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Chapter 31

ROLLING THUNDER - PLANNING AND POLICY FEBRUARY-JUNE 1966

The Joint Chiefs of Staff continued during 1966 to approach the matter of air operations more aggressively than did other advisors to the President. The air measures proposed by the field commanders to counter enemy support of the war in the South were generally approved and supported by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The reactions at the State and OSD levels and at the NSC/White House advisory levels were consistently more conservative.

The Spring and early Summer of 1966 became a period in which pressures mounted and issues were joined. Advocating stronger actions against NVN, military authorities sought to persuade their civilian superiors that time was running out on moderation. In this period decisions of great consequence took shape slowly but steadily. Repeated military recommendations, backed by that most cogent of arguments, the failure of extant measures to achieve US objectives, almost consistently brought grudging approval for stronger military actions.

The story of US planning and policy for the use of its air power in Southeast Asia during 1966 can best be told in terms of this gradual acceptance by the President of military recommendations for stronger air actions against the enemy. Proposals from the field that early in the year seemed to have little chance of being accepted had, by mid-1966, been accepted in principle and some had been put into effect.

The Target Systems

The main military objective that the Joint Chiefs of Staff and CINCPAC sought in ROLLING THUNDER during 1966 was the destruction or neutralization of the principal systems supporting enemy infiltration of men and supplies into RVN. These were NVN LOCs and POL. The recommendations by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and CINCPAC in mid-January set the stage for additional strong efforts to

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secure Presidential authority for effective attacks on these systems. Acquisition of this authority was complicated and hampered by uncertainty in the minds of some of the President's advisors about the actual military value of destroying the POL and LOCs. Beyond this, a general belief that adverse political effects would result from any large-scale attacks to knock out these systems inhibited efforts to secure the requisite authority. Nevertheless, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and CINCPAC persevered during the first half of 1966 in their attempts to persuade the President that the best way to reduce substantially the enemy infiltration was to destroy the means by which he moved.

The LOCs

The NVN rail lines and highways outside the restricted areas had been attacked during 1965. Hanoi's ports and related facilities, however, had remained immune from attack. The continuing recommendations by the Joint Chiefs of Staff aimed at more effectively interdicting the rail lines and highways in NVN and at curtailing the operations at NVN ports.

The necessity for increased efforts against the rail system, particularly in northern NVN, was underscored on 11 January when the Secretary of Defense inquired of the Joint Chiefs of Staff why the rail lines leading from Hanoi to China were still operable despite US air attacks. He asked also what air actions would be required to "successfully interdict" these lines and if the cost in lives would be offset by "adverse effect of the interdiction" on NVN.¹

The key to putting these lines out of operation lay in the effective interdiction of the major bridges. This had not been accomplished, owing to bad weather, operational restrictions, and the enemy's repair capability. General Wheeler explained on 25 January that interdiction could be accomplished and the lines kept inoperative by "a commitment of approximately 750 strike/combat support sorties monthly providing six strikes per month on each line. . . ." Based on experience to date, these operations would cost

1. (TS) Memo, SecDef to CJCS, 11 Jan 66, JMF 9155.3 (5 Jan 66).

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the United States four aircraft destroyed and one crew member killed each month. General Wheeler stated that the Joint Chiefs of Staff believed that these costs would be warranted by the impact upon NVN and RVN.²

Mining the Ports

One million short tons had been imported into NVN in 1965, 70 percent by sea, mostly through the port of Haiphong. It would obviously be advantageous to stop this flow and the Joint Chiefs of Staff fully realized this. Their proposal of August 1965 that Haiphong and smaller ports at Hon Gay and Cam Pha be cut off by aerial mining of their approaches had been sent to the State Department for assessment of political risks, but by the beginning of 1966 no reply had been received. They had again raised the problem without making a specific recommendation on 18 January.³

The Joint Chiefs of Staff had followed this course because they realized the serious political consequences that could arise from mining the ports. US intelligence estimates substantiated that reactions, even among nations friendly to the United States, would be adverse in most cases. Since much of the shipping then using NVN ports was of Free World origin, to mine the ports and possibly to destroy ships from such nations as Great Britain could alienate America's friends. Communist nations, particularly the Soviet Union, could be expected to protest any mining of NVN ports vigorously and possibly to attempt some type of action against the United States in the United Nations. It was unlikely, however, that the Soviet Union would risk sending its ships into NVN harbors known to be mined.⁴

2. (TS) CM-1134-66 to SecDef, 25 Jan 66, same file.

3. (TS-GP 1) J-3 TP for CJCS, "Mining Haiphong Approaches," 7 Mar 66, JMF 9155.3 (8 Mar 66). (TS-GP 1) JCSM-608-66 to SecDef, 8 Aug 65 (derived from JCS 2343/566-4); (TS-GP 1) Memo, DepSecDef to CJCS, 18 Aug 65, encl to 1st N/H of JCS 2343/566, 19 Aug 65; JMF 9155.3 (6 Mar 65) sec 2.

4. (S-GP 1) Memo, CIA to SecState et al., "Reaction to Continuation or Termination of the Pause in Air Attacks on the DRV," 19 Jan 66, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam 1-20 Jan 66.

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Closing main seaports to normal shipping would force NVN to turn to rail, small craft and coastal shipping and would also force a reduction of some imports. But the chances of stopping all shipping would not be very promising. Even if the ports were closed effectively, NVN could shift to use of shallow-draft coastal shipping and off-loading by lighters. Rail transport from China could be reduced drastically, but, based on experience in World War II and Korea, could not be completely cut off. Road transport would probably be expanded. While mining could reduce the level of imports substantially, the enemy could still bring in enough supplies to meet its minimum domestic needs and support the war in RVN.

POL

A study by the Joint Staff in January revealed that NVN facilities to receive, store and distribute POL products were particularly vulnerable to air attack at that time. Only a tiny fraction of the 172,000 MT of POL imported in 1965 came from Communist China, the rest coming by ship from the Soviet Union to Haiphong, the only NVN port capable of receiving bulk oil shipments. Within the country distribution was normally by railroad but by early 1966 the ROLLING THUNDER rail interdiction program had compelled the extensive use of highway and waterway carriers for POL distribution. US reconnaissance and intelligence had identified 13 significant POL storage areas in NVN. Before the US air strikes had taken their toll, these contained 97 percent of the estimated 216,000 MT total national storage capacity. Attacks on four of these areas had destroyed some of this storage, leaving about 179,000 MT of POL capacity. Over half of the remaining POL capacity was located in two storage sites, one in a lightly populated area near Hanoi and the other similarly located in Haiphong. One development which disturbed US planners was the dispersal of the POL stocks away from these concentrated storage areas into small buried facilities, which gave greater protection and reduced the value of the POL targets. Because of their small capacities these dispersed sites were worthy only of armed reconnaissance attack. The Joint Staff wanted the main POL storage areas attacked before NVN succeeded in fully dispersing its POL. The most important single target within the POL system was the storage at Haiphong,

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with over 40 percent of the total remaining known POL bulk storage. If 85 percent of the capacity at Haiphong were destroyed, the port would not be able to handle arriving shipments.⁵

The case for destroying the POL was somewhat strengthened by a joint J-3/DIA report that NVN was becoming more dependent on the use of motor vehicles. Eight hundred NVN vehicles had been destroyed by bombing in 1965, but this loss had been more than offset by importation from Communist China and the Soviet Union of about 2,000 vehicles in the same period. Hanoi had asked the Soviet Union for 2,700 additional vehicles and was seeking about 1,000 more from Communist China and the European satellite nations. According to the J-3/DIA report, NVN already had about 10,000-12,000 motor vehicles but required more because US bombing had increased the mileage that vehicles must travel and had increased the number of trucks needed to accomplish a ton-mile movement.⁶

Infiltration into RVN

As in earlier years, the principal infiltration route into RVN ran through Laos, where 500 miles of developed road as well as numerous trails led down the heavily forested panhandle. Using large numbers of men and great energy, Hanoi was keeping about 200 miles of this road net open year round, from the 17th Parallel southward through Laos to the Ca Mau Peninsula in RVN. Hanoi had also begun sending men and supplies into RVN through the DMZ. Although the DMZ was, under the terms of the 1954 Geneva Accords, to remain free of armed forces, the VC had operated in the DMZ for some time. By 1966 the enemy had stepped up infiltration directly from NVN into RVN through the zone, and appeared ready to intensify his activities in the zone even more. US planes had detected many camouflaged roads and trail nets running through the DMZ along with new road construction and support structures.⁷

5. (TS) J-3/DIA Study, "Attack on the North Vietnam Petroleum Storage System--A Study," 23 Apr 65 (Revised 24 Jan 66), OCJCS Bulky File 091 Vietnam Jan 66.

6. Ibid.

7. (TS-NOFORN-GP 1) COMUSMACV Command History, 1966, pp. 22-24.

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The Intelligence View

CIA experts informed the Secretary of State in late January that even the maximum level of air attacks proposed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff would not have a critical impact on the combat ability of the communist forces in RVN. They pointed out that the requirement for outside supply of the communist forces then in RVN was estimated to average only about 12 tons a day. Even with the communist force increases projected for 1966 by MACV, and at greatly intensified levels of combat, this requirement would average no more than 165 tons a day. The weakest part of the enemy LOCs, the Lao corridor, could carry about 400 tons a day, despite the current high levels of bombing in Laos.⁸

Another intelligence analysis produced at this time stated that enemy forces in RVN required only a small amount of external supply. The enemy supplied themselves with the food and POL they needed from sources within RVN. During 1965 it was estimated the VC/NVA in RVN had received 5-10,000 tons of outside supplies and that some of these had been put into stockpiles. The trend was rising, however, with greater demands in sight as a result of the increased infiltration from the North, the introduction of heavier weapons, and the standardization on the 7.62mm family of weapons. It appeared that as a result the total 1966 requirement would be substantially higher than the 1965 requirement. The communists were not using their existing LOCs between NVN and RVN at anywhere near capacity. Nevertheless, they were making a strong effort to increase their infiltration capabilities, probably in anticipation of increased requirements and to provide a greater margin of excess capacity in order to keep operating under the intensified aerial attack.⁹

RT 49

When, early in February, the Secretary of Defense visited CINCPAC's headquarters in Hawaii, Admiral Sharp's staff described for him the dimensions and nature of the

8. (S-GP 1) Memo, CIA to SecState et al., "Reaction to Continuation or Termination of the Pause in Air Attacks on the DRV," 19 Jan 66, OJCS File 091 Vietnam 1-20 Jan 66.

9. (TS) SNIE 10-1-66, 4 Feb 66.

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air effort that would be required to force a major reduction in the importation of war material into NVN and to curtail the infiltration into the South. To accomplish these tasks 7,100 sorties per month would be required. Sixty percent of these would be interdiction sorties to cut the overland flow of materials into and through the Hanoi/Haiphong complex, ten percent would be used against key port facilities and "high value" targets within the Hanoi/Haiphong areas, with the remaining 30 percent directed against LOCs supporting infiltration into RVN directly.¹⁰

On 12 February Secretary McNamara, recalling this briefing, intimated to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, that CINCPAC had recommended a monthly level of 6,000 combat sorties in NVN. He asked General Wheeler to review ROLLING THUNDER operations at a level of 200 sorties per day against the area presently authorized, plus the northwest quadrant. He said that the northeast quadrant of NVN, that area of northern NVN which included the Hanoi/Haiphong complex, "posed special difficulty" at this time. He stated that CINCPAC should assume that he would be required to stay within a limit of 6,000 sorties but could carry over the sorties not flown on a given day because of bad weather or other operational factors.

The difference between the recommended 7,100 sorties and the 6,000-sortie figure which Mr. McNamara was now using stemmed, General Wheeler believed, from his having subtracted the recommended effort against "key port facilities and high value targets" in the northeast quadrant.

General Wheeler informed Admiral Sharp on 13 February that he believed that authority to carry over sorties would increase the field commanders' flexibility. He added that he expected the Joint Chiefs of Staff to propose, "without being sanguine of immediate acceptance," reduction of the buffer zone along the CHICOM border and the Hanoi sanctuary, operations against the "POL complex," and the opening of the northeast quadrant for armed reconnaissance.¹¹

10. (TS-GP 3) Memo, ASD(ISA) for CJCS et al., "CINCPAC Briefings on Southeast Asia," 11 Feb 66, JMF 9155.3 (11 Jan 66).

11. (TS) NMCC Telecon, CJCS to CINCPAC, 132000Z Feb 66, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Feb 66.

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On 16 February Admiral Sharp informed the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, that, given the restriction on operations in the northeast quadrant, he could profitably use at least 6,000 sorties in the south and northwest. The real limiting factor was the bad weather which, unless it improved significantly, would probably prevent even 6,000 sorties a month from being flown. He told General Wheeler that, while the general briefing had set 7,100 sorties as a goal, he had in private conversations told Secretary McNamara he would prefer 7,400 sorties per month. Even this figure was not optimum, but represented a compromise solution based on the total forces and ordnance estimated to be available in Southeast Asia during CY 1966.¹²

On 19 February the Joint Chiefs of Staff presented the Secretary of Defense with the review of ROLLING THUNDER he had requested. They pointed out that if the northeast quadrant presented great problems and could not be attacked in the near future, two alternative courses of action were open. The United States could resume armed reconnaissance throughout the area authorized just before the Christmas truce on 24 December 1965; or it could reduce the excluded areas in the northeast quadrant and carry out operations throughout the redefined quadrant.¹³

With respect to the first alternative, practically all of the JCS fixed targets in the area had been struck and the expenditure of 6,000 sorties per month would be primarily against the LOCs and related targets. This would have little effect on Hanoi. In the absence of authority to strike all of the northeast quadrant, the preferable course would be to redefine the northeast quadrant to allow attacks against all NVN, less the area north and east of a line from the coast, passing four miles south of Haiphong, ten miles south and west of Hanoi/Phuc Yen airfield, and north of a 20-nm buffer zone along the CHICOM border. This would open up for attack about 650 miles of major rail, road, and water LOCs, 5,000 square miles of area, and 18 JCS numbered targets.

12. (TS-GP 3) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 160315Z Feb 66, JCS in 14408.

13. (TS-GP 3) JCSM-113-66 to SecDef, 19 Feb 66, JMF 9155.3 (17 Feb 66).

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In any case, so long as the northeast quadrant remained sacrosanct, air power could not effectively attack the influx of support to NVN. Denial of this support was, the Joint Chiefs of Staff stated, essential to the accomplishment of US military objectives in Vietnam. Because of this bar on attacks against remunerative targets and lucrative interdiction areas, greater effort must be made in other areas to compensate partially for a "self-imposed operational restriction." The Joint Chiefs of Staff commended to the Secretary as the "soundest program from a military standpoint," which offered "the greatest return for air effort expended against NVN," the program that they had forwarded to him a month earlier, on 18 January. This program was the minimum essential effort against NVN needed to further US military objectives in Southeast Asia. But if other than military considerations forbade such a program, they recommended, as an alternative, the redefinition of the northeast quadrant, and authority for CINCPAC to employ a monthly total of 7,400 combat sorties in NVN and 3,000 in Laos, and to use his resources as weather and operational factors dictated. Failing that, they asked that, at the least, the present area of RT 48 operations be expanded to include the area authorized for attack as of 24 December 1965, and that CINCPAC be granted the same flexibility he enjoyed at that time. "If for nonmilitary reasons," the Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded, "an operational limitation must be established through sortie allocation, such allocation should be on a monthly rather than a daily basis in order to enhance CINCPAC's flexibility."¹⁴

The new ROLLING THUNDER package, RT 49, approved by the President on 26 February, reflected to a degree the JCS views. The armed reconnaissance area was restored to that existing on 24 December 1965, as was the IRON HAND area. A total of 8,100 combat sorties were authorized for Laos and NVN, 5,100 for NVN and 3,000 for Laos, on a monthly basis. Effective 1 March, RT 49 had no terminal date since the monthly sortie authorization would not require a monthly renewal. Sorties could be interchanged between Laos and NVN as weather and operational factors dictated. RT 49 also reinstated the authority for coastal armed reconnaissance north of 20° 31' N to a point 25 nm from

¹⁴. Ibid.

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the CHICOM border, which had been originally authorized on 18 December but not included in RT 48.15

General Wheeler, on 26 February, informed Admiral Sharp that RT 49 was a step in the right direction despite several outstanding defects, such as lack of authority for IRON HAND in the northeast quadrant and the maintenance of the quadrant itself as a sanctuary. "I propose to push ahead in these areas in the weeks to come," he told CINCPAC. He asked him to keep a close eye on the results of RT 49 and to submit any comments and recommendations for improvement. He was particularly concerned by the greater threat now posed to US aircraft by SA-2s and by higher-grade MIG aircraft in the northeast quadrant.16

Mining of NVN Ports

At the beginning of March the question of mining NVN ports again came under scrutiny. In providing the Secretary of Defense a concept of operations for Southeast Asia, the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 1 March included provisions for aerial mining of NVN ports together with interdiction of inland waterways, coastal waters, harbors, and water LOCs.17

On the following day, 2 March 1966, Ambassador Lodge reported a VC attack on a friendly vessel in the Saigon channel and requested Washington consideration of possible retaliatory strikes against Haiphong Harbor. He suggested mining of the Haiphong channel as being preferable to bombing or naval blockade. CINCPAC agreed with Ambassador Lodge that the mining of Haiphong channel was the most appropriate means of reprisal. Plans had already been prepared and could be put into effect with only 72 hours notice.18

15. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 4888 to CINCPAC, 26 Feb 66; (TS) Memo, no sig J-3 Pac Div, to CJCS, 25 Feb 66, JMF 9155 (18 Feb 65), sec 6, ROLLING THUNDER 49.

16. (TS) Msg, JCS 0950-66 to CINCPAC, 26 Feb 66, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Feb 66.

17. (TS-GP 1) J-3 TP 7-66, 7 Mar 66, JMF 9155.3 (8 Mar 66), (TS-GP 3) JCSM-130-66 to SecDef, 1 Mar 66 (derived from JCS 2343/760-5), JMF 9155.3 (24 Jan 66) sec 3.

18. (S-GP 3) Msg, Saigon 3168 to State, 2 Mar 66, JCS IN 39000. (TS-GP 3) Msg, CINCPAC to CJCS, 6 Mar 66, JCS IN 44988.

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After considering the recommendations of Ambassador Lodge and CINCPAC, the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 10 March requested the Secretary of Defense to approve the total air campaign against NVN proposed on 18 January, "with earliest attack" on the NVN POL storage target system, followed by interdiction of the principal LOCs from China and mining of NVN deep-water ports. The Joint Chiefs of Staff believed that the recent VC attacks on shipping in the Saigon channel had diminished the political sensitivity of NVN harbor mining.¹⁹

The Secretary of Defense waited several weeks before replying that he would consider the JCS recommendations in future ROLLING THUNDER decisions. The mining of NVN harbors was never approved, however.²⁰

COMUSMACV Proposes a Shift In Air Effort

The intelligence analysis of early February that had indicated possible increased infiltration proved correct. By mid-March General Westmoreland was reporting greatly accelerated efforts by the enemy to infiltrate through Laos and the western portion of the DMZ.²¹

General Westmoreland believed that it was of greater immediate importance to attack and destroy the enemy's infiltration capabilities in southern NVN and in the Laotian panhandle than it was to attack NVN facilities in the northern area of NVN (north of Vinh) which he described as the "strategic rear." On 17 March he informed CINCPAC and the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, that the enemy was moving men and supplies into RVN at an accelerated rate, obviously bent on maximum reinforcement before bad weather closed his routes through Laos. COMUSMACV recommended, therefore, that the weight of air effort be shifted southward to the routes running through southern NVN and Laos. In this effort no arbitrary sortie limits should be set. The weight of effort could be shifted back to the enemy's "strategic

19. (TS-GP 3) JCSM-153-66 to SecDef, 10 Mar 66 (derived from JCS 2343/790), JMF 9155.3 (8 Mar 66).

20. (U) Memo, SecDef to CJCS, 28 Mar 66, Encl to JCS 2343/790-1, 30 Mar 66, same file.

21. (S-GP 1) Msg, COMUSMACV 08328 to CINCPAC, 17 Mar 66, JCS IN 64653.

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rear" in about six weeks, after bad weather curtailed enemy infiltration in the South. COMUSMACV also asked that, because the enemy was infiltrating through the western DMZ, bombing restrictions in that area of the DMZ be removed.²²

Admiral Sharp disagreed with COMUSMACV that strikes in northern NVN should be set aside and "all our effort concentrated in the Laos Panhandle and southern NVN." CINCPAC did not consider the enemy's "strategic rear" to be in NVN but "out of country" where "hardware of the war making potential" was generated. The United States, although it could not strike at the source, could strike at this hardware close to points of entry in NVN before it was dispersed over the LOCs. Interdiction "in depth" was needed to destroy enemy resources, to increase his repair problems and to force him to spread his defenses over a wider area. CINCPAC agreed with COMUSMACV that the DMZ should be attacked, but wanted bombing to be conducted throughout the DMZ, excepting only centers of population.²³

On 4 April, the Chairman informed CINCPAC and COMUSMACV that the Joint Chiefs of Staff concurred in the objective of causing as much damage and disruption to the enemy's infiltration efforts in the South as could be inflicted during the remaining good weather. A "substantial" weight of effort was being assigned against LOCs in southern NVN and Laos in current ROLLING THUNDER and STEEL TIGER programs. Further intensive studies were taking place to determine the enemy infiltration patterns and methods. However, the Joint Chiefs of Staff did not believe that it was necessary to concentrate on the southern LOCs at the expense of the "strategic rear." Interdiction of the area north of Vinh was also important and should be applied "throughout maximum depth." As to sortie restrictions, the present limit was well above those needed by commanders, particularly in view of the bad weather. With regard to the DMZ, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were preparing a recommendation that some air operations be authorized there.²⁴

22. (S-GP 1) Msg, COMUSMACV 08328 to CINCPAC, 17 Mar 66, JCS IN 64653. (S) Msg, COMUSMACV 08332 to CINCPAC and CJCS, 17 Mar 66, JCS IN 64994.

23. (S-GP 3) Msg, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV 19045Z Mar 66, JCS IN 69320.

24. (TS-GP 4) Msg, JCS 7643 to CINCPAC and COMUSMACV, 4 Apr 66.

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The Search for Expanded Authority - RT 50

The current ROLLING THUNDER program to which General Wheeler had referred was RT 50, developed in the last ten days of March and containing much stronger provisions than had its predecessor. General Wheeler had begun action on this program by discussing its parameters and objectives with Secretary McNamara on 21 March. On the next day the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, reported to Admiral Sharp that the Secretary had broached the possibility that a "controlled armed recce program" might be authorized within the northeast quadrant. As visualized by Secretary McNamara, the program would permit a level of 600-700 strike sorties against LOCs in the northeast quadrant to be charged against the current authorization of 8,100 sorties for Laos and NVN. He had informed the Chairman that, although he would not remove the restrictions on the sanctuary areas along the Chinese border or around Hanoi/Haiphong, strikes against a cement plant and associated power plant in the Haiphong area might be considered along with strikes against two or three of the major bridges on the Hanoi/Lao Cai rail line.²⁵

General Wheeler expressed concern to CINCPAC that Secretary McNamara continued to believe that ROLLING THUNDER had had relatively little effect on the enemy. This belief had apparently been strengthened by General Westmoreland's recent recommendations for shifting the air effort from the enemy's "strategic rear". "To say that this attitude disturbs me is to put it mildly because this conviction is used to argue against expansion of the air campaign against highly remunerative targets such as the POL system," General Wheeler concluded.²⁶

Although Admiral Sharp was anxious to resume operations in the northeast quadrant, he informed General Wheeler on 25 March that to do so with only 600 to 700 sorties a month would merely harass the enemy and would not reduce his external support significantly. Because the enemy had built up his air defenses and improved his ability to repair LOCs, any effective operations in the northeast quadrant would require "a large scale support effort" against air defenses

25. (TS) Msg, JCS 1508-66 to CINCPAC, 22 Mar 66.

26. Ibid.

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and a very heavy effort to destroy his LOCs and to keep them inoperable. CINCPAC estimated that 2,500 strike and support sorties would be required monthly in the northeast quadrant.²⁷

CINCPAC proposed that, if he was to be directed to make less than "an optimum effort" in the northeast quadrant, initial operations be concentrated on destroying all known POL storage and distribution facilities in the quadrant, rather than dispersing an inadequate number of sorties against several target systems. The weight of effort needed to destroy the enemy's POL would be negligible compared to that needed for an effective interdiction program.

Admiral Sharp informed the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, that to "go into the northeast" as proposed by the Secretary of Defense was not the answer to the problem. "Results can be expected to be inadequate," he said, "and the current criticisms will only be intensified because of certain increase in losses." He stated that the United States should not go into the area without objectives worth the risk. These were the objectives he had proposed on 12 January. "If not those," he concluded, "then POL."²⁸

Secretary McNamara had raised other aspects of the POL problem with General Wheeler during their discussions on 21 March. He had asked, for example, if it would be wise to attack the POL system in the absence of a decision to mine the ports. He had also asked what follow-up air actions would have to be carried out once the main POL storage facilities were destroyed, which elements of the POL system would have to be attacked, and how many sorties would be needed. Although concerned that attacks on the POL would trigger MIG reaction, Secretary McNamara had assured General Wheeler that he would assist in getting approval for strikes against the POL system and for a controlled reconnaissance program in the northeast quadrant.²⁹

27. (TS-GP 1) Msg, CINCPAC to CJCS 250850Z Mar 66.

28. Ibid.

29. (TS) Note to Control Div, "ROLLING THUNDER 50," 23 Mar 66, JMF 9155 (18 Feb 65), ROLLING THUNDER 50.

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On 26 March, in a memorandum to the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended that RT 50, a program of air strikes which took into account CINCPAC's proposals on POL, be initiated on 1 April. They noted that controlled armed reconnaissance in the northeast would place additional pressures on NVN. A monthly rate of 600 sorties would be sufficient against the rail lines and the three principal highways in the northeast quadrant. If another 300 sorties were added, the principal alternate routes could also be interdicted effectively. Further strikes to destroy the key bridges on these main routes should be conducted and other JCS targets restructured.³⁰

The materials needed by NVN to repair its bombed bridges and highways should also be destroyed. The Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended bombing the Haiphong cement plant, the Thai Nguyen iron and steel combine, and a large TPP collocated with the Haiphong cement plant. Because of the nearby enemy MIGs, planes on these missions should attack and destroy the early warning and ground control intercept (EW/GCI) at Kep airfield. The Joint Chiefs of Staff also recommended attacks against nine POL storage areas, including those at Hanoi and Haiphong, and against six bridges, three of which had been struck previously.

They assured Secretary McNamara that, quite apart from the question of whether or not NVN ports were to be mined, the POL receiving, handling, storage, and distribution systems should be destroyed because of NVN's great dependence on POL. Follow-on attacks should also be made against Haiphong facilities, which included the only deep-water facility for offloading tankers.

As US attacks on the POL came closer to Phuc Yen and Kep, said the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the probability of MIG attacks on US planes would increase. NVN had 78 MIGs in the Hanoi/Kep area, two-thirds of them operational. Although US pilots could defeat them, US plane losses would be inevitable. From a strictly military point of view, the enemy air capability should be destroyed before the bombing of the POL. Because of the political risks involved in

³⁰. (TS-GP 3) JCSM-189-66 to SecDef, 26 Mar 66, JMF 9155 (18 Feb 65) ROLLING THUNDER 50.

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such actions, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were willing to accept the military danger for the moment and not to attack the MIGs. They recommended, however, destroying EW and GCI at Kep airfield. At the point when the MIGs interfered with US strike operations the enemy jets and their bases should be attacked.³¹

On 31 March the Secretary of Defense discussed with the President the air program proposed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The President approved this program with respect to the southern and northwestern quadrants of NVN. Of the 8,100 combat sorties authorized, 900 could be used in the northeast quadrant "at the discretion of the military commands." He authorized attacks against six main roads and three railroads within the quadrant but outside the Hanoi 30-mile circle and the Haiphong 10-mile circle and outside the 25-30 mile strip nearest China. Although the Joint Chiefs of Staff had recommended six bridges for attack, only four were approved. The strikes which the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended against the Haiphong cement plant/TPP, against seven POL storage facilities including Hanoi and Haiphong, against the Kep EW/GCI, and against Viet Tri Railroad/Highway Bridge were deferred. Secretary McNamara ordered these targets deferred until specifically authorized, but directed that specific plans be made to carry out strikes against them in April.³²

General Wheeler was disappointed by the deferment of these ten targets. But he informed Admiral Sharp that he was "happy to state" that he was "confident authority will be forthcoming in the near future." In his view this authority was being withheld for international political reasons--the Communist Party Congress was in session but would terminate its meeting on or about 7 April.³³

The Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, was concerned that US planes would suffer heavy losses upon entering the northeast quadrant, which the enemy had turned into

31. Ibid.

32. (TS) Memo for Pres, no sig, [SecDef], "April program of air strikes against North Vietnam and Laos," [with SecDef notations], 31 Mar 66, JMF 9155 (18 Feb 65) ROLLING THUNDER 50.

33. (TS) Msg, JCS 1711-66 to CINCPAC, 31 Mar 66, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Mar 66.

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a "hornet's nest." He cautioned CINCPAC to initiate air actions there with care. "While it is most desirable from our point of view," General Wheeler said, "to resume air operations in the excluded area and interdiction of the northeast rail line would be militarily remunerative, bridges are tough targets and the cost would be high." Noting that weather conditions had been "atrocious," he said that he saw no reason to increase the danger to air crews by sending them in during bad weather. He ended by assuring CINCPAC that there was no pressure or requirement from Washington that he send his pilots in "full bore" against the entire target system in the northeast quadrant without regard for the safety of his airmen.³⁴

PP On the same day it was approved, the execute order for ROLLING THUNDER 50 was sent to CINCPAC. ROLLING THUNDER 50 became effective on 1 April to continue through 30 April. Except for the changes discussed above, ROLLING THUNDER 50 resembled its predecessor.³⁵ Armed reconnaissance by US planes was authorized in NVN south and west of a line running due west from the coast at latitude 20° 32' N latitude 105° 20' E longitude, then due north to a point 30 nm from Communist China, then southwesterly to Laos but remaining 30 nm from China. The VNAF could conduct armed reconnaissance in NVN between the DMZ and 19° N. In keeping with the instructions from the Secretary of Defense, CINCPAC was told to plan for and be prepared to attack the Viet Tri Railroad/Highway Bridge, the Haiphong cement plant/TPP, the Kep EW/GCI, and seven major POL storage sites, including those at Hanoi and Haiphong.³⁶

In passing on the authorization for ROLLING THUNDER 50 to his major commanders, Admiral Sharp warned that during the "lengthy hiatus" of operations in the northeast quadrant the enemy had undoubtedly built up his air defenses to a considerable extent. For this reason, and because of the poor weather in the entire area, he cautioned commanders that he did not expect them to rush into anything simply because they had been authorized to attack in the northeast. "It will be far better to have fewer sorties flown than authorized," he said, "rather than many unremunerative

34. Ibid.

35. (TS- GP 3) Msg, JCS 7480 to CINCPAC, 010112Z Apr 66.

36. Ibid.

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sorties flown simply to meet the sorties rate with attendant risks outweighing results." He was pleased with certain features of his new instructions; for example, the fact that his airmen were not expected, as in the past, to take out tough fixed targets, bridges and specified LOCs immediately and in a single strike. Authority for maximum day and night interdiction of the LOCs should not be interpreted as calling for continuous or necessarily frequent interdiction; rather it should be viewed in terms of results to be achieved.³⁷

On the same day that he received the execute order for RT 50, Admiral Sharp issued a new basic operations order to his commanders covering ROLLING THUNDER and IRON HAND operations. It was clear from the objectives listed in this order that CINCPAC had not acceded to COMUSMACV's request that operations in the area south of Vinh be given priority.³⁸

Earlier, for planning purposes, and to facilitate assignment of responsibilities to his commanders, CINCPAC had established seven geographical zones in NVN, designating these Route Packages (RPs). In this new basic operations order, CINCPAC assigned primary responsibility for armed reconnaissance, photo reconnaissance, and intelligence analysis to COMUSMACV in RP 1, to CINCPACFLT in RPs 2, 3, 4, and 6B and to CINCPACAF in RPs 5 and 6A. (See Map).

CINCPACFLT was named coordinating authority to preclude mutual interference of forces during air operations. COMUSMACV was authorized to use VNAF forces in RP 1 and charged with insuring that OPLAN 34A operations did not conflict with ROLLING THUNDER, IRON HAND, or BLUE TREE operations. He was authorized flexibility in adjusting the weight of effort between RP 1 and the STEEL TIGER and BARREL ROLL areas in Laos. CINCPACFLT would support COMUSMACV's operations in Laos by allocating any sorties in excess of his ROLLING THUNDER or IRON HAND requirements to that area, or, in the event that weather precluded strikes in NVN, by diverting sorties to Laos. Both CINCPACAF and CINCPACFLT would direct sorties into each

37. (TS) Msg, CINCPAC to CINCPACFLT et al., 020255Z Apr 66, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Apr 66.

38. (TS-GP 1) CINCPAC to CINCPACFLT et al., 010200Z Apr 66, JCS IN 92503.

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other's primary areas if weather conditions dictated such a move or when both commanders deemed it advisable.³⁹

Allocation of Air Effort To The "Extended Battlefield"

In early April, a shortage of air munitions resulted in the whole question of allocation of air effort in South-east Asia being brought under close scrutiny. The Secretary of Defense, during discussions with the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, on 12 April, expressed concern that priority of air effort might be going to ROLLING THUNDER at the expense of air operations in RVN. He stated that his statistics showed that the sorties against NVN since the initiation of RT 50 exceeded sorties against targets in RVN. He reminded the Chairman that they had repeatedly emphasized to CINCPAC and COMUSMACV that first priority for the air operations must go to RVN, and that, "not until the full South Vietnamese requirements are met are they to utilize Air Force, Navy, or Marine Corps air from Thai, carrier, or South Vietnamese bases against targets in Laos and North Vietnam." In view of these explicit instructions, he assumed that the preponderance of air effort against NVN in the first ten days of April reflected a temporary reduction in General Westmoreland's needs in the South. Nevertheless, he asked General Wheeler to repeat to the field commanders that priority must be given air operations in RVN.⁴⁰

The Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, immediately informed Admiral Sharp and General Westmoreland of Secretary McNamara's views. General Wheeler informed the two commanders that he had pointed out to Mr. McNamara that the air strikes in support of ground operations in RVN were actually at a high level, and that it appeared the allocation of effort was sufficient to the need. Nevertheless, because of Mr. McNamara's unusual personal interest, General Wheeler called on CINCPAC and COMUSMACV to insure that their subordinate commanders fully understood that air support in RVN had higher priority than air strikes in NVN and Laos. "Please advise me," he asked, "whether or not the ... policy is understood by all responsible commanders and is being followed in programming air operations."⁴¹

39. Ibid.

40. (S-GP 3) Memo, SecDef to CJCS, 12 Apr 66, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Apr 66.

41. (TS-GP 1) Msg, JCS 8297 to CINCPAC and COMUSMACV, 12 Apr 66.

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General Westmoreland was disturbed by the implication that he was not operating within his directives. He had, he said in an immediate reply to General Wheeler, always assumed that his superiors recognized that he, as the responsible commander in RVN, would never contemplate withholding air support from his own troops. He then turned to his earlier concept for the disruption and destruction of enemy infiltration through the "extended battlefield area," stating that he had been concentrating his air power in support of this concept. He considered the Laos/DMZ/southern NVN area nothing more than an extension of the RVN battlefield. His allocation of strike effort had been tailored to this concept. Weight of effort could not logically be divided or identified by in-country or out-of-country segments since the tactical battle was being waged in this area without regard to boundaries. He believed that what he was doing, applying in an integrated manner the resources necessary to cope with his enemy on the battlefield, was the only proper approach. ". . . I regard as unacceptable the allocation of air effort predicated on policy formula," he said. And he advocated strongly taking advantage of the flexibility of air power by shifting its weight where it was needed, when it was needed, to do the most good. Subject to these views, said COMUSMACV, all responsible commanders understood the policy and were following it in their planning and programming. If Mr. McNamara did not agree with his approach, General Westmoreland asked to be advised whether the Secretary intended that COMUSMACV's "on-the-ground judgment in these particulars be supplanted by formalized adherence to allocation of air effort by policy formula."⁴²

General Wheeler discussed General Westmoreland's message with the Secretary of Defense and they agreed that it would not be possible to give a "Yes or No" answer but rather a "Yes and No" answer to his direct question. General Wheeler informed General Westmoreland that he believed, frankly, that COMUSMACV had missed the point of Secretary McNamara's concern. The Secretary considered that ROLLING THUNDER per se definitely had second priority of demand on air resources. But he was not attempting to take away COMUSMACV's prerogatives or initiatives nor to direct allocation of air effort by policy formula.

⁴². (TS-GP 3) Msg, COMUSMACV 12815 to CJCS and CINCPAC, 13 Apr 66, JCS IN 22029.

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In the meantime General Wheeler had also heard from CINCPAC who stated that he and his commanders did understand the policy and were complying with it. On 14 April, addressing both CINCPAC and COMUSMACV, the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, closed the matter for the time being by saying, ". . . I conclude that your allocations are compatible with the policy: namely, attack sorties made out-of-country with in-country resources are not at the expense of sorties required for direct support of the campaign in South Vietnam."⁴³

On the same day, the Secretary of Defense gave direct support to COMUSMACV's concept of the extended battlefield when he ordered that requirements for air operations in RVN, Laos, and RP 1 be completely filled before any strikes were made in the other Route Package areas in NVN. Just two days later, on 16 April, in a personal message to CINCPAC and CINCSAC, Secretary McNamara emphasized his order by informing both commanders that requirements in the extended battlefield area came first. Operations in other RPs might be carried out only if they did not jeopardize actions in RVN, Laos, and RP 1. The Joint Chiefs of Staff and CINCPAC agreed that General Westmoreland's concept was now being implemented.⁴⁴

Additional Guidance - RT 50

During April further guidance was added to the ground rules for RT 50 in the northeast quadrant. Bridges on assigned LOC segments which were JCS numbered targets were authorized for bombing whether or not they had been struck before. However, targets not associated with these LOCs and not previously bombed could not be attacked. Also, as a result of State Department objections, the railroad yards at Cam Pha, which included some port facilities and which had been struck by mistake, were specifically exempted from attack.⁴⁵

43. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 8463 to CINCPAC and COMUSMACV, 14 Apr 66.

44. (TS-GP 3) Memo, SecDef to CJCS, 14 Apr 66, JMF 9155.3 (12 Apr 66). (TS-GP 4) Msg, DEF 8689 to CINCPAC and CINCSAC, 16 Apr 66. (S) Msg, JCS 8734 to CINCPAC, 18 Apr 66. (TS-GP 3) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 190323Z Apr 66, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Apr 66.

45. (TS) Msg, CINCPAC to CINCPACFLT et al., 290225Z Apr 66, JCS IN 52160.

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On 26 April the Joint Chiefs of Staff informed CINCPAC that effective 1 May RT 50 would be continued under that designation until further notice. He was specifically warned, however, that this did not authorize him to strike the ten deferred targets. 46

On 7 June CINCPAC again set forth the policy on priority of air effort in Southeast Asia, stating that the first priority task was support of operations within RVN. CINCPACFLT would support this in-country effort with one carrier. Aircraft from two carriers and USAF planes from Thailand would be used for operations in Laos and NVN. No planes based in Thailand would be used in RVN. The VNAF would continue to participate on a "token basis" in operations carried out against RP 1 in NVN, but only if this could be done without detracting from the effort in RVN. 47

Concentration on POL Strikes - RT 50A

During the remainder of May and June, the Joint Chiefs of Staff concentrated their effort and attention on convincing the President, against the advice of some of his chief policy advisors, that the ten deferred targets should be opened up for attack. On 2 May the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff briefed the President in detail on the need for attacking the POL systems, with particular emphasis on those targets in the Hanoi/Haiphong restricted circles. On the same day, in anticipation of a policy discussion luncheon at the White House scheduled for 4 May, the Chairman directed the Joint Staff to prepare a draft execute message for a new ROLLING THUNDER program to supersede RT 50. The new program would follow the general pattern of RT 50 but would include added features to increase its effectiveness. Strikes against the Haiphong and Hanoi POL complexes would be authorized, on the same day if operationally possible, but only in good weather. 48

The draft execute message was furnished to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, on 3 May. In addition to the specific

46. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 9326 to CINCPAC, 26 Apr 66.

47. (TS-GP 3) Msg, CINCPAC to COMUSMACV et al.,
070309Z Jun 66, JCS IN 24761.

48. (TS) Memo, CJCS to Mr. Bill Moyers (White House)
4 May 66, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam May 66. (TS) Memo for Record,
Capt J. R. McKee, USN, J-3 Pac Div, 021545 May 66, JMF 9155
(18 Feb 65) ROLLING THUNDER 50A.

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measures and provisions which he had directed, the proposed order opened up a new route in the northeast quadrant for armed reconnaissance. It also authorized attacks on the JCS numbered targets in the northeast quadrant, including six targets previously struck in the Hanoi/Phuc Yen and Haiphong restricted areas. The limitation of 900 sorties in the northeast quadrant had been deleted in order to allow CINCPAC greater flexibility, since improving weather might make it possible for a significantly increased effort there. A total of 8,100 attack sorties was proposed for the period 5-31 May.⁴⁹

The draft message designated the revised program RT 51. At the direction of the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, however, the message was recast, as a revision of the existing program, RT 50. It authorized strikes against the ten fixed targets deferred on 31 March, but warned that great care must be taken to avoid causing excessive numbers of civilian casualties. This draft was not immediately approved, however, and remained in abeyance.

On 4 May, CINCPAC proposed that strikes against the ten targets approved for planning purposes be approved for execution. In the same message CINCPAC also pointed out that of the bridge targets authorized earlier, three had been put out of commission and the fourth damaged. In addition, Admiral Sharp noted, a large number of NVN lighter and cargo craft were moving supplies from ships at anchor in the coastal port areas north of 20° 32' N latitude. He asked authority to attack them. Further, although CINCPAC had been instructed not to strike the Cam Pha area, armed reconnaissance along Route 18 near Cam Pha and Hong Gai port was authorized. He asked, therefore, for authority to strike certain facilities near Hon Gai port associated with the LOC and Route 18 armed reconnaissance. The Joint Chiefs of Staff immediately forbade him to do so, telling him that such strikes would cause "tactical difficulties." The Joint Chiefs of Staff, they informed him, were focusing on approval of strikes against NVN POL. Strikes against Hon Gai port would "complicate and obstruct this effort."⁵⁰

⁴⁹. (TS) Memo, no sig, to CJCS, 3 May 66, same file, same sec.

⁵⁰. (TS) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 040447Z May 66, JCS IN 57631. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 1433 to CINCPAC, 9 May 66.

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National authorities hesitated to approve the bombing of the ten fixed targets mainly because these targets were near centers of population. They feared that bombing so close to Hanoi and Haiphong might cause heavy civilian casualties and raise an even greater outcry against US policy in Vietnam. This point had been made clear early in May when the Chairman had instructed the Joint Staff to include in the draft execute order specific warning against inordinate civilian casualties. Sensitivity to civilian casualties was apparent at a White House meeting on 5 May when the Secretary of State made a general statement to the effect that hospitals, schools, and temples were located very close to the POL facilities in Hanoi and Haiphong. When he investigated the accuracy of this statement, General Wheeler was informed by DIA that no such installations would be endangered by attacks on these facilities. 51

On 9 May COMUSMACV recommended that, because the VC had destroyed some textile mills in RVN, the United States retaliate by destroying the Thai Nguyen iron and steel plant, "an economic asset of appropriate importance to NVN." The Deputy Ambassador supported General Westmoreland's suggestion. But Admiral Sharp, although he agreed that retaliatory strikes should be made, recommended to the JCS that the NVN POL, beginning with the Haiphong storage, be destroyed instead. 52

Because of their desire to push through the authority for bombing the ten targets, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were adamant against any action which did not fit into their strategy for securing approval. For this reason they refused to seek approval for strikes against concentrations of enemy missiles located in storage areas near to Hanoi and Haiphong. CINCPAC assessed these concentrations to be targets of considerable value, but the Joint Chiefs of Staff did not believe it "expedient" to endanger their efforts on the POL, by seeking approval to hit the missiles. They so informed CINCPAC on 16 May. 53

51. (TS) Memo for Record, CJCS, "Strikes on Hanoi and Haiphong POL Facilities," 9 May 66, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam May 66.

52. (TS-NOFORN-GP 3) Msg, COMUSMACV to CINCPAC, 091226Z May 66, JCS IN 65820. (TS-GP 3) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 100730Z May 66, JCS IN 67751

53. (TS-GP 1) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 052329Z May 66, JCS IN 60899; (TS-GP 1) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 062057Z May 66, JCS IN 62564; (TS) Msg, JCS 2719-66 to CINCPAC, 16 May 66; JMF 9155 (18 Feb 65) ROLLING THUNDER 50A.

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General Westmoreland put a new light on the ten targets on 22 May when he recommended that they be struck in the event of certain types of VC attacks against US installations in RVN. He arranged targets and US installations on an "eye-for-an-eye" basis, recommending that, if mortar attacks were made against US POL storages, the US should respond by bombing the Haiphong and Hanoi POL; in reply to any mortar attacks by the VC against the US airfields in the South, the US planes would bomb Kep and Phuc Yen airfields in NVN.⁵⁴

Commenting on COMUSMACV's "retaliation" proposal, General Wheeler told Admiral Sharp on 24 May that the Joint Chiefs of Staff did not want targets kept in a "reserve category" for retaliatory purposes because of the inhibitions inherent in such an arrangement. He then reviewed for CINCPAC his efforts to secure Presidential approval to bomb the ten targets. He had just talked with the Secretary of Defense and proposed a reduction of the sanctuary area around Hanoi and Haiphong so that "additional targets of high worth would be opened to attack." At the same time he had asked if the current restrictions against these POL strikes were apt to continue for very long. The Secretary of Defense had observed that the single remaining obstacle to the POL attacks was the current political turmoil in RVN. He believed that as soon as this situation settled, the President would agree to bombing the POL target system.⁵⁵

CINCPAC advised General Wheeler on 27 May that he appreciated the reasons for the delay in striking the ten targets. He would live by the rules "with the express intent of not jeopardizing your efforts to get approval of these ten targets, particularly the seven POL targets." He had turned down recommendations by his field commanders to strike some relatively minor POL areas and other facilities because they were on the borderline with respect to their location near populated centers and might upset the JCS efforts. He warned,

54. (S-GP 4) Msg, COMUSMACV 17603 to CINCPAC, 22 May 66, JCS IN 89352.

55. (TS) Msg, CJCS 2897-66 to CINCPAC, 24 May 66, OJCS File 091 Vietnam May 66. For discussion of the unsettled political conditions in RVN in this period see Ch. 38.

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however, that the enemy was dispersing his POL into smaller and smaller increments, implying that if the main areas were not struck soon their target value would dwindle.⁵⁶

Admiral Sharp then made specific recommendations, repeating previous proposals in some cases, for new ROLLING THUNDER "ground rules" to become effective 1 June. These were, in order of priority: 1) authorization to strike the ten targets, particularly the POL facilities; 2) authority to strike POL targets anywhere in the northeast quadrant; 3) authority to strike selected targets in the Hon Gai and Cam Pha complexes; 4) relaxation of rules for coastal armed reconnaissance north of 20° 32' N; 5) reduction of the Hanoi/Haiphong restricted area circles; 6) relaxation of rules to allow armed reconnaissance against other known lucrative targets in the northeast quadrant.⁵⁷

By the end of May, the arguments raised by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the field commanders appeared to be having some effect. On 31 May Secretary Rusk and Mr. Rostow concurred in the addition to RT 50 of seven LOC-associated targets, including a POL storage area less than ten miles from Haiphong. General Wheeler considered this a very encouraging sign, marred, however, by the effects of the current political troubles in the RVN. "It is quite clear that authority to attack the POL system was within our grasp," the Chairman told Admiral Sharp on 2 June, "when the political turmoil in SVN rose to a height which caused many people here to take a second look."⁵⁸

When, within the next week, the "political turmoil" subsided and the situation took a definite turn for the better, General Westmoreland sent a message to Admiral Sharp recommending immediate strikes against the ten deferred targets. He emphasized the psychological advantage of striking while Hanoi was still dismayed by the healing of the political rift in RVN.⁵⁹

56. (TS-GP 3) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 270341Z May 66, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam May 66.

57. Ibid.

58. (TS-GP 1) Memo for Record, OASD (ISA), 31 May 66, JMF 9155 (18 Feb 65) Sec 910, RT 50A Extended. (TS) Msg, JCS 3068-66 to CINCPAC, 2 Jun 66, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Jun 66.

59. (TS-GP 1) Msg, COMUSMACV 19218 to CINCPAC, 5 Jun 66, JCS IN 22371.

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On 6 June Admiral Sharp strongly seconded Westmoreland's recommendations. Attacks now on the ten targets would encourage Saigon and enhance the RVN political situation, make enemy dispersion of POL more difficult, directly affect the movement of NVN trucks and watercraft, and have a "critical impact" on the enemy's thinking at a time when he was hoping for some seasonal successes from his operations across the borders of Laos and Cambodia.⁶⁰

General Wheeler told Admiral Sharp on the same day that, if the political situation in RVN did not worsen, he expected within a few days authority to strike the ten targets. "You should know that this first intrusion into the Hanoi/Haiphong sanctuary will raise . . . specters of large numbers of civilian casualties in the target areas." To allay the fears of those policy advisers whose judgement might be influenced by this prospect, the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, had made certain that the draft execute message included admonitions on weather, crew experience, ordnance, and the like, which he normally would not send to a field commander. He assured Admiral Sharp that this had been done merely to smooth the path to authorization.⁶¹

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A week later the Secretary of Defense, addressing Admiral Sharp directly, advised him that the final decision on attacking the POL, the TPP, and the cement plant would be influenced by the extent to which these targets could be bombed without killing significant numbers of civilians. He asked what preliminary steps CINCPAC recommended to keep casualties down, and how many casualties would result if such steps were taken. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had already furnished Secretary McNamara with estimates of probable casualties. They had also given him five general measures which could be taken to reduce casualties.⁶²

On 14 June Admiral Sharp cabled the Secretary that in order to minimize casualties in the attacks on the Hanoi/Haiphong storage facilities, he intended to take five steps.

60. (TS-GP 3) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 060805Z Jun 66, JCS IN 23294.

61. (TS) Msg, JCS 3167-66 to CINCPAC, 6 Jun 66, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Jun 66.

62. (TS) Msg, OSD 3339-66 to CINCPAC, 13 Jun 66, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Jun 66. (TS-GP 3) Telecon 045-66, NMCC 752, J-3 to Dep C/S for Plans and Opns, PACOM, 132334Z Jun 66, JMF 9155 (18 Feb 66) ROLLING THUNDER 50A.

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They were: 1) conduct the strikes only in favorable weather; 2) select an axis of attack so that normal weapons dispersion would avoid populated areas; 3) use the most accurate weapons available; 4) use ECM to the maximum to thwart enemy missiles and AAA in order to limit pilot distraction during attacks; 5) use his most experienced pilots and brief them thoroughly. Under favorable weather conditions, the most important factor, CINCPAC did not expect more than 50 civilian casualties in attacking the Hanoi POL, Haiphong POL, and the Haiphong thermal power and cement plant.⁶³

General Wheeler, who was in Paris at the time, immediately cabled Secretary McNamara supporting CINCPAC's measures and estimate and saying, "I recommend that we proceed to execute as soon as possible."⁶⁴

Secretary McNamara called CINCPAC's "preliminary steps" "excellent," but he was still apparently not completely at ease. He asked Admiral Sharp on 15 June what restrictions should be placed upon flak and SAM suppression missions before and during the attacks to insure that strafing and bombing attacks on enemy AAA and missile sites did not hit populated areas. The enemy had located many such installations in the midst of civilian communities. The Secretary again warned that permission to strike the targets would depend largely on whether or not it was judged that civilian casualties in the attacks could be kept to a minimum.⁶⁵

In reply CINCPAC informed the Secretary that the restrictions already in effect were sufficient. He did not intend to go on a "SAM hunt" prior to the attack, nor to mount any massive flak suppression effort, although flak suppression in the immediate areas of the targets would be needed. He expected that most civilians would be warned in time by air raid sirens and would take cover. "It is unlikely that civilian casualties in any number would result from flak and SAM suppression," he told the Secretary.⁶⁶

63. (TS) Msg, CINCPAC to SecDef, 140659Z Jun 66, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Jun 66.

64. (TS) Msg, CJCS to SecDef, 141548Z Jun 66, same file.

65. (TS) Msg, SecDef 3395-66 to CINCPAC, 15 Jun 66, same file.

66. (TS-GP 3) Msg, CINCPAC to SecDef, 160920Z Jun 66, same file.

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Y P On 22 June the Joint Chiefs of Staff, following approval by the President, authorized CINCPAC to bomb the seven POL targets and the Kep airfield radar at first light on 24 June. CINCPAC was directed to bomb Hanoi and Haiphong POL on the same day, if possible, and then to strike the remaining targets. Attacks would have to be made under good weather conditions. Other caveats were worked into the execute message, including those measures which CINCPAC himself had devised to minimize civilian casualties. He was also told that, if weather or some other operational factor caused a delay in the strikes, he was positively not to start the bombing on Sunday, 26 June.⁶⁷

The soul searching which this decision had cost national authorities, including those at the highest level, was evident in the intense interest they displayed in every aspect of the impending operations. On the day before strikes were scheduled, CINCPAC was informed that the President and the Secretary of Defense "have been on the phone repeatedly." This concern stemmed from the expectation that a storm of criticism throughout the world would follow the bombings near Hanoi and Haiphong. "Fear of adverse reaction has been carefully implanted, nurtured, and amplified by those here who oppose more effective actions against the North," the J-3 observed to the CINCPAC J-3 on 23 June. "As you know, that group poses the greatest danger to hopes for more effective action."⁶⁸

The J-3 said that it was hard to believe the difficulty that had been encountered in securing the bombing authority. He believed that much would depend on the way in which the bombings were carried off. He cautioned field commanders that much would depend also on the manner in which the President and the Secretary of Defense were informed of what took place at each step of the way. Both wanted extremely detailed information on almost every aspect of the operations and they wanted it swiftly. The J-3 warned that special measures, special attention by special people, must be used to get this information to Washington in time and in the form desired. He asked especially to be informed about every change in the weather forecast in the target area.⁶⁹

67. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 5003 to CINCPAC, 22 Jun 66.

68. (TS) NMCC Telecon 053-66, J-3 to C/S, PACOM, et al., 231745Z Jun 66, JMF 9155 (18 Feb 65) ROLLING THUNDER 50A.

69. Ibid.

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The CINCPAC J-3 replied to the J-3 that he was taking extraordinary steps to develop the best possible reporting procedures. The weather, however, was bad, and it appeared that it would not improve within the next 48 hours, thus almost automatically precluding launching the strikes on 24 or 25 June; because 26 June was Sunday, the prospect of hitting the targets before 27 June was not very good.⁷⁰

CINCPAC recognized that in bombing near Haiphong there existed the danger of striking a ship belonging to a nation other than NVN, but he believed that it was a risk that had to be taken. He believed, for example, that a Soviet tanker was currently in Haiphong and assumed that this vessel was anchored off the pier at the main POL facility discharging its cargo. CINCPAC told his air commanders that, even though a tanker was berthed off the end of the servicing pier, their planes could bomb the POL storage area. If, however, the tanker was anchored and off-loading its cargo, no attacks would be made on the servicing pier.⁷¹

Before CINCPAC could launch the strikes, sensational stories appeared in the world press predicting air strikes against the Hanoi and Haiphong POL storages. These accounts gave the sequence of strikes, and the reasons for them, making accurate guesses as to timing, and speculating that the delay in bombing had been caused solely by bad weather. On 25 June, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, considering that the entire operation had been "thoroughly blown," and that NVN would have already increased the quantity and alertness of its air defenses to meet the attacks, cancelled CINCPAC's authority to bomb the POL. General Wheeler explained the reasons for cancellation to Admiral Sharp, and added that since the weather forecast was bad for the next six or seven days, not much was lost. He was convinced, said the Chairman, that once the weather cleared and CINCPAC was ready to go, the Joint Chiefs of Staff could obtain immediate approval for execution of the POL strikes. He asked CINCPAC to keep

70. (TS) NMCC Telecon 033-66, C/S, PACOM to J-3, 232229Z Jun 66, JMF 9155 (18 Feb 65) ROLLING THUNDER 50A.

71. (TS-GP 3) Msg, CINCPAC to CINCPACFLT, 232130Z, 26 Jun 66, JCS IN 52911.

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PP a close weather watch, to keep his strike forces at the ready, and to speak up when he was ready to go. As an alternative to the POL strikes, General Wheeler requested him to strike the rail and highway bridge at Viet Tri on the Hanoi-Cao line. He warned Admiral Sharp that there was much concern in Washington that the enemy would have stepped up his air defense in the Hanoi/Haiphong target area. He also warned of the possibility "that they will attempt to turn these strikes into an aerial Dien Bien Phu perhaps to the point of sacrificing their MIGs in a full-blown air battle and launching their IL-28s against the fleet or against Da Nang."72

On 28 June, CINCPAC, following instructions, cabled "Forces are ready and weather forecast favorable for strikes against NVN POL system. Request authority to initiate strikes . . . Wednesday after 291100H Saigon time."73

Almost immediately General Wheeler cabled Admiral Sharp full authorization to launch the bombing attacks on the POL.74 The attacks took place as scheduled on 29 June. Because only about 40 percent of the storage capacity at Haiphong was destroyed in the first strike, CINCPAC was authorized to restrike on 5 July.75

72. (TS) Msg, JCS 3633-66 to CINCPAC, 25 Jun 66, OCJCS File 091 Vietnam Jun 66. (TS) Msg, JCS 5311 to CINCPAC, 25 Jun 66.

73. (S-GP 3) Msg, CINCPAC to JCS, 281019Z Jun 66, JCS IN 59442.

74. (TS) Msg, JCS 5414 to CINCPAC, 28 Jun 66.

75. (TS-GP 3) Msg, JCS 5945 to CINCPAC, 5 Jul 66.

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