

U.S. Air War in Indochina Is Vastly Changed

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Dec. 3—Capt. John Lamb, a 25-year-old Air Force pilot from Ohatchee, Ala., climbed into his small A-37 attack fighter at the Bienhoa air base, taxied out and then took off toward the Cambodian border.

Directed by a forward air controller hovering below in a small spotter plane, Captain Lamb circled around the target in the crater-marred jungles, armed his bombs, turned on his gunsight and dropped his four 500-pounders in four passes. Another Dragonfly, the smallest jet fighter in the Air Force, followed with canisters of napalm.

The operation, ordered by Seventh Air Force headquarters, took place in Tayninh Province just three miles from the border. The effort apparently destroyed two bunkers, cleared the way for some "friendly" troops below and, as the air controller put it, "started a good fire coming up."

It was an efficient operation—the pilots hit what they were ordered to and returned within an hour—and it was illustrative of the change that has come over the use of American air power in South Vietnam.

Sharp Decline in Activity

In the days of search-and-destroy tactics and frequent clashes involving large units, American fighters filled the skies over South Vietnam. Now, with the declining ground war, the Communist forces' reversion to small guerrilla units, the gradual withdrawal of American troops and the expansion of the South Vietnamese Air Force, American air activity has declined sharply from 1968 and 1969, the peak years.

Fewer American troops need air support these days. Apart from the fast scrambles to help those in trouble, the targets are often marginal despite the command's efforts to be more selective in approaching strikes.

"There is real satisfaction when we help our own boys out of a jam," a pilot said, "but I wonder about some of these targets. We really can't tell from the air what effect we are having. But I know many of the targets have been hit for

ever they find that they are "locked in" by enemy radar and thus threatened by enemy fire. Such assaults, carried out on Sept. 5 and again last Sunday, were justified by the military command as the exercise of "the inherent right of self-defense."

Previous attacks on North Vietnam were justified on the ground that unarmed reconnaissance planes were being threatened in violation of an understanding reached with Hanoi just before the bombing halt in November, 1968. Hanoi denies any such agreement.

Increased Defensive Effort

Military sources, explaining the need for the new instructions, cite intelligence reports to the effect that Hanoi has placed surface-to-air missile sites fur-

ther south and west in North Vietnam, along the Laotian border, putting American planes over Laos in increased danger.

"There is no doubt that one of our nightmares is that we will lose our first B-52 to Communist fire," an officer said.

Moreover, the military sources assert that the North Vietnamese are stringing more anti-aircraft weapons along the trail network to counter the intensive strikes. An F-4 Phantom jet was downed over Laos this week, the 75th such loss there since the military began releasing figures last March.

In the wake of the retaliatory raids against the North last month and the new guidelines for pilots, observers are predicting considerable activity over North Vietnam during the

current dry season, particularly if the deadlock in the Paris peace talks continues.

"I think we will see more and more attacks against missile sites and supply depots in North Vietnam this time," an experienced Western diplomat said.