Air War Vietnam—1972

Frank Harvey

In 1966 I spent fifty-five days in Vietnam observing the air war firsthand and wrote a book, *Air War—Vietnam.* It went to six editions. It was reprinted almost in its entirety in the official Pentagon publication to show how well our troops were doing and how just our case was; it was quoted extensively in liberal publications and by campus protestors to show how badly our troops were doing and how unjust our cause was. American fighter pilots in one F-100 squadron elected me to their inner circle of gungho operators which they called "Sierra Hotel" (decorum forbids a translation of the code words). I. F. Stone reprinted my napalm sequence; Dr. Spock's lawyers phoned to ask me to appear at his trial in his behalf; my local American Legion Post invited me to speak at their annual Memorial Day ceremony.

I went to Vietnam with the intention of getting as close to the air war as possible, of observing and listening to everyone who would talk, and of setting down my observations as honestly and factually as I could. The wildly diverse reactions to the book would seem to indicate that I succeeded. My book was treated like a Whitman's Sampler. The readers looked in, chose the pieces of candy they liked, and apparently ignored the rest.

Now, in 1972, I am going to take a second look at the Vietnam air war, which has changed dramatically in many of its details, again as impartially as I'm able. This isn't easy for me. I'm a pilot myself; some of my closest friends are pilots now interned in P.O.W. camps in North Vietnam; the air war has become increasingly unpopular in the United States (which makes the dangerous job of flying combat missions increasingly hard on morale); my "gut reaction" is to take the side of my pilot friends in a war they didn't start but in which they have suffered and died for years. But if I were to take sides, this article would lose its entire point.

In order to understand the changes that have occurred in the past five years in the Vietnam air war, a brief backgrounding is necessary. Even before the bombing halt called by President Johnson several years ago, the ground-to-air defenses in North Vietnam were dangerous. The instant an American plane crossed the border into North Vietnam it was immediately acquired by the radar of a Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) site and was "tracked" as a potential target. Before the plane left the SAM range of the first site it moved into range of another site and so on, all the way to the target and back to the border. Sometimes as many as six SAM's were in the air at once trying to destroy the American jets. Those SAM's were huge missiles, sometimes described by pilots as "white telephone poles." On a clear day it was easy to observe them at the moment of launch, for they blasted a big cloud of dust off the pad and for a moment or so moved slowly compared to the blazing streaks they presented once they reached 3,000 feet. A SAM was so large and powerful that it could not turn quickly, however, and if a target plane spotted one, the pilot could evade it by banking brutally tight (perhaps blacking himself out momentarily) so that the missile shot harmlessly past or exploded too far away to be dangerous. Three thousand feet was known as "SAM altitude." If you stayed below it, and were alert—and lucky—you could dodge the white monsters.

Up at 20,000 feet and above, however, the danger was great. If you were flying over an undercase which hid the earth, and a SAM burst out of the clouds unexpectedly, you had absolutely no chance. True, American planes were equipped with warning devices which helped them anticipate a SAM attack—but in a tense combat situation, with many life-or-death details to handle simultaneously, there was al-

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ways the chance a SAM would appear unannounced. If it did, you were dead.

SAM's, of course, were only part of the danger. North Vietnamese anti-aircraft guns clustered like steel asparagus around important targets. The guns were designed to shoot down planes anywhere between treetop level and 40,000 feet: rifles, light and heavy machine guns, radar-controlled weapons of 37 mm., 57 mm. and 100 mm. If the concentration of guns was particularly dense, such as around the Than Hoa Bridge, the gunners did not aim at the incoming bombers: they merely put up a solid curtain of steel and let them fly into it, which many did. Our pilots had a dilemma. They could come down below 3,000 feet to avoid the SAM's, but when they did they were much more vulnerable to the guns.

In those days, there was a rather limited danger from North Vietnamese fighters. The pilots were relatively inexperienced and were flying obsolescent MIG 17's and early-model MIG 21's. Our F-4 Phantom jets were more than a match for them.

Now, more than five years later, many changes have occurred on both sides. After President Johnson ordered the bombing halt, the North Vietnamese were of course free to beef up their SAM sites and their triple-A guns with the newest and best equipment the Russians were willing to send them. North Vietnamese pilots had several years to practice combat tactics in the newer and deadlier MIG fighters then available. With the exception of unarmed recon planes, almost no Americans appeared until American power struck heavily at concentrations of trucks and supplies assembled North of the DMZ in early January, 1972. Bad weather handicapped these strikes, many of which had to be made blind, through clouds and rain, so it is possible they were not as effective as they might have been. The Air Force announced that the strikes were for the purpose of trying to destroy a buildup of material which had reached dangerous proportions and which might be used to launch a heavy sustained attack if it reached South Vietnam.

Against this brief background, how does American air power in Vietnam look today? American air power is now more important than ever before. It is the last blue chip Mr. Nixon can play to try to help the South Vietnamese fight off the invaders from the north and to build on the base that has been established slowly and at such great cost in the Vietnamization program. From the American standpoint, our air power is called upon to play an even more critical role; it must protect the dwindling number of American military personnel in Vietnam as the war winds down to the vanishing point. Perhaps the heavy sustained strikes in January were dictated by this consideration. Many people still remember the fate of the French at Dien Bien Phu. They were wiped out. A bloody American Dunkirk on the beaches of Vietnam *could* take place. (The North Vietnamese, who have lost 500,000 dead, officially admitted by General Giap, are now losing 1,000 a week, and would surely not hesitate to wipe out every American possible, just as they did with the French.) An American air umbrella can probably prevent this now, regardless of how determined and savage the North Vietnamese effort, unless, of course, the North Vietnamese attack and destroy the planes themselves. If they do this it is almost certain that American F-111's (now fully debugged after years of lethal difficulties) would be sent against Hanoi and Haiphong. The gloves would really come off. For this reason, I doubt whether the North Vietnamese will try to destroy the air umbrella itself, and if they do not destroy it I believe it will do the job Mr. Nixon has set for it.

During the period of the bombing halt, Americans did not sit idly by and simply watch the North Vietnamese improve their defenses. American Research and Development took over when our planes were no longer permitted to attack north of the DMZ, and the results of our R. and D., recently revealed, indicate that American air power in Vietnam has far surpassed the enemy, not so much in planes but in electronic ground equipment. I am referring, of course, to Igloo White, which began in secret back in 1968 to protect American Marines in Khe Sanh, which Giap hoped to turn into another Dien Bien Phu. The Igloo White system involves tens of thousands of "sensors" which are airdropped in the jungle by jets flying 600 miles an hour. These sensors embed themselves in the earth, leaving a knee-high antenna which resembles a weed. These seismic "weeds" are sensitive enough to pick up the clatter of a tank, the rumble of an ammunition truck or a man's footstep as he walks by, and then radio this information automatically to a high-flying drone plane. The drone plane relays the information to a giant computer in Thailand which pinpoints the position along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Since these little dart-like sensors are sprinkled in a line parallel to the jungle road they are monitoring, it is merely necessary to sit and wait a little to develop the direction, speed and size of a convoy even though it is moving under a heavy jungle canopy in pitch darkness. The movement of the convoy as it prints out brightly on the radar screen at the control center is known as "the worm." Sometimes two convoys are seen converging on each other, and the controllers wait until they meet and there is a stoppage of traffic. Then they vector Air Force and/or Navy jets to the spot. So sophisticated is the delivery that the pilots simply sit there, directed by their own airborne computers, until the black boxes drop the bomb for them. The accuracy and effect of these drops is then, of course, measured back at the control headquarters by observing what the worms do. Usually they wiggle away a little—then vanish.

The reason is they've been wiped out. The score in 1971: 12,000 trucks destroyed on the Ho Chi Minh Trail without a single American on the ground.

Everyone, of course, is familiar with the fact that combatants in any war tend to exaggerate (often wildly) the numbers of trucks, men or planes they have bravely destroyed. Before the war went automatic, there was no way to check up on such reports. Now there is. So many sensors of various kinds have been sprinkled along the Ho Chi Minh Trail that American controllers can count the trucks going down full—and tally them against those going back empty for a fresh supply of ammunition. The chances of any given truck reaching a staging point in the south where its 10,000-pound cargo of ammunition, guns and supplies can be used against South Vietnam is now estimated at two in ten. In 1971, only one ton of war supplies reached South Vietnam out of twenty that entered northern Laos. These figures must be given real credibility. They are arrived at factually, by computers, and are subject to continuous checking, since trucks are attacked going both ways.

But American R. and D. did not content itself with developing this deadly system of automated "beep and bang" (it was sometimes only a minute or so between the time a sensor sent its message and an American jet hit the spot). The attack vehicles themselves were modified and improved. When I was in Vietnam in 1966, I went on a night mission into the delta in an old, slow C-47 (a modified version of the ancient DC-3 twin-engined transport that our domestic airlines started with forty years ago). This old plane was fitted, however, with three "miniguns"—rotary-barreled machines that spat out 7.62 mm. shells at the rate of 6,000 per minute; so fast that it appeared, at night, that the plane was breathing fire upon the earth. (Hence the nickname, "Puff the Magic Dragon.") We expended 17,500 rounds against the V.C., who were trying to overrun a fort, then began to take heavy ground fire (I could see the tracers coming up at us) and had to call in jet fighters to finish the job of protecting the fort. I was sitting within a few feet of our supply of flares, which were said to burn at thousands of degrees F., and which a single round of V.C. fire might have touched off. Needless to say, I was considerably relieved when we left the target area still in one piece. Our speed was about 150 mph, we were operating below 3,000 feet, and the danger of being hit by our own jets in the darkness was not inconsiderable. I mention this typical incident in order to contrast it with the 1972 air war.

The job of the old Magic Dragons has now largely been taken over by AC-130 Hercules propjets which cruise at 300 mph and are equipped with the same type 7.62 machine guns (but also in the "Pave Spectre" configuration, where they use big 40 mm. cannon with computerized target acquisition and fire controls). These AC-130's do not use the crude sight which, in the old Dragon, was mounted beside the pilot's left shoulder. The crew, instead, scans the ground with night-vision, low-light-level T.V., which picks out targets in starlight as well as in daylight. The aircraft is then placed on the automatic system, a computer takes over, flying the aircraft and aiming and firing the cannon. In one hour along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, one AC-130 (A for attack) destroyed sixty-eight trucks, better than one a minute.

The AC-130's are very large four-engined planes and can carry much more destructive power than the old transports they replaced. In addition, the big planes are equipped with a cathode-ray tube which reacts to the electrical disturbance broadcast by a truck ignition system (sudden salt-and-pepper jitters on the lighted tube) much as your T.V. can react when a truck or car passes your home. There is one difference. The gunship's tube picks up emissions many miles away and guides the plane to the target. Finally, the gunships are equipped with infrared sensors which react to heat (a small campfire, hidden in the woods, shows up) and by using all the different devices as a crosscheck they can zero in on big or little targets regardless of the jungle cover or the darkness of the night. Because the AC-130's are very vulnerable to SAM's and fighters, they always operate with a cover of American jet fighters.

In 1966, the Americans were using mostly conventional HVAR (High Velocity Aircraft Rockets) which were unguided "dumb bombs." A dumb bomb is an old-fashioned iron bomb containing high explosive which is released and allowed to fall free with the hope that it will strike on, or close to, the aiming point. The new "smart bombs" are guided to their targets: by radar; by homing on a beam of light beamed down from a laser carried in another plane; or by means of a T.V. camera carried in the nose. Trucks are now driven into caves for protection when they complete their twenty-mile run from one *Binh Tram* (relay station on the Trail) to another. They are thus almost completely safe from dumb bombs. A smart bomb, however, may be guided right into the mouth of the cave, and often is. And, of course, it is now relatively simple to knock out a bridge which might have been missed repeatedly by unguided drops. In one instance, four spans out of five were knocked out by five smart bombs in a single pass.

American anti-personnel devices have also been made much more deadly in 1972. (After you read about them, you may give credence to the theory that the North Vietnamese and the V.C. would, indeed, like to inflict a Dien Bien Phu on Americans, and agree that an air umbrella is really needed for the safety of those last to leave the theatre.) Two particularly lethal new weapons are code-named "Gravel" and "Dragontooth." Gravel looks like a light-green tea bag and can be packed in a dispenser

and spewed out by the thousands; anyone who touches one later is dead or mangled. Dragontooth is a refinement of the Cluster Bomb Units I saw in action in 1966. It, too, can be packed into cannisters and dropped in large numbers, either going off at once or set to go off later when stepped on. After planes have sown Gravel and Dragontooth, the area is a mine field until bomblets with delayed-action fuses have been found and destroyed. Obviously they hold up advances for long periods with a minimum of effort from the planes.

Helicopters (the old Huey has been largely replaced by the newer, faster Cobra) are sometimes armed with large containers of nails which are fired into undergrowth like some gigantic sawed-off shotgun, killing or seriously wounding anybody down there. There is a bomb called Pave-Pat II which weighs 2,500 pounds and is filled with propane under pressure, which clears away many acres of jungle, trunks, twigs, leaves, clean as a cultivated field, to open up enemy actions to eyeball inspection. There are aerial torpedos which bury themselves in the earth and blow up when the enemy even tries to dig in the vicinity. Some of these are six feet long and powerful enough to destroy a number of trucks in one blast.

I was not surprised to read this lead paragraph in a *Christian Science Monitor* story:

> Buck Rogers is alive and well and bombing Indochina. A new kind of military technology has made war without soldiers a reality along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It is now possible for the United States to pull out its ground forces and continue fighting the Vietnam war by replacing troops with transistors. "It's the key to Vietnamization," says an enthusiastic Air Force officer. "It has the possibility of being one of the greatest steps forward in warfare since gunpowder," says hawkish Barry Goldwater.

This, then, is a rough idea of what is happening in the air war in Vietnam in 1972 and, more important, what we may expect to continue to happen as the war winds down to a guerrilla operation and/or another attempt by the North Vietnamese and the V.C. to inflict an Asian Dunkirk on the remaining Americans.

It would appear from late stories coming out of Vietnam that Vietnamization is going better than most news reports have suggested. I have not been there recently, however, and must rely on what I read. A December, 1971, report by Colonel Robert D. Heinl, Jr. of the North American Newspaper Alliance, came to me as a surprise:

> The overpowering impression on return to Vietnam after 15 months absence is that the war is over.
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> Flying in low over the Delta from Bangkok and then across familiar Long An Province, one sees the bridges rebuilt and intact—not a single one knocked sideways as they all were three years ago.
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> Miles and miles of blacktop highways, unmineable by the remnant Viet Cong, radiate into the country and swarm with Hondas which are giving rural South Vietnam a smog problem.
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> In the fields, the water buffalo are gone. Instead, Japanese tractors are pulling plows.
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> Village roofs, no longer thatched or burnt-out, but bright with new galvanized iron, reflect the sun like mirrors. Many houses that had tin roofs now have tile.
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> Paddies are trim and neatly dammed, with shell craters mostly filled in, dikes repaired.
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> Market boats make their way up the canals, bringing produce to the capital. For miles along the river's serpentine bends in the vicinity of Saigon, merchant ships lie at anchor, evidencing no fear of mines, guerrilla swimmers, or the fearful Rung Sat special zone from which the VC used to fire rockets at everything that steamed by.
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> The middle of the night is utterly quiet. There are no M-16 bursts, no outgoing artillery volleys, no distant flares, no B-52 strikes—none of the battlefield nightsounds or impressions that were typical two years ago.
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> The streets are almost empty of American troops. . . . The American bachelor officers' quarters are vanishing, too. . . . The honky-tonks are quiet, and the bar girls are hurting for business. There are no swarms of field soldiers on pass. . . .

The article is much longer, but it follows the tone of the above passages to the end. It must be noted that it is written by a colonel and was published in the December, 1971, *Armed Forces Journal,* but the details mentioned above do seem to have the ring of truth. There would not really be much point in making them up, since all of them are open to verification by anyone who happens to be in Vietnam these days. My own guess is that Vietnamization is finally succeeding and that American air power is probably capable of supporting Mr. Nixon's plan to wind the war fully down in this election year and bring home most of the troops (except, of course, the Air Force, Marine, Army, and Navy pilots and crews with their supporting units). The pre-emptive strike against North Vietnamese buildups in January, 1972, may be repeated (or there may be a large-scale heatup in the entire air war) while this article is going to press. If these events do take place, my guess is that Americans at home will become temporarily enraged, sad, guilty, or whatever, but that these emotional states will not last long and that Mr. Nixon, by election time, may be able to point to a solid success in his really rather bold efforts to bring this mess to a close. If his trip to China succeeds, there would seem to be almost no doubt of the eventual erosion of willpower among the V.C. and the North Vietnamese and a reluctant bitter realization on their part that "we can't lick 'em so we might as well join 'em."

On the other hand, one should never count the North Vietnamese out. Their mid-January penetrations deep into Cambodia and Laos are indicative of the tremendous vitality and determination they have

shown from the start. This is the first dry season since 1965 that American ground forces have not been available to help the South Vietnamese if they get in serious trouble with the enemy. The North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao have not let up since they captured the Plain of Jars in Northern Laos. In January, they seized control of the Bolovens plateau, which is a key area for the infiltration of men and supplies into South Vietnam. In Cambodia, the South Vietnamese and the Cambodian 22nd Brigade both pulled back toward the border, leaving the area pretty much in the control of the Communists. V.C. commando attacks, such as the one on the ammunition dump at Ben Hoa, continued, and there was concern about another fierce Tet offensive, particularly against vulnerable spots like Kontum or Pleiku in the central highlands and towns such as Tay Ninh City which are near the Cambodian border.

However, thanks to the American air umbrella (and to an alleged vast improvement in the ability of South Vietnamese pilots flying superior planes), the security of South Vietnam itself is reported to be good. It must be remembered that whereas American air power has been reduced in Vietnam itself, the U.S. Navy still maintains aircraft carriers armed and ready in the sea off the coast and that B-52 bombers still remain in Thailand to be used if and when needed. Both of these units are powerful indeed, particularly when they are guided to their targets by the kind of pinpoint techniques I have described. Beyond that, it would require only a matter of hours to reinforce air strikes against the enemy in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam from American forces deployed overseas and—in a real emergency—from the United States itself. The Tactical Air Command has for years deployed overseas on just a few hours' notice in what is known as a Composite Air Strike Force, CASF for short. This is a small, complete strike force made up of fighter bombers, tankers, and C-130 transports, one of which is a "talking bird" and can direct combat operations by radio in the theatre. All of the planes, fuel, ordnance, and logistical support are "combat packages" maintained in the U.S.A.—on tap, ready at a moment's notice.

I went on a CASF move myself to Turkey during the Berlin crisis, and we were on the ground at Adana, ready to fight, less than forty-eight hours after the order to move from South Carolina was given. I flew with the F-100's and the C-130's over Bulgaria, so close to the Soviet Union that we were painting MIG's on our radars the very next day. In that case, it worked well. And if the Americans get in trouble in Vietnam because the forces are too thin (and there is a chance the North Vietnamese will overrun), I believe that CSAF's will be used and that they would be very effective.

The role of American air power will continue to be effective in Vietnam regardless of how desperately the North Vietnamese press any future offensives, and regardless of how serious their advances in Laos and Cambodia appear on your nightly T.V. screen. I say this even though I know that the morale of these airmen, the most highly trained group of airmen in the world, has been seriously damaged from time to time by the steady barrage of antiwar protests, and even more by the apparent lack of concern by the rank and file Americans concerning the fate of pilots who have been in prison camps in North Vietnam for so long. Some of my best friends in the USAF—men I know well and respect highly—have retired in disgust. "Let the peaceniks negotiate with the Communists with flowers if they ever show up like they did in Prague, with tanks," they said to me bitterly. "I'm sick of risking my ass—and getting screamed at by American kids when I come home."

I am torn by this situation. I saw Jan Palach's funeral on T.V. when hundreds of thousands of Czechs lined the streets and Russian tanks rumbled in the background, and it occurred to me that the Czechs, being powerless to fight, had only one option left. To weep. If I ever have to choose, I would rather die in the cockpit of an F-4 with my nose gun winking than crouching in a city street, soaked with gasoline, with a match ready in my hand, as young Palach did. On the other hand, I simply could not make a pass up a hootch line in which there were said to be V.C. hiding, and send the napalm tanks tumbling down, knowing I must burn innocent people as well.

Of one thing, however, I am sure. I do not excuse those young Americans who have fled to Canada, Sweden, or elsewhere to escape the draft. I respect the conscientious objector, or even the draft-card burner, who makes his stand in the U.S., even though I may not agree with him. I believe it may take as much courage to burn your draft card in public, surrounded by angry patriots, as it does to start your bombing run on the Than Hoa Bridge through a sleet storm of steel. But for the person who flees this terrible struggle I have little but contempt. But this is really the *only* situation in this tragic ghastly mess that *is* clear in my mind.

I would lead a jet strike personally if I felt it would help my friends Jim Kasler and Robbie Reisner escape from their North Vietnamese prison camp. On the other hand, I would stand at attention in the presence of the Viet Cong who faced a Huey gunship, rockets, grenades, and machine guns all blazing, with a hand-held rifle. "We turned the little mother into blood pudding," the pilots told me. "But he sure had a set of balls."

He sure did. And so have many other courageous people on both sides of this terrible conflict, people who have been killed, maimed, imprisoned—and many who are still fighting.