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A NEW WAR FLARES ¹

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A new type of war has flared in Vietnam with the invasion of the south launched by Hanoi forces on Easter Sunday. The scale, pace, and character of the war have intensified in Hanoi's invasion and the U.S. response. New weapons and tactics have been thrown into the battle by both sides in unprecedented quantities in a crescendo that indicates once again that the fate of Vietnam will be decided on the battlefield rather than around the conference table.

The three-pronged invasion of South Vietnam is the largest and most heavily armed effort ever mounted by Hanoi. All but one of North Vietnam's regular army divisions have been committed to this offensive, armed with a vast array of new weapons manufactured and supplied by the Soviet Union. These include tanks, 130-mm. field artillery, 100-mm. radar-controlled flak guns, anti-tank missiles, truck-mounted heavy rocket batteries and Strela shoulder-fired infrared anti-aircraft missiles. The North Vietnamese army also attempted to provide SA-2 and MIG-17 air cover for its main thrust south from the demilitarized zone (DMZ). This effort was quickly thwarted by counter air attacks.

To counter these Hanoi invasion thrusts, the U.S. has mounted the largest interdiction campaign since the bombing pause in 1968. This campaign, being flown by U.S. Air Force, Navy and Marine squadrons is aimed at cutting off the flow of war materiel from China and the USSR to North Vietnam and destroying supplies already in country on their way to combat areas,

The U.S. has now deployed an air striking force of more than 700 aircraft against Vietnam. This air war is being fought with bitter intensity with more than 200 sorties a day against northern targets. The North Vietnamese air defense system is putting up everything it has. More than 800 SA-2 Guideline missiles were fired in the past month, and 10 MIG fighters were shot down by U.S. airplanes in a single day.

¹ Aviation Week & Space Technology, May 15, 1972, pp. 9.

Many people will wonder why an interdiction campaign is being revived at this time, when earlier such efforts during the Lyndon Johnson regime proved ineffective. There are several basic new factors in the current combat equation that could radically alter its effectiveness.

First the bombing campaign in the Johnson regime was poorly targeted, and air strikes were banned on many key supply bottlenecks by White House edict. There was never any attempt, to seal off Haiphong or say other ports from shipborne supplies from China and the Soviet Union. But most important, the scale of ground combat in that era was of such relatively low intensity that it could be sustained in combat areas by a slow flow of simple materiel such as rice, bullets and mortar shells.

Now the main sources of supply through the ports and the key storage areas are being attacked with more effective weapons. Both the character and the intensity of the ground combat have changed so that huge quantities of heavy sophisticated supplies must be run through the air gauntlet to sustain the pace of the Hanoi offensives.

Trucks, not bicycles, are required to move the massive loads of heavy artillery shells, large rockets, missile rounds, and fuel required by tanks and the trucks used to move the artillery and barrage rocket launchers. In addition, the trucks on the supply lines are huge consumers of fuel. At the height of the siege of Khe Sanh, a maximum of 1,500 artillery rounds were pumped into its perimeter, and that daily rate could not be sustained for long. In contrast, the North Vietnamese artillery has pumped 35,000 shells into An Loc, while the fire rate accelerated to 4,000 shells a day before the fall of Quang Tri. The Soviet T-54 tank now spearheading the Hanoi invasions consumes 18 gal. of fuel an hour. Supplying 14 regular army divisions equipped with these supply-consuming weapons at the pace of the first six weeks of invasion combat is indeed a far more formidable task than the ingenious Communist logistics system has ever tackled before.

No interdiction campaign has any chance for success unless a high rate of battlefield supply consumption can be forced on the enemy. This is where the South Vietnamese ground forces and their air support must play a key role. The performance of the South Vietnamese ground forces to date has been mixed. Some units, notably at An Loc, have fought far better than anybody expected. Two regiments in the central highlands broke and ran at the first sign of enemy tanks and the notoriously weak 3rd Division, composed mostly of deserters, panicked before Quang Tri. But the South Vietnamese army has not been destroyed, and it still has good units holding fast in key areas. Nor has the Communist-anticipated internal support from the Viet Cong materialized in South Vietnam.

The military battle for control of South Vietnam is far from over. The Hanoi government is determined to destroy the Saigon army in the field and force a humiliating retreat on the 60,000 U.S. troops still in the country.² It has supply stockpiles near the current battlefields sufficient to sustain the present rate of combat for many weeks. But if its equipment losses on the battlefields are high, the Southern resistance stubborn and its main reserve stockpiles destroyed along with the hope for more massive foreign aid from China and Russia, then Hanoi will have to pause and reorient its strategy. It will take a combination of sustained effective aerial interdiction and a determined ground defense to blunt the massive offensive spearheads of Hanoi.

This campaign will be waged for months before there are any significant indications of its outcome.

² Rearguard in the Air, AW&ST Jan. 10, pp. 9.

