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Chapter 25

ROLLING THUNDER CONTINUES

The closely controlled program of air strikes against NVN, begun on 2 March, continued throughout 1965. The intensity of this program, ROLLING THUNDER, entailing US carrier-based and land-based aircraft with some participation by the VNAF, rose much more slowly than the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the field commanders wished or believed necessary. In terms of targets struck, areas brought under armed reconnaissance, methods of attack, and weight of effort, reality lagged far behind the recommendations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under the damping influence of other Presidential advisors who urged a more cautious, and in the JCS view, less productive, approach. Because during the year the enemy acquired from the Soviet Union sophisticated air defense systems, the threat to US forces operating over RVN soon became an integral part of the ROLLING THUNDER planning and a matter of continuing concern to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Procedures for Development of ROLLING THUNDER Package

Each numbered ROLLING THUNDER package, eventually sent to CINCPAC as an execute order, set forth in detail the targets to be struck, set limits on the timing and weight of effort, delineated the areas in which specified operations could take place, and in other respects precisely delimited operational aspects. The general procedure for development of these numbered packages involved initial guidance to the Joint Staff (J-3), by the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, in terms of what the Joint Chiefs of Staff felt should be included.

In addition, the recommendations by CINCPAC for each package were carefully considered. The DIA furnished target information and evaluations to further assist the J-3.

After the initial draft planning message had been developed, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were briefed by action officers and appropriate revisions were made. Revisions made at this juncture usually reflected JCS judgment on what

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higher authority would or would not accept. The Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, then discussed, usually on Saturday, the revised draft planning message with the Secretary of Defense, whose own staff had meanwhile been made aware of the features embodied in the draft message. It was at this stage, in coordination between the Assistant Secretary of Defense (ISA) and counterpart officials in the State Department, that the views and influence of these agencies were brought to bear. Substantive changes to the original JCS proposals were the rule rather than the exception, with both State and DOD officials, and on occasion the President's personal staff, prompting changes in targets, areas, timing, and procedures. Invariably such changes were in the direction of softening the impact of the bombing program on NVN. The final step in approval of the numbered package involved its presentation to the President by the Secretary of Defense, usually at luncheon on Tuesday, and in the presence of such highly placed Presidential advisors as Mr. Bundy, Mr. Rostow, and the Secretary of State. The President approved each ROLLING THUNDER package before the execute message was sent by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to CINCPAC. CINCPAC was responsible for recommending to the Joint Chiefs of Staff optimum targets for all ROLLING THUNDER packages. For this purpose he maintained in his headquarters a Target Planning Group composed of intelligence and operations personnel from his staff and from the staffs of his component commanders. The group produced a target list and armed reconnaissance proposals which were then considered by CINCPAC's ROLLING THUNDER Planning Group, chaired by his Chief of Staff. CINCPAC's final recommendations were submitted to the Joint Chiefs of Staff eleven days prior to the effective execution date of each ROLLING THUNDER package. Within the information developed for fixed targets were estimates of civilian casualties that would be caused by particular strikes.¹

Any of the individual members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who wished could have an observer present with the Joint Staff group which developed the weekly package. On 10 May the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, instructed the Joint Staff to flag for his attention any proposed target or proposed usage of forces that had not previously been considered by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This was "to provide opportunity for the Joint Chiefs of

1. (TS-GP 3) Armed Reconnaissance Study, Nov 65, Ann D, OCJCS Bulky File, 091 Vietnam Nov 66.

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Staff to exercise judgment in the targeting and the manner of employing our forces for the strikes against North Viet-Nam ..."²

In spite of the inhibitions placed upon ROLLING THUNDER, the areas authorized for attack in NVN were gradually expanded northward and westward, the number of sorties in a given period was raised, and the value of targets struck rose at year's end. There was a perceptible increase in both the scope and effectiveness of ROLLING THUNDER as compared to the first efforts made in the Spring of 1965.

RT 9 - RT 12 - Interdiction of LOCs

In approving NSAM 328 on 1-2 April the President decreed that the United States should continue roughly the present slowly ascending tempo of ROLLING THUNDER operations, being prepared to add strikes in response to a higher rate of VC operations, or conceivably, to slow the pace in the unlikely event VC activity slacked off sharply for more than a brief period. The United States would, in other words, react to any enemy initiative as appropriate.³

The President also forecast at least part of the shape ROLLING THUNDER would take, saying, "We should continue to vary the types of targets, stepping up attack on lines of communications in the near future, and possibly moving in a few weeks to attacks on the rail lines north and northeast of Hanoi."⁴

Starting with RT 9 on 2 April and continuing through RT 12, which ended on 29 April, operations against NVN were specifically directed at interdicting NVN LOCs into Laos and RVN. The general objective of this campaign was to increase the difficulty and cost to the enemy of sustaining his infiltration to the south and to degrade his capabilities of overt aggression. It was to be achieved by preplanned strikes against bridges and ferries and by armed reconnaissance against railroad rolling stock, trucks, and NVN shipping. During this campaign CINCPAC was authorized to attack either by day or night, in contrast to an earlier restriction to attack only by day. The number

2. (S-GP 3) CM-604-65 to D/JS, 10 May 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam May 65.

3. (TS-GP 1) NSAM No. 328, to Sec State, Sec Def, and DCI, 6 Apr 65, Encl to JCS 2343/566, 7 Apr 65 JMF 9155.3 (6 Apr 65).

4. Ibid.

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of strike sorties authorized was fixed at 24 per calendar day. Attacks on the Ile du Tigre were authorized in this period.⁵

In RT 12 CINCPAC was authorized six sorties in excess of the 24 sortie limit when necessary to destroy trucks or railroad rolling stock. The State Department had been reluctant to grant this relatively small expansion of authority. The Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, asked Admiral Sharp to send him, each time that he invoked "this permissive commitment of additional air resources," an evaluation for the Secretary of Defense of the actual worth of the target as demonstrated by results achieved.⁶

In RT 9 through RT 12, 26 bridges and seven ferries were struck.⁷

During the Honolulu Conference on 19-20 April, Secretary McNamara, General Wheeler, Ambassador Taylor, Admiral Sharp, General Westmoreland, Mr. William Bundy, and Mr. McNaughton discussed the ROLLING THUNDER program. On 20 April Secretary McNamara reported to the President that all had agreed that the present tempo was about right and that sufficient increasing pressure was being provided by "repetition and continuation." He stated that all of them envisioned a strike program continuing at least six months and perhaps a year or more, with the Hanoi-Haiphong-Phuc Yen areas being avoided during that period. "There might be fewer fixed strikes, or more restrikes, or more armed reconnaissance missions," he informed the President. Ambassador Taylor had observed that it was important not to "kill the hostage" by bombing inside the "Hanoi do-nut." All the conferees, Secretary McNamara advised the President, considered ROLLING THUNDER essential to the US campaign, both psychologically and physically, but did not believe that it could "do the job alone."⁸

5. (TS-GP 3) Msgs, JCS 8134 to CINCPAC, 31 Mar 65; JCS 8554, 7 Apr 65; JCS 9006, 13 Apr 65; JCS 9451, 20 Apr 65.

6. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 1433-65 to CINCPAC, 22 Apr 65.

7. (TS-NOFORN-GP 1) Institute for Defense Analyses Study, "The Effects of U.S. Bombing on North Vietnam's Ability to Support Military Operations in South Vietnam and Laos: Retrospect and Prospect," 29 Aug 66 [hereafter cited as JASON SUMMER STUDY], OCJCS Bulky File, 091 Vietnam Aug 66.

8. (TS) Memo, SecDef to Pres, 21 Apr 65, OCJCS File 337, Honolulu Conference, Apr 65.

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By the end of April, 60 of the JCS-designated targets in NVN had been struck, 43 by US planes and 17 by planes of the VNAF. Eighty-six armed reconnaissance missions had been flown against LOCs, targets of opportunity, and coastal shipping. The CJCS, addressing himself to the LOC interdiction campaign, informed the Secretary of Defense that the NVN problems in providing logistic support to the southern portion of NVN had been magnified and that the enemy's ability to support any major offensive beyond his own borders in Laos or RVN had been "degraded."⁹

RT 13 - RT 14

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In the ensuing several months emphasis shifted to attacks on fixed targets having military value. In addition to the bridges, barracks, and ammunition depots, the President authorized strikes against power plants, supply depots, ammunition factories, locks, and POL installations and facilities, specifying clearly, however, that strikes on population centers would be avoided. At the same time, armed reconnaissance areas were expanded and stepped up attacks made against radar sites, land and water vehicular traffic, bivouac areas, and maintenance facilities. LOCs were cratered, and chokepoints seeded. In this same period a gradual, but slight modification of restrictions and of operational methods and procedures became apparent and the limits on sorties were raised.

Before RT 13, which began on 30 April, armed reconnaissance had been limited to specific segments of designated routes. But beginning with RT 13 armed reconnaissance was authorized by a more broadly defined geographical area, in this instance the area of NVN south of the 20° N latitude. In addition the sortie limit was raised to 40 per calendar day with a maximum of 200 for the seven day period.¹⁰

Secretary McNamara, during a conference with General Wheeler on RT 13, stated that he believed that CINCPAC had consistently exceeded the number of sorties authorized since the beginning of ROLLING THUNDER. General Wheeler pointed out that newspaper accounts of the bombings made no distinction between actual strike sorties and other sorties carried out in

9. (TS) CM-616-65 to SecDef, 17 May 65, OJCS File 091 Vietnam May 65.

10. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 9990 to CINCPAC, 29 Apr 65.

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support of the strikes, for example, Combat Air Patrol (CAP), Search and Rescue (SAR), and flak suppression. The Secretary agreed but insisted he was talking about strike sorties. Actually, the number of sorties specified in the RT orders were considered by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to be "advisory" only. CINCPAC and his component commanders established the actual strike magnitude, which was monitored by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in order to insure an adequate weight of effort. Nevertheless, the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, asked the Director, Joint Staff to assemble data comparing the authorized figures with those reported from the field for the last two RT programs. When compiled these data showed that of 474 sorties authorized on fixed targets, CINCPAC's forces had flown 316, and of 264 authorized on armed reconnaissance they had flown 249.¹¹

Temporary Suspension

On 10 May 1965 President Johnson informed Ambassador Taylor that he had decided to suspend ROLLING THUNDER operations for about "a week as a means of swinging world opinion" in favor of the United States and "to begin to clear a path either toward restoration of peace or toward increased military action, depending upon the reaction of the Communists."¹²

Various efforts were made to contact officials of the NVN in order to apprise them that the United States would watch very closely to see if the bombing pause were accompanied by any significant reductions in NVN support of the VC, but these efforts appear to have been unsuccessful. At any rate, although ROLLING THUNDER operations were suspended effective 2400 hours, 12 May, Saigon time, and an intensive reconnaissance conducted, no reduction in NVN support of the VC was detected. Consequently, the President authorized resumption of ROLLING THUNDER at 0600 on 18 May, ending a five day suspension. Secretary of State Rusk announced, "In view of the complete absence of any constructive response, we have decided the bombing must be resumed."¹³

11. (S) CM-568-65 to D/JS, 26 Apr 65; (S) Summary, ROLLING THUNDER 11 and 12 (To Date), 26 Apr 65, JMF 9155 (18 Feb 65) sec 2, ROLLING THUNDER 13, 30 Apr-6 May 65.

12. (TS) Msg, State 2553 to Saigon, 10 May 65. No evidence has been found in available records to indicate that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were consulted prior to this Presidential decision.

13. (TS) Msg, State 3103 to Moscow, 11 May 65; (S-NODIS) Msg, State 2425 to New Delhi et al., 18 May 65.

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CINCPAC Proposes Changes

In mid-May Admiral Sharp warned against underestimating the cumulative effects of ROLLING THUNDER, and at the same time challenged the view that few worthwhile targets remained south of the 20th Parallel. He pointed out that of the four major barrack complexes attacked, about two-thirds of the buildings remained undamaged. Three major ammunition depots had been struck but only 40 percent of the ammunition storage and 56 percent of the depot support buildings had been destroyed or damaged. 46 percent of the known buildings in the two major support depot complexes attacked had not been hit. The surface had barely been scratched in strikes against NVN shipping and port facilities and a significant part of the enemy's bridge and ferry system was still intact. New staging areas, and refueling areas had not yet been attacked.¹⁴

CINCPAC proposed an around-the-clock program of strikes to be conducted in increments by small numbers of planes making repeated strikes. These missions would include armed reconnaissance of land and waterway routes, route interdiction, restrikes on still lucrative military targets, destruction of dispersed supplies, equipment, and military personnel, and attacks on ports and recognized NVN shipping. He recommended also that the regularly programmed large-scale attacks be continued to inflict damage on an incremental basis rather than attempting to inflict maximum damage in one day. Initially, strikes would be limited to the area south of 20° N, but subsequent strikes would be made against major military supply and ammunition depots and barracks northwestward from the 20th Parallel.¹⁵

The Joint Chiefs of Staff generally agreed with the concept sent them by CINCPAC. But they felt that in order to put his ideas into effect, changes in the current concept of operations would have to be made. These would involve giving CINCPAC greater authority to plan strikes and restrikes as the situation dictated. On 22 May 1965 they proposed in a memorandum to the Secretary of Defense that CINCPAC be given such authority. In a draft message that they proposed be sent to CINCPAC they embodied instructions that would have had him prepare a weekly plan of operations for submission to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

14. (TS-GP 3) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 120314Z May 65, JCS IN 55813.

15. Ibid.

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The draft set the weekly sortie rate at 400, and in general gave him a freer hand.¹⁶

The Secretary of Defense took a whole month to disapprove the CINCPAC views and the JCS recommendations. On 22 June he told the Chairman:

I am aware of no serious defects in the present method of planning ROLLING THUNDER operations. The proposed programs are worked out with close coordination between COMUSMACV, CINCPAC and the JCS. The operations are militarily effective and are managed in such a way as to permit political considerations to be taken into account on a timely basis. Accordingly, I doubt that, at this time, a change in our method of planning ROLLING THUNDER operations would be desirable.¹⁷

Ambassador Taylor's Proposed ROLLING THUNDER Tactics

At about the same time that CINCPAC was giving the Joint Chiefs of Staff his concept for future ROLLING THUNDER operations, General Taylor also proposed a change in strike tactics over NVN. On 13 May, he suggested to Secretary Rusk that consideration be given to varying the ROLLING THUNDER apparent standard pattern of "virtually daily strikes." The Ambassador believed that a more random pattern would have a greater psychological effect on the DRV. He suggested a period of a few days during which there would be no attacks, followed by a day of concentrated strikes over a wide area, and then small attacks. It seemed to him and to the Embassy Staff that this tactic would accentuate for Hanoi the "tensions, stresses and strains" of the entire bombing program.

Admiral Sharp quickly went on record as opposed to Ambassador Taylor's suggestion. In a cable to the Joint Chiefs of Staff he explained that there already were sufficient variables in operating methods. Moreover, he believed that the

16. (TS-GP 3) JCSM-404-65 to SecDef, 22 May 65, Encl A to JCS 2343/597-1, 22 May 65, JMF 9155.3 (12 May 65).

17. (TS-GP 3) Memo, SecDef to CJCS, 22 Jun 65, Att to JCS 2343/597-2, 22 Jun 65, JMF 9155.3 (12 May 65).

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concept he had just submitted, if approved, would result in maximum psychological impact on NVN. The Ambassador's proposal was not adopted.¹⁸

ROLLING THUNDER Moves North - RT 15 - RT 28/29

ROLLING THUNDER strikes were moved north of 20° N for the first time in RT 15. On 17 May the Joint Chiefs of Staff instructed CINCPAC to strike the Quang Suoi Barracks near Ninh Binh but not to do so prior to 19 May. The target was hit on 22 May.¹⁹

When General Wheeler cleared the planning message for RT 16 with the Secretary of Defense on 16 May he tried to increase the number of armed reconnaissance sorties but was unsuccessful, the Secretary specifying 285 sorties over the ten day period. The Secretary told the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff that CINCPAC had not yet equaled or exceeded the number of armed reconnaissance sorties during a given ROLLING THUNDER period. The Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, told CINCPAC that "if you approach the specified upper limit, he will seek to have your authorization for armed recon sorties increased."²⁰

During RT 16, which took place between 25 May and 3 June, and covered ten strike days as opposed to the usual seven, CINCPAC was authorized to attack with relatively small strike elements in a series of attacks spread over the period until the desired damage levels to fixed targets had been achieved. This was done to reduce the risk involved in going against targets believed to be heavily defended. While MIG CAP and screening aircraft were authorized to protect the strike force, they were enjoined not to attack air bases supporting hostile aircraft. They could, however, engage in air to air combat.²¹

18. (TS) Msg, Saigon 3753 to State, 131033Z May 65, JCS IN 48675; (TS-GP 3) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS 140351Z May 65, JCS IN 59404.

19. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 2230 to CINCPAC, 17 May 65. (S-NOFORN) NMCC OPSUM, 22 May 65.

20. (TS) Msg, JCS 1836-65 to CINCPAC, 19 May 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam May 65.

21. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 2672 to CINCPAC, 22 May 65.

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In RT 17 emphasis was placed on armed reconnaissance of routes emanating from Vinh with sufficient repetitive attacks to insure proper interdiction of the LOCs. SAM sites were explicitly excluded as targets. A new feature was added in RT 18 when CINCPAC, at his request, was authorized to conduct armed reconnaissance; small and precise attacks during daytime against prebriefed military targets not in the Joint Chiefs of Staff target list; and, thereafter, armed route reconnaissance with residual ordnance.²²

US air strikes moved north of 21° N on 15 June in RT 19 when a military complex and an ammo depot above that line were taken under attack. RT 19, RT 20, and RT 21 listed a total of 24 fixed targets, including seven to be restructed. Among these latter were the airfields at Dong Hoi and Vinh which were being reconstructed by the enemy. The number of weekly sorties was raised in RT 21 from 200 per week to 250 per week with the weight of effort and timing to be at the discretion of CINCPAC. In all of these periods CINCPAC's request for additional armed reconnaissance sorties were granted when it appeared necessary to higher authority.²³

Each of these programs authorized a slightly larger armed reconnaissance area until, in RT 21, the area was extended to the Laotian border in the northwest. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had on several occasions proposed the use of naval forces to harass the Ile du Tigre within the framework of the ROLLING THUNDER program. They again proposed this action in their planning message for RT 21 but it was turned down since some higher authorities considered it would represent an escalation of the war.²⁴

Although its participation was an important element of ROLLING THUNDER, in view of the need for the program to be a combined effort, the VNAF was hard pressed to mount the few strikes assigned to it in southern NVN. Increasing need for its services in RVN in response to growing VC activity severely reduced VNAF resources available for ROLLING THUNDER. By June CINCPAC believed some measure was necessary to assure

22. (TS-GP 3) Msgs, JCS 3263 to CINCPAC, 2 Jun 65; JCS 3552, 8 Jun 65. See Ch 26 for details of the SAM threat and its effect on ROLLING THUNDER.

23. (TS-GP 3) Msgs, JCS 3944 to CINCPAC, 15 Jun 65; JCS 4494, 24 Jun 65; JCS 4801, 29 Jun 65.

24. Ibid.

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continued VNAF participation in air actions against the north, and by arrangement with COMUSMACV and the RVNAF high command it was agreed that the VNAF would provide a modest three strike/reconnaissance missions (24 sorties) for each of the ROLLING THUNDER periods.²⁵

On 11 June, in connection with important recommendations for deployment of forces, the Joint Chiefs of Staff warned the Secretary of Defense that there were significant indications that the Communists might be on the verge of moving the war in Southeast Asia to a new level of intensity. The Soviet deployment of more jet fighters, some light bombers, and SA-2s to NVN showed a Communist decision to "add a new dimension to the situation in Southeast Asia." They proposed therefore, among other actions, that the air war against NVN be intensified to include increased armed reconnaissance sorties against the LOCs and strikes against militarily important targets. This was necessary, said the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to reduce NVN capabilities to support the insurgencies in Laos and RVN, to punish NVN still further, and to establish more clearly the US intent to prevent a Communist seizure of RVN.²⁶

Fairly typical of the evolutionary development of a ROLLING THUNDER Program was RT 20. In their original draft planning message the Joint Staff included 11 fixed targets to be struck by the US planes and three targets to be struck by the VNAF. Of these 14 targets, one had been recommended by CINCPAC and the Secretary of Defense jointly, three by the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, two by CINCPAC, one by CINCPAC and J-3 jointly, and the remaining seven by J-3. Of those recommended by J-3 only two had not been previously approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. At a meeting on 18 June the Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed to recommend approval of the two new targets.

In the ensuing consultation between the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Secretary of Defense, five US fixed targets and one RVNAF fixed target were removed from the draft proposal, leaving five US targets and two VNAF targets. While it is not clear at whose initiative these were excised it is

25. (TS-NOFORN-GP 3) CINCPAC Command History, 1965, Vol II, pp. 337-338.

26. (TS-GP 3) JCSM-457-65 to SecDef, 11 Jun 65, (derived from JCS 2343/602), JMF 9155.3 (7 Jun 65).

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probable that the Secretary of Defense was responsible. At this point a draft planning message containing the targets and instructions approved by the Secretary of Defense for RT 20 was sent to CINCPAC to alert him. By this time the draft planning message had been shown to the State Department by the Assistant Secretary of Defense (ISA).²⁷ Upon seeing the list of fixed targets proposed by the Secretary of Defense, the State Department objected to hitting a thermal power plant and a POL installation at Nam Dinh. These were listed as one target because of their proximity. State Department authorities felt that they were "too close" to Haiphong, to SAM Site #1, and to Phuc Yen airfield. (The targets were actually 27 miles from the SAM site and 51 miles from the airfield.) They also believed that the installations were too close to civilian population areas, thus leading to the possibility of "high" casualties.

The Assistant Secretary of Defense (ISA), Mr. McNaughton, explained to the Secretary of Defense on 22 June that these targets were indeed the closest to Hanoi and Haiphong of any that had been recommended. With respect to the second State Department objection, the estimate of civilian casualties based on a relevant adjacent area population of 1,300 and assuming daylight alert conditions, had been placed at 30 casualties. Mr. McNaughton recommended that Mr. McNamara press for these targets, which represent 4 percent of NVN's thermal power capacity and 6.5 percent of its POL storage capacity. "If you must come up with an alternate target as a replacement," he said, "I suggest that you recommend Target 43, which was one of those recommended by the Chiefs for ROLLING THUNDER." Target 43 was an ammunition depot at Qui Hau. In the end, as a compromise solution, Secretary of State Rusk agreed to Target 43, and it replaced the Nam Dinh target on the list of approved fixed targets.

The final execute message for ROLLING THUNDER 20, sent on 24 June, contained five fixed US targets and two VNAF targets. Subsequently two airfields, Vinh and Dong Hoi, were added to.

²⁷. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 0438 to CINCPAC 21 Jun 65; (TS) Briefing for JCS, 18 Jun, J-3, ROLLING THUNDER Twenty; (TS) Memo, J-3 for CJCS, 17 Jun 65; (C) Note to Control Div, "Briefing on ROLLING THUNDER 20," 18 Jun 65; JMF 9155 (18 Feb 65) sec 3, ROLLING THUNDER 20.

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RT 20 as reconnaissance revealed that these fields, previously struck, had been restored to operational status by the enemy.²⁸

General Wheeler, on 28 June, informed Admiral Sharp that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were "considering urgently expanded military actions" both in RVN and NVN, with the objective of proving to the VC and to the NVN that they could not win in South Vietnam. "In North Vietnam," he said, "our objective is further to curtail by air strikes their capability and will to continue support to the VC."²⁹

An ad hoc study group appointed by the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, following a conversation with the Secretary of Defense on 2 July, reported on 14 July that ROLLING THUNDER results through June showed that the program had not achieved the purpose intended. Although 10,000 sorties had been flown and 122 targets in NVN (the original JCS 94 targets had increased to 240) had been damaged or destroyed, the economic effects on NVN had been minor. "From a military standpoint," the report maintained, "the flow of material and manpower from NVN in support of VC/DRV operations in the south is still considerable. Direct attacks against military installations, while doubtless creating a disruptive effect on troops and upon their training, have not discernibly weakened the fiber of the DRV military structure. In short, the DRV still seems ready and able to endure air strikes at the current level."³⁰

Secretary of State Rusk, during an interview on 11 July, asserted that the United States had never "suspected" that air strikes against North Vietnam would be a "decisive element" but that the NVN had discovered that it was not going to be permitted to send tens of thousands of people into the RVN to attack it and still be permitted to live in safety and comfort "there in the North." There was to be no sanctuary for those committing aggression against the RVN and he warned that this was a fact that "others who may be supporting Hanoi must take fully into account."³¹

28. (TS) Memo, ASD(ISA) to SecDef, "ROLLING THUNDER XX," 22 Jun 65, w/pencilled notation, JMF 9155 (18 Feb 65) sec 3, ROLLING THUNDER 20.

29. (TS) Msg, JCS 2400-65 to CINCPAC, 28 Jun 65, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Jun 65.

30. (TS) CM-745-65 to SecDef, 14 Jul 65, OCJCS File, 091 Vietnam Jul 65.

31. Interv, Secretary Rusk, 11 Jul 65, Dept of State Bulletin, 2 Aug 65.

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During the Summer of 1965 the nature of the strike program against fixed targets did not, in spite of the urgings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the findings of the ad hoc group, change materially. ROLLING THUNDER programs between July and September authorized strikes on 59 fixed targets (27 of them restrikes) which included 26 barracks, 11 ammunition depots, two port facilities, seven bridges, two explosive plants, two thermal power plants, six supply depots, one hydroelectric power plant, one lock and one POL installation.³² Beginning with ROLLING THUNDER 22/23 on 9 July two packages were combined, designed to cover a two week period with the weight of effort to be approximately equal for each week. It was felt that this procedure, which he had suggested, would give CINCPAC more flexibility in his planning and conduct of the operations.³³

In this package the Joint Staff proposed strikes against bridges on the main rail line leading from China into NVN, one of the bridges only 17 miles from the China border. They also proposed moving the armed reconnaissance area north and north-westward to within 11.5 miles of the Chinese border in order to include the area of this rail line.³⁴

Even though the President's statement of early April seemed to support attacks against rail lines from China, higher authority disallowed the attacks on the bridges and did not move the armed reconnaissance area as far to the north as the Joint Staff had recommended. 22° N was made the northern limit of the area. Restrikes by armed reconnaissance planes were authorized against previously struck airfields and JCS numbered LOC targets if necessary to keep them out of commission.³⁵

During the twelve week period of RT 22/23 through 32/33 the tempo of the armed reconnaissance program, in contrast to the fixed target strikes, increased substantially. In RT 26/27 the limit on armed reconnaissance sorties was raised from 500 to 600 for the two week period, to 1,000 for ROLLING THUNDER 28/29,

32. (TS-NOFORN GP 1) JASON Summer Study, p.88, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Aug 66.

33. (TS) Note to Control Div "ROLLING THUNDER," 2 Jul 65, JMF 9155 (18 Feb 65) sec 3, ROLLING THUNDER 22/23.

34. (TS) Briefing for the JCS on ROLLING THUNDER 22/23, 2 Jul 65; (TS) Memo for the CJCS, J-3, 1 Jul 65; same file.

35. (TS-GP 3) JCS 5226 to CINCPAC, 6 Jul 65.

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and 1,200 for RT 30/31 and RT 32/33. CINCPAC frequently asked for and received additional sortie authorizations to maintain the momentum of his attacks.³⁶ In their instruction to CINCPAC for RT 24/25 the Joint Chiefs of Staff directed him to plan his strikes and reconnaissance missions so that his planes would not "approach closer than fifteen (15) nautical miles of the China border."³⁷

In RT 26/27, ROLLING THUNDER fixed target authorization moved over the 22° N Parallel, and CINCPAC was finally authorized to strike a highway bridge on the highway to China. Other bridge targets in that same area were rejected by higher authority. Naval craft berthing areas and airfields were also authorized for armed reconnaissance strikes in this program.³⁸

New guidance granting authority to attack SAM systems "in a mobile mode" was reflected in the RT 28/29. CINCPAC was told on 17 August that he could attack such systems lying within the ROLLING THUNDER armed reconnaissance area. CINCPAC had made a number of specific recommendations on this particular package. He had asked that the armed reconnaissance area be expanded to new limits which would allow operations within 17 nautical miles of SAM sites in the Hanoi area and within 15 nautical miles of Phuc Yen on the north. The Joint Staff included these new geographical limits in the draft planning message. CINCPAC also recommended 800 sorties for the two week period; the Joint Staff increased this to 1,000 sorties feeling the greater number was warranted because of the increased tempo of operations against the LOCs. Of 15 fixed targets proposed by CINCPAC, the Joint Staff turned down eight for reasons ranging from the fact that they were not on the JCS Target List or lay in heavily populated areas to the fact that they were located close to Phuc Yen and would "be difficult to sell." In lieu of eight targets dropped, the staff substituted a group of key targets in the Haiphong/Hon Gay area. "If there is a substantial fall out of targets in the clearance process," the Joint Chiefs of Staff were informed, "the Chairman has eleven targets considered suitable as alternates; seven are restrikes."³⁹

36. (TS-NOFORN) JASON Summer Study, p. 88.

37. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 6369 to CINCPAC, 21 Jul 65.

38. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 7398 to CINCPAC, 3 Aug 65.

39. (TS) Briefing for the Joint Chiefs of Staff on ROLLING THUNDER 28/29, 13 Aug 65, JMF 9155 (18 Feb 65) RT 28/29 - 20 Aug-2 Sep 65.

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CINCPAC had also recommended that he be allowed to restrike all JCS targets previously struck. The Joint Staff proposed to the Joint Chiefs of Staff that he be authorized to restrike only 37 of the 100 targets thus far struck, but designated eight more of the targets as jettison areas. Of the remaining targets, only 20 had more than 50 percent residual capacity. Because of this and of other factors the Joint Staff advised the Joint Chiefs of Staff that "CINCPAC has rather wide latitude in this area and . . . now is not the time to push for this broad change as requested."⁴⁰

On 13 August the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved the recommendations of the Joint Staff and agreed "to give their full support to the Chairman's efforts to obtain permission to attack more profitable targets."⁴¹

In its final form RT 28/29 authorized CINCPAC to strike nine fixed targets, none of them particularly valuable. None of the Haiphong/Hon Gay targets were included.⁴²

Blockade and Mining

Another means considered by the Joint Chiefs of Staff for bringing pressure on NVN was blockade and mining of NVN ports. Such action combined with ROLLING THUNDER operations would substantially reduce the importation and movement of war materials into and through NVN. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had considered these actions as early as March 1964 and had proposed in November 1964 the aerial mining and naval blockade of NVN harbors as one of the series of increased military pressures that could be launched against NVN. On 6 April 1965, when President Johnson approved a program of expanded military operations in Vietnam, including the gradual acceleration of the ROLLING THUNDER program, he had stated that blockade and aerial mining of NVN ports should be considered "for future operations," but because of the "major political complications," he had directed further study of these matters.⁴³

⁴⁰. Ibid.

⁴¹. (S) Note to Control Div, ROLLING THUNDER 28 and 29 13 Aug 65, JMF 9155 (18 Feb 65) sec 4.

⁴². (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 8472 to CINCPAC, 17 Aug 68.

⁴³. (TS-GP 1) Briefing Sheet for CJCS, JCS 2343/566-4, 2 Aug 66, JMF 9155.3 (6 Apr 65) sec 2. (TS-GP 1) JCSM-976-64 to Sec Def, 18 Nov 64 (derived from JCS 2339/157-1), JMF 9150 (13 Nov 64). (TS-GP 1) NSAM No. 328 to SecState, SecDef, and DCI, 6 Apr 65, Encl to JCS 2343/566, 7 Apr 65, JMF 9155.3 (6 Apr 65).

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In response to the Presidential direction, the Joint Chiefs of Staff prepared a "Blockade and Aerial Mining Study," which they submitted to the Secretary of Defense on 8 August 1965. After reviewing the economic, political, and military aspects of blockade and mining, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended approval of aerial mining of the approaches to the ports of Haiphong, Hon Gay, and Cam Pha for inclusion in the ROLLING THUNDER program. The Joint Chiefs of Staff also recommended that the mining operations, once begun, be extended to minor NVN ports. As a complementary measure "for maximum impact" on NVN, the Joint Chiefs of Staff requested the inclusion of an expanded interdiction campaign against "high density alternate LOCs" north of the 20th Parallel in ROLLING THUNDER operations.⁴⁴

The Secretary of Defense forwarded the Joint Chiefs of Staff study to the Department of State for an assessment of the political risks involved in the mining and expanded interdiction recommendations. Deputy Secretary Vance assured General Wheeler that, upon completion of the assessment, further consideration would be given to including the recommended actions in the ROLLING THUNDER program, but apparently no further action was taken on the Blockade and Aerial Mining Study.⁴⁵

The Target Study - NVN is Evaluated

In late August the basic list of targets in the "Target Study-North Vietnam" was evaluated and priorities assigned to the targets by the Joint Staff. Targets were separated into four groups: Group I - those targets which were a direct and immediate threat to US/RVN forces, military bases or installations; Group II - those targets (other than Group I) which were most critical to the military capability of NVN; Group III - those targets (other than those in Groups I and II) which directly contributed to the military capabilities of NVN; Group IV - remaining targets sustaining NVN military and economic capabilities. The staff analysis showed that only two Group I

44. (TS-GP 1) JCSM-608-65 to SecDef, 6 Aug 65, (derived from JCS 2343/566-4), JMF 9155.3 (6 Apr 65) sec 2.

45. (TS-GP 1) Memo, DepSecDef to CJCS, 18 Aug 65, Encl to 1st N/H to JCS 2343/566, 19 Aug 66, same file.

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and two Group II targets had been struck. 40 targets in Group III and 54 targets in Group IV had been attacked.⁴⁶

⁴⁶. (TS-GP 1) Study, "Priority Listing of Targets Included in The JCS North Vietnam Target List (U)," 20 Aug 65, OCJCS Bulky File, 091 Vietnam Aug 65.

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