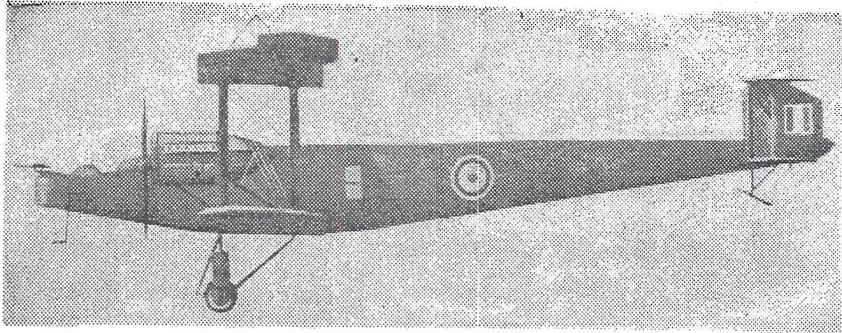


Indochina: Bombing Strategy From Colonial Air War

"The appearance of the airship would strike terror into the tribes. It will enable an expedition to be made with astounding rapidity, it will create the most terrifying effect on savage races, and the awful wastage of life occasioned to white troops by such expeditionary work would be avoided. . . ."

THIS PROPHECY for colonial warfare was written in 1908—years before the first bomb was ever dropped from an airplane in anger—by an early exponent of air power, R. P. Hearne. His language is more frank, but the strategy he envisioned has much in common with that which has governed the air war in Indochina since its inception on a systematic basis in early 1965.

The irony is all the more apparent now that we have been told that peace is no longer quite at hand. For the American answer to the present negotiating impasse has been to send the bombers ranging north of the 20th parallel once again to cow the recalcitrant natives. And even should a ceasefire be arranged, we are told that the formidable American air war apparatus will not be dismantled. It will be kept intact in Thailand and on carriers at sea, presumably ready to pounce once again should the administration wish to show its displeasure. Thus it is in



its historical context that we may see the use of air power in Indochina for what it really is.

IT IS COMMONLY accepted that the United States has dropped twice the tonnage of explosives on Indochina that was dropped in all of World War II. But unlike World War II it was never possible to destroy the enemy's means of production, since North Vietnam's arms were made in China and Russia. Also, although many towns have been destroyed in Indochina, the United States has not carried out saturation bombing of large urban centers as in World War II.

The strategic objective of air power in North Vietnam is to punish; in the South, air power has become a substitute for American ground troops. Thus, strategically, and in some cases even tactically, the air war in Indochina has more in common with colonial air wars of the 1920s and 30s. Consider this between-the-world-wars version of protective reaction on the Northwest Frontier of India:

"One tactic of the RAF which was very effective was bombing (the Pathan) reservoirs instead of bombing the villages. Every Pathan village lives on the irrigation of the hillside. The food is grown on terraces, which are watered by the skies during the rains. . . ."

"When a reservoir is bombed it bursts and washes all the soil off the terraces and there is no more food for that village for that season."

This was the view of C. G. Grey, who concluded that this method of air war did "more than anything else to produce the peace which has existed on the Northwest Frontier for several years past."

Despite the damage done to the intricate system of irrigation dikes in North Vietnam, the United States avoided the temptation to systematically destroy them.

The same restraint was not shown,

however, when it came to the mass deforestation of much of South Vietnam. Advances in chemistry made the program possible, but a more primitive version was tried by the Italians in the 1930s when they tried to burn off Ethiopian forests with incendiary bombs. Similar deforestation by fire was attempted in Vietnam, but failed when the tropical rain forests failed to ignite.

During the Indochina war, the United States has developed many special types of aircraft to meet the conditions of colonial air war. So did the French before World War II.

"The French, with that intellectual honesty and freedom from hypocrisy which is their chief charm, called it colonial bombing," Grey wrote. "In fact they evolved a type of bomber that was officially called 'Type Coloniale.' It had the 'usual bomb racks' and a 'gun pit in front with the guns pointing downward.' In the rear it had a fan tail with the fuselage extending over it so that a machine gunner could sit in the shade with plenty of traverse for his gun 'to shoot at the indigenes in comfort.'"

"In this way," Grey wrote, "any odd Syrians, Moroccans, Senegalese, Gabonese (sic), French Equatorial Africans and Indochinese who happened to object to French rule were kept in order."

THERE WERE complaints even in

those days that Colonial air war killed women and children. These complaints caused the then Air Chief Marshal, Sir Hugh Trenchard, to remark sarcastically in the House of Lords that one might almost think that women and children were fitted with special magnets to attract bombs.

The whole theory of Colonial Air War was summed up by Sir Samuel Hoare, who served as Britain's Secretary of State for Air between the wars, when he termed it "control without occupation." This of course is the philosophy behind keeping American bases in Thailand even after a cease fire.

Rudyard Kipling wrote a story about it called "As Easy as A.B.C." The A.B.C. stood for Aerial Board of Control, and the story was set in the future when all the world consented to be ruled by an international air force under the control of A.B.C.

The great military historian, B. H. Liddell-Hart, writing just at the end of World War II, wrote:

"Airpower had inherent drawbacks as a prime means to victory because while tactically it is the most rapid in operation and sudden shock, strategically it is less fitted to produce swiftly decisive effect. . . . An airforce operates by fractions and is much less concentrated than an army or a fleet. Its ground targets tend to be more dispersed, persed."

"An airforce is a super guerrilla instrument. It thus has a natural tendency to lead, strategically, to attrition warfare—the gradualness of which carries an ever extending devastation and damaging after effect."

Liddell-Hart went on to say that "Air power is more destructive than decisive," and the ultimate devastation when prolonged "may be disproportionately detrimental to post war prospects." This might well serve as an epitaph for the Indochina air war.