about the trail is a United States Air Force unit, Task Force Alpha, whose operations have provided information for many of the tactical decisions made by Vietnamese and American commanders in recent years, besides guiding planes to targets.

This base of about 4,700 Americans was selected for such operations mainly because of its location.

Nakhon Phanom, at the northeast corner of Thailand, overlooks the jungles of Laos across the Mekong River, and is only 4 miles from North Vietnam.

Decisions by Computer

Data from the sensors are fed into one of the world's largest computers, which directs the pilots and equipment of tactical fighter-bombers, gunships or B-52's to targets.

In most cases, the entire operation is automatic. Planes are directed to their targets automatically and bombs are released not by men who see anything, but in response to electronic signals from computers that have decided where the enemy ought to be.

Air Force spokesmen, over the past few years, have leaked information to technical aerospace journals implying a confidence that the system operated from Nakhon Phanom is virtually foolproof. Despite this, many aspects of the current North Vietnamese offensive clearly caught the American command and the Vietnamese all off guard.

Nakhon Phanom's sensor system should have predicted the large-scale deployment of North Vietnamese tanks and heavy artillery during recent campaigns in the Central Highlands province of Kontum, near Anloc, 60 miles north of Saigon, in eastern Cambodia and elsewhere.

But at the time field commanders generally expressed complete surprise when the enemy tanks showed up. Sensing could not have been effective.

tive enough to pinpoint targets along the trail because about 600 North Vietnamese tanks did enter South Vietnam.

The proximity of large enemy units and of war, however, seem scarcely to have affected the town of Nakhon Phanom or its American base.

At night, the lights of the Laotian town of Thakhek sparkle across the dark Mekong. Just beyond that is territory controlled exclusively by Communist forces.

But here, loudspeakers blare rock music and four brilliantly lighted ferris wheels create a carnival atmosphere in honor of the late King Chulalongkorn, of Thailand, who abolished slavery in 1905.

Thai troops are not in evidence here, though northeast Thailand is the main focus of Thai Communist guerrilla insurgency and North Vietnamese infiltration. During the last two weeks, several air bases, nominally Thai, but actually American, have been subjected to ground attacks or mortar shelling. But Nakhon Phanom itself has never been attacked.

Journalists Are Watched

American authorities maintain close surveillance of journalists, but others are waved into the base by a bored military policeman who apparently does not check credentials.

Col. Norbert L. Simon, commander of the 56th Special Operations Wing, operating the base, does not feel that security poses any imminent problems since this is a Thai base and the Thai armed forces are mainly responsible for its protection.

The base has a large new post exchange, a swimming pool, tennis courts and air-conditioned service clubs. There are also many office buildings, and on most of the doors in them are large signs saying "Secret."

Most of the signs in the town are in English and Thai. Thai and American currencies are used interchangeably; shops, restaurants and brothels have adjusted to sharp new social divisions between American blacks and white. Those establishments that wish to do business with blacks say so, with signs describing the places as "soul" establishments.

The most endangered Americans here are the crews flying helicopters and A-1 propeller-driven fighter-bombers used in rescuing pilots downed in North Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam.

Slow aircraft used for rescues are extremely vulnerable to ground fire. While declining to say how many rescue planes and crewmen have been lost, pilots concede that "the work is dangerous and we do take losses."

The pilots told newsmen repeatedly that "in North Vietnam everyone has a gun, and even over the tiniest, out-of-the-way village, it seems like everyone is shooting at you."