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THE

*Survival Power vs. Air Power***'Ant Colonies' of N. Viets Repair**

Editor's Note: AP Special Correspondent Peter Arnett, the winner of a Pulitzer Prize in eight years of war reporting from South Vietnam, has just completed his first visit to North Vietnam. In the following story he describes the "ant power" of the North Vietnamese war effort and the wonder of a visitor, wonder not at the destruction of U.S. bombing but at the survival power of the North Vietnamese.

By PETER ARNETT
AP Special Correspondent

If you have wondered why the North Vietnamese can continue to fight on despite the biggest bombing campaign in the history of war, then ride with three U.S. pilots and me down the roads south of Hanoi and find out.

Our destination was Nam Dinh City and the Phat Diem Cathedral, both severely bombed and showplaces of the destructive power of the American air campaign. Jane Fonda and Ramsey Clark had been there. Now it was the turn of the three pilots just released from a prisoner-of-war camp — Navy Lt. Mark Gartley and Norris Charles and Air Force Major Edward Elias — and myself.

But long before we reached our destination we were shaking our heads in wonder not at the destructive power of the bombs from the sky but at the survival power of the people on the ground.

The pilots' previous view of North Vietnam was from the skies above. For years I had watched from the vantage point of South Vietnam.

NOW HERE on the ground as we rolled along the narrow highways in the dark hours before dawn the clichés came true.

Here was the "ant power" that Pentagon experts theorized lay behind Hanoi's ability to keep supplies and men moving to the southern war fronts. Where bombs had scored direct hits on railway cars on the tracks paralleling the road, dark shapes hammered at twisted wreckage, while other figures carried material and dumped it into the craters. As dawn came and we passed through the railroad junction of severely bombed Phu Le, we saw that the dark shapes were women and they weren't even using buckets; they were carrying mud in their bare hands to fill the craters in, and they seemed to be enjoying it.

When our old Russian Volga sedan bogged down at one point the women swarmed out of the mud and gathered around us, laughing and gesticulating.

This "ant power" was everywhere. Whereas in South Vietnam the war has denuded the countryside of population and sent people scurrying into the cities, in the North it is the reverse and they swarmed on the highway.

WALKING or riding bicycles along lonely roads in South Vietnam at night can mean death or capture. But in the North, nighttime is the logical time to travel for the faint-hearted, or for the supply convoys, because it affords protection from the planes that fly above.

The key to the use of the night is simply that there are no guerrillas to harass the convoys or blow up the supplies. In North Vietnam the war is only from the air.

That is why I observed no barbed wire anywhere, no barricaded militia outposts or fortified bunkers. Except for when the planes came over, the North Vietnamese countryside looked positively bucolic. But few things are ever what they seem, and Elias, who piloted a reconnaissance plane before he was shot down five months ago, enlightened me.

"See those grave mounds?" Elias asked as we waited under the trees for a ferry to cross a river where a bridge had been destroyed. About 100 yards away, buffalo grazed quietly around the heaps of earth.

"THEY'RE antiaircraft pits with the muzzles down," Elias said. "Let a plane come over and they'll stick up their snouts and blast away. And those things are difficult to spot in pictures. It would take a very expert and very lucky

PI (photo interpreter) to see them."

As we sped into the rising sun, Elias's head was twisting to left and right. "See that flak site? They're 85s." Or he would say, "There's another one, half a dozen .51-calibers." To me they looked like banana trees.

The discovery of the flak sites and the industrious people were possibly predictable enough. Enough American planes get hot down each week to adequately suggest the extent of the antiaircraft fire. And "people power" has long been known as North Vietnam's most important commodity.

What was mind-bending to the freed pilots was the extent of North Vietnam's visible supply chain. From the time we left the outskirts of Hanoi at 4 a.m. one morning to our return at 8 p.m. the next night we constantly encountered vehicle convoys, rows of stacked ammunition alongside the roadsides and gasoline drums. These were stretched out along the 180 miles we drove, and other foreign visitors in Hanoi at the time attested they saw similar scenes on different roads.

DURING daylight the vehi-

cles were casually parked under the inevitable line of trees at roadside. On some long, straight stretches of highway we counted as many as 40 trucks.

They seemed extremely vulnerable, but Charles commented, "We could never see those things from the air. And the moment someone comes down to get a better look at them — blam, man."

This simple roadside cover hid ammunition caches up to 1,000 cases in size, according to my fast counts from the moving automobile. Particularly noticeable were concentrations of supplies at bombed-out railway crossings. The pilots figured these had been dumped by trains and would soon be moved to where the railway lines were usable again.

In the evenings as the trucks began to move south loaded with supplies, the whole operation reminded me of a huge glacier forcing itself slowly but surely down a mountain valley.

REFLECTING on the scenes one evening at a rest house in Ninh Binh province, Gartley said, "I used to fly over this place and it seemed uninhabited. But look, it is teeming with life."

Gartley later said, "All the pilots really have for targets are the cities, the bridges and the railways. Yet the North Vietnamese move out from the cities and use these back roads."

Elias said, "It is technology against ideology. I just wonder how far technology can go because the Vietnamese habitually beat it." He mentioned that Hanoi has found a partial answer to the threat of the laser-guided "smart" bombs that can zero in accurately on targets.

"The North Vietnamese put up smoke around the target. If you don't see it you can't hit it," Elias said.

The North Vietnamese glory in their ability to outwit the U.S. planes.

"YOU HAVE to fight this war with intelligence, not with computers," Prime Minister Pham Van Dong told the antiwar activists who went to Hanoi to pick up the released pilots. "The computers merely multiply man's stupidities thousands of times," he said, rocking forward in his chair with a knowing smile.

The editor of the Communist party newspaper Nhan Dan told the activists that "we have made enormous efforts" to beat the American

blockade of the ports. "We have spirit and courage. We have used many measures and we can continue our transportation to the south. These methods cannot be calculated by electronic computer."

I was wondering how a computer could determine the number of handfuls of mud required to fill a bomb crater, or the manpower needed to load and unload supplies that are leapfrogged from train to train across the bombed out portions of track each night on the way south.

But all those bombs raining on North Vietnam are dropping somewhere, and in interviews with top officials I got the impression that severe damage is being done.

"WHOLE cities have been destroyed. Hospitals, schools, churches have been destroyed. There have been so many victims," said Premier Dong, when the antiwar activists asked if the American people could help contribute to reconstruction.

"I fear that no city will be left intact in the North if President Nixon is re-elected. Mr. Nixon's war is ten times more barbarous than his predecessor's," the editor said.

But as our old sedan bucked and rocked across filled-in

bomb craters and careened by the ammunition boxes stacked like cordwood along the roadside, I got the feeling that the world of the cities and the world of the countryside supply routes were separate.

We were given no information about where these supplies originated, but we presumed they came down the highways from China to the north. I got the impression that as long as those supplies were pumped down through the arteries of North Vietnam the war would go on even if the cities were destroyed.

And the North Vietnamese can rationalize anything. Standing on one of the broad, treelined thoroughfares in the Hanoi that the French took so much pride in building, one of my guide-interpreters commented, "This is just a remnant of colonialism, anyway. If it is destroyed we will build a new, better city. Our city."