

Foe Claims 4 Planes Downed; U.S. Silent

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Dec. 19 (AP)—Military spokesmen disclosed today that American fighter-bombers exchanged missiles with anti-aircraft defenses deep inside North Vietnam yesterday.

The United States command said no planes had been hit in the engagement, about 145 miles south of Hanoi. The command refused to comment on North Vietnamese claims that three American planes had been shot down during heavy raids on a province bordering Laos.

"No comment," said a command spokesman. "We never comment on statements by the North Vietnamese. I have nothing to report."

A Fourth Is Claimed

The spokesman said the command had been announcing all American air losses. Some reports have been delayed for security reasons, when a search is on for missing crewmen.

The North Vietnamese Foreign Ministry said that the three planes had been shot down yesterday during attacks "in a pop-

ulated area" in Nghean Province. The Ministry did not mention the fate of the crewmen.

Today, the North Vietnamese news agency asserted that a fourth American plane had been shot down. The report, received in Tokyo, said the plane, a F-4 jet fighter, had been downed by North Vietnamese anti-aircraft men in Vinhphu province. Again, the fate of the pilots was not mentioned.

The United States command reported only the missile engagement, in Nghean Province, the second in the same region in the last six days. The command said that the planes involved returned safely to their carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin.

According to the command's account, two ground sites fired one surface-to-air missile each at a Navy RA-5 reconnaissance jet about 200 miles north of the demilitarized zone in the vicinity of Quanglang airfield.

An A-7 fighter-bomber escort fired one air-to-ground missile at each site, the command said, but the results were not known.

The command did not say

what the mission of the reconnaissance plane was. It was apparently seeking to photograph the Quanglang field and any MIG interceptors that might have been based there.

The United States is concerned about the increasing appearance in recent weeks of MIG interceptors over Laos, apparently to harass United States aircraft that were bombing the Ho Chi Minh supply trail network to the south. Quanglang is only about 15 miles from the Laotian border.

Spokesmen said there had been at least 10 instances in recent weeks in which MIG-19 and MIG-21 interceptors had flown briefly into Laos, occasionally firing air-to-air missiles, including one at a B-52. No American aircraft were reported hit.

The North Vietnamese, with increased anti-aircraft defenses, also have increased SAM firings in the past few weeks to defend the Ho Chi Minh trail against heavy United States bombing.

24 Attacks Reported

In addition to heavy fighting in Cambodia and Laos, the Saigon command reported 24 enemy attacks during the 24-hour period ending at dawn.

The command said that 14 civilians had been killed and 18 civilians and seven soldiers wounded. South Vietnamese vehicles, the command said, had run over road mines near Camlo, a district town south of the DMZ in the Central Highlands.

In one of the heaviest shelling attacks in several weeks along the buffer zone, the south Vietnamese command said, North Vietnamese gunners fired 80 mortar rounds at a South Vietnamese infantry unit near Camp Fuller. An undisclosed number of South Vietnamese troops were reported killed and wounded.

Informed sources in Laos said that North Vietnamese regulars, estimated by the Laotian Defense Ministry to number 8,000, are using 130-mm. long-range artillery against the five Thai fire bases that form the backbone of the defenses of the Plaine des Jarres. Thai batteries are returning the fire with 105- and 155-mm. artillery. United States Air Force F-4 fighter-bombers joined Laotian T-28 light bombers against enemy troop concentrations around the plain.

The plain, 100 miles northeast of Vientiane, has changed hands three times in the last two years. It has been held by pro-Government forces since July.