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# U.S. halts Indo-China air pullout

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Saigon

## ★ U.S. halts air pullout from Indo-China theater

Continued from Page 1

Washington has apparently decided it needs to maintain this level of air power, at least for the immediate future, to back up the South Vietnamese, support Cambodia, and keep up the current heavy bombing of the Ho Chi Minh supply and infiltration routes in Laos. In addition to all this, there are expected to be more of the so-called "protective reaction" air strikes over North Vietnam.

[There was such a strike Friday. F-105 fighter-bombers attacked three radar-controlled missile sites near the Mu Gia and Karai Passes on the North Vietnamese side of the frontier with Laos, near where the Ho Chi Minh Trail crosses southward into the latter country. The F-105's were protecting B-52 bombers attacking the trail in this area. News agencies quote the U.S. command as saying there was no damage to American aircraft.]

### 'Truck kills' cited

The heaviest bombing at the moment is concentrated on the North Vietnamese supply push in southern Laos, and U.S. pilots have had some unusually good results to report recently.

For instance, in the first two weeks of this year,

pilots estimate, they destroyed more than 1,000 North Vietnamese trucks in Laos — perhaps the largest "truck kill" for any similar period in the entire five years that U.S. planes have been hitting the Ho Chi Minh Trail. By comparison, U.S. planes last year were knocking out about 400 trucks a month in Laos.

The truck traffic is currently as much as 15 percent greater than at a similar period last year, according to one estimate.

### Secondary blasts

The record strikes against trucks this month followed a highly lucrative

series of raids the end of last month on a large truck park and storage area along the trail.

Those raids, which took place between Dec. 19 and 28, resulted in more than 7,000 secondary explosions, according to the Air Force—meaning that huge stores of fuel or ammunition, or possibly both, were destroyed.

"We got explosions like I've never seen before," reported one American airman who saw results from an observation plane.

"It was quite fantastic . . . huge explosions, orange balls of fire, and black smoke with continued secondaries."

The United States has put a freeze on further withdrawal of U.S. Air Force squadrons from the Indo-China area.

Over the past two years, the Air Force has cut its squadrons in Vietnam from 45 to 25 in line with the growth of the South Vietnamese Air Force.

But in the just-ended fifth phase of U.S. withdrawals from South Vietnam, only 600 Air Force men were included, and most of them held administrative jobs. No squadrons were withdrawn.

Informed sources say that in the current sixth withdrawal phase, fewer than a thousand Air Force personnel are scheduled to be withdrawn, most of them filling administrative slots, but that none of the squadrons will be coming out.

### 1,400 planes on hand

Current Air Force strength stands at about 42,000 men in Vietnam and about 29,000 in Thailand. The United States has about 1,400 aircraft in the area.

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★ Please turn to Page 2