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Hanoi's buildup

By George W. Ashworth

The general looked up from the charts and figures in the Pentagon conference room. "With all our resources, we probably could not do what the North Vietnamese are doing," he said somewhat wryly.

The general had just gone over details of the Communist supply buildup at and near the passes in North Vietnam, and the probable level of infiltration down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Hanoi is already working to get the supplies moving for three wars, one in Laos, a second in Cambodia, and a third in South Vietnam.

The general had pointed out that the United States, despite its almost endless capabilities, probably would find itself bogged down and experiencing many difficulties if attempting to support three wars from Saigon.

Yet the Communists have done it from their side and the new flow of supplies down the trail proves that they are far from ready to quit. Thus, with the end of the monsoons along the trails, the war enters another round of a seemingly endless fight.

Although the subject of the general's amazement was new, the amazement wasn't.

For this fall, as with other periods over the years, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong continue to persevere with an almost awesome dedication. And the American response to the dedication, shown this time in the new infiltration, is the application of awesome amounts of firepower.

Last week was a curious week in the war, full of new developments, such as the infiltration and the countering bombing, the repeated "noes" by Hanoi to President Nixon's peace initiative, and the repeated American hopes that maybe the Communists would change their minds.

Yet, with all developments adding up to another chapter of the same old story, the war seemed to be continuing with new patterns—and the same fabric. Paris peace efforts remained stalled, and the allies and the enemy were still at it on the various fronts.

There were reports of progress from the field. Continued lack of enemy strength in the central and southern parts of South Vietnam brought cheer here. Things reportedly are looking up in the northern part of South Vietnam, in the First Military Region, where enemy attacks against allied fire bases have cost the enemy heavily while failing to gain the fire bases.

But, to temper the good news, there were reports from the Second Military Region,

which includes much of the central highlands, that terrorism is increasing and that there have been enemy inroads. A major allied pacification effort along the coast in Binh Dinh Province appears to remain in deep trouble.

Outside South Vietnam, the Cambodian Government seemed for the moment to be holding its own. Yet, in Laos, the Communist grip on the southern regions, through which the infiltration trails run, seemed stronger than ever.

Back in the Pentagon, plans were being made for the removal of another 40,000 troops from South Vietnam. Officials working on the program believed that another 40,000 troops could be withdrawn without jeopardizing Vietnamization. The following increment, however, they were saying, might leave matters a little ticklish.

The belief that the new withdrawal could come without major problems represented in itself a sort of backhanded proof of some success in Vietnam.

All along, with each withdrawal announcement, the argument has been heard in the Pentagon that the present cut could be managed, while the next would be difficult. Things seem to have worked out better than expected, however; that next, damaging withdrawal seems yet to remain in the future.

But, just as matters have not worsened for the allies, Hanoi and the Viet Cong seemed to have escaped disaster. Neither side seemed close to victory, and while the allies could not be defeated, the enemy would not be defeated.