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IF THE BOMBING IS STOPPED ...

North Vietnam is really feeling the sting—so why stop the air attacks? That is the feeling of top U. S. commanders at the scene. Idea of easing off is considered a mistake, one that would bring a flood of fresh enemy troops and supplies to step up the fighting against GI's in the South.

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U. S. commanders here are convinced that stopping the bombing of North Vietnam, without reciprocal military action by Hanoi, will prolong the fighting in Vietnam even if serious peace talks get started.

As these commanders see it:

The Communists must be held to a minimum military capability before and during any peace talks. Otherwise, the Communists will have no incentive to conduct meaningful negotiations.

Continued air strikes will be needed to keep the Reds' capability to a minimum, the military leaders emphasize.

Risk of relaxing. This point is stressed: In nearly three years of bombing, the strain on Communist resources has never been as great as right now. To relax or remove these pressures means risking a "brand-new war"—with the enemy having all the advantages.

Says a senior officer in the Air Force: "Give the Reds even 30 days of quiet, and they will be able to restore all their lines of communications and repair their transportation. Then what do you have? You've got a different kind of war on your hands."

The fresh flood of arms and other supplies into South Vietnam would be enormous, intelligence experts predict.

"The enemy's logistical position has never been worse than it is today," declares an American official. "Never has he had to divert so many assets—both in people and matériel—to keep his lines of communications open."

In the North, both Hanoi and Haiphong have become bottlenecks, deprived of much of their value as staging and distribution points for supplies from

Communist China and Soviet Russia. Aerial-reconnaissance photographs show crates stacked up high in areas adjacent to Haiphong's piers.

Comdr. Henry Urban, Jr., who commands an air wing aboard the carrier U.S.S. *Kitty Hawk*, says all four major bridges leading out of Haiphong again have been chopped down.

According to Commander Urban, who has just finished his third tour in Vietnam waters, the Communists have been reduced to using sampans or makeshift pontoon crossings to get supplies out of Haiphong. He reports: "Supplies get out, but it takes a lot longer, quite a bit longer, to do the job."

At Hanoi, the Paul Doumer Bridge

spanning the Red River, principal crossing point for supplies coming by rail or highway from Communist China, is not usable. The Air Force, with six days of good bombing weather in December, dropped seven of the bridge's spans.

The North Vietnamese again have been forced to use alternate methods of getting material across the Red River to distribution points south of Hanoi.

Given a bombing pause, these vital arteries would be repaired.

Bad weather has balked attempts to hit supply lines as hard as desired in the past month, say pilots aboard the *Kitty Hawk*. More often than not, bombing has to be done by electronic aiming devices. Even so, the fliers believe they are hitting their targets.

Pilots make no ambitious official claims of destruction of great numbers of trucks and trains. Yet their radar screens pick up convoys all over North Vietnam, and they have great confidence in their bomb-aiming devices—in any kind of weather.

Pounding the Ho Trail. One major supply route from North Vietnam into Laos and thence southward along the Ho Chi Minh Trail runs just west of Dien Bien Phu. Others run from North Vietnam into Laos through the Mu Gia Pass and Nape farther south.

Traffic along the Ho Trail is described as sometimes resembling the Los Angeles Freeway. American air action against the Trail now involves almost the same daily number of sorties as against targets in North Vietnam itself, sources in the Laotian capital, Vientiane, say.

Rear Adm. Ralph W. Cousins, commander of Task Force 77, the arm of the Seventh Fleet deployed in the Vietnam theater, says that during the recent Christmas and New Year's cease-fires there were "hundreds of trucks on the roads, demonstrating the Communists' need for resupply."

Admiral Cousins reports that barge traffic on inland waterways has fallen off. The reason he gives is the successful bombing of the barges themselves, and

IF THE BOMBING IS STOPPED . . .

[continued from preceding page]

also the strikes against barge-building yards at Haiphong.

Train traffic is up again, Admiral Cousins notes, particularly from the marshaling yards south of Hanoi down to Nam Dinh and eastward to Thanh Hoa. There convoys move along Highway 1 to Dong Hoi and Vinh, then west into Laos.

American plane losses in the North continue to rise, now nearing 790. Commander Urban, who led the August, 1964, Tonkin Gulf raids and served again in 1966 and 1967, says this:

"Those first raids caught them by surprise. They weren't expecting us," the carrier pilot says. And the number of Red ground weapons was minor, compared with today's.

Feefed-up defenses. In 1966, Air Force and Navy pilots agree, the big change in North Vietnamese air defenses took place. From an Air Force officer:

"It was during the latter part of 1965 and early 1966 that the Communists sophisticated their weapons system. That was the time we should have been hitting at the source—that is, where the weapons were being brought in, such as the rail lines from Red China."

In 1965, Admiral Cousins comments, "we wasted time looking for surface-to-air missiles (SAM's) when they first appeared. In retrospect, we should have gone on making regular strikes against

more-important targets and let the SAM's take care of themselves."

Some officers, agreeing with Admiral Cousins' view, feel the U. S. bombing policy got a "fixation" on destroying targets such as SAM installations. One of these officers contends: "It was like looking for needles in haystacks, and all we did was expose ourselves to the very thing we wanted to destroy."

By the time the bombing program was reoriented, one officer says, "the Commies had been able to ship in all the SAM's and bigger anti-aircraft weapons they needed."

"Untouchables" hit. Now the air war is in a set pattern. During the last half of 1967, virtually all important "untouchable" targets were bombed.

Says Admiral Cousins: "We have hit the worthwhile targets. What's left, of course, are Hanoi and Haiphong, but that would mean bombing populated areas."

Bombing Haiphong to block incoming supply shipments is not what Admiral Cousins urges. "I subscribe to mining Haiphong harbor," the Admiral says.

One target commanders would like to hit is the "off limits" Gia Lam airfield at Hanoi. Gia Lam is technically a civilian airport, but intelligence analysts believe the Hanoi command now has put key elements of its air-defense-control system at Gia Lam.

The targets that Navy, Air Force and Marine pilots plan to be bombing in coming months are the "same old ones we've been bombing," as one Air Force pilot puts it.

Hit-'em-again strategy. Experts point out that "rebombing" is the name

of the game now. Says one officer: "The job is to keep those targets—air bases, rails, power plants—out of commission."

In other words, it's going to be more and more of the same from here on out, air commanders agree. As soon as the Reds rebuild a bombed bridge, the U. S. bombers will race back in and wipe it out again.

This could become boring for pilots, especially the younger ones who seek excitement. Destroying a truck is not quite as thrilling as shooting down a MIG or bombing a major installation. But if feelings among younger pilots on the *Kitty Hawk* are any barometer, this is not likely to become a serious problem.

One night recently, the two-man crews of two A-6 intruder jets burst into the debriefing room bubbling with enthusiasm. They were elated. They had not wiped out a big convoy and they had not shot down any MIG's, but, bombing by radar through heavy rain and clouds, they had attacked a dozen trucks. They thought they had hit most of them.

"Worthwhile job." Lieut. Richard C. Nelson, 26, of Philadelphia, senior among the four, summed up their feelings about going after the unglamorous targets in this way:

"You get a satisfying feeling. You're doing a job you consider worthwhile. You hit a truck that maybe is carrying something that would have killed some of our guys on the ground. That makes you satisfied."

To American strategists here, this type of bombing must go on unless Hanoi agrees to halt the movement of supplies into South Vietnam.