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Air Force's Quiet Move To Thailand

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Headquarters for the U.S. Seventh Air Force, responsible for targeting all American bombing of Southeast Asia, is being moved from South Vietnam to Nakhon Phanom airbase in Thailand, only nine miles from the Laotian border.

This means that the U.S. is complying with the letter of the proposed peace agreement, while retaining its air strike capability for possible raids against Indochina after a ceasefire.

The peace agreement now being negotiated in Paris forbids the presence of U.S. troops in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, but does not mention Thailand.

According to Americans stationed at Nakhon Phanom, the move will be completed within two months. (The peace agreement sets a 60-day limit for the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Indochina.)

WORK

It is already clear that something big is happening at Nakhon Phanom. Construction work can be seen in different sectors of the base. GI sources say that it is a Red Horse Civil Engineering unit that is putting up scores of prefabricated buildings.

Nakhon Phanom had been the smallest of seven tactical airbases in Thailand and was manned by only about 5000 men. Many thousands more are expected, however, and sources say that intelligence personnel connected to the 6994th Security Squadron in Saigon have already made the move.

This transfer means that American air units in Thai-

land will have control of their own tactical operations — from detection of targets to scheduling of sorties to release of bombs.

The 50 B-52s and approximately 550 fighter bombers, rescue helicopters and gunships in Thailand have up until now been directed from Tan Son Nhut airbase near Saigon. "Blue Chip" was the code name for this intelligence center which since 1965 has targeted all American air strikes in the Indochina theater.

MONITOR

Sources report that the super-secret air traffic monitoring center known as "Motel" will be moved either to Nakhon Phanom or to one of its radar input substations located at Udorn airbase, also in Thailand. "Motel," now located atop Monkey Mountain outside Da Nang, reports directly to operation "Blue Chip" at Tan Son Nhut. In addition, reconnaissance photography analysts will move to Udorn, according to sources there.

The new Southeast Asia command will probably move into the operations area of the now defunct Task Force Alpha, the computer center at Nakhon Phanom which controlled the electronic sensor system along Communist supply routes in Indochina.

The sensor program, known as Igloo White, has been under fire from critics both inside and outside the military as being too ineffective for its costs.

SECURITY

Placing Air Force headquarters at Nakhon Phanom

raises new questions of base security. North Vietnam has increased its verbal attacks on the Thai government's role in the Indochina war, and according to both Thai and American intelligence, the North Vietnamese have increased the number of men and arms in and around Thailand. The U.S. airbases in Thailand have been the subject of an increasing number of sapper attacks — one at Nakhon Phanom itself on Dec. 3.

Americans stationed at both Udorn and Kakhon Phanom have been told in briefings that a cease-fire in South Vietnam will not mean they are going home, as there will "still be plenty left to bomb in Laos."

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