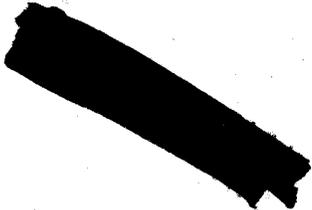




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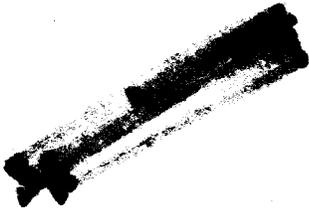
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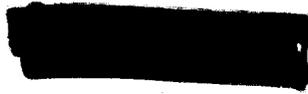
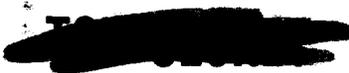
THE AIR FORCE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA
THE END OF THE U. S. INVOLVEMENT
1973 - 1975

BY
E. H. HARTSOOK

OFFICE OF AIR FORCE HISTORY
HEADQUARTERS USAF, 1980



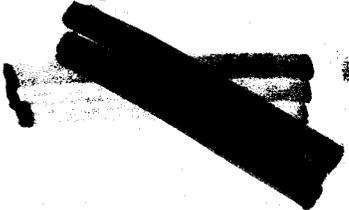
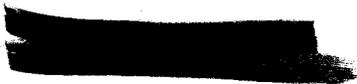




FOREWORD

(U) This is the seventeenth monograph dealing with USAF plans, policies, and operations in Southeast Asia. It treats USAF involvement from 1973 up to the defeat of South Vietnam at the end of April 1975. Actual USAF operational involvement spanned only the first seven and a half months of 1973 and the final days of evacuation in 1975. However, the plans for retaliatory air attack against North Vietnam remained in effect throughout, and the South Vietnamese continued to hope that U.S. air power would come to their rescue as it had before. This monograph also attempts to summarize the factors leading up to the fall of South Vietnam and the end of the U.S. involvement.

JOHN W. HUSTON, Major General, USAF
Chief, Office of Air Force History



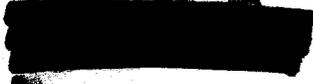
PREFACE

(U) It might appear that once the cease-fire agreement was signed in January 1973 and all U.S. forces withdrawn, there would be no further history to write about the Air Force in Southeast Asia. This was not the case, however. Although U.S. ground forces had withdrawn from Vietnam in accordance with domestic political and economic pressures, the administration still exerted strong efforts to increase South Vietnam's chances of survival against the North. The underpinning for these efforts included plans for an important continuing role for U.S. airpower based in Thailand.

(U) A prime objective in trying to increase South Vietnam's chances of survival was to guarantee the cease-fire against encroachments by Hanoi. In this, the administration made use of several tactics. First of all, by keeping the B-52s in Thailand, it aimed to scare North Vietnam into abiding by the peace agreement for fear of a Linebacker II-type retaliation, thus buying time for South Vietnam to strengthen its position. It tried to get Russia and China to stop sending military aid to Hanoi, within the framework of its larger diplomatic agreements with them. It sought cease-fires in Laos and Cambodia that would effectively keep North Vietnam from using these countries to supply its forces in South Vietnam. In this, it backed up its diplomatic efforts with its continued bombing and other U.S. military support to the governments in Laos and Cambodia that were contending with aggressive procommunist factions. Making use of every tactic in trying to assure South Vietnam's viability, the administration also offered reconstruction aid to Hanoi, provided it honored the peace terms.

(U) To help further its policy objectives in Southeast Asia within the new post cease-fire limitations, the United States set up a 1,250-man Defense Attache Office in Saigon to carry on the functions of the former Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), and a new

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U.S. Support Activities Group/Seventh Air Force (USSAG/7AF) command in Thailand. If South Vietnam could be kept viable with economic and other support--perhaps turned into another Taiwan or South Korea, as the World Bank and the American mission in Saigon predicted--and if pro-U.S. forces could be kept in power in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, the United States, even though out of the war, could retain its position of influence in Southeast Asia. To U.S. policy planners, this position seemed worth defending, the more so as there were signs that the Soviet Union, using Hanoi, seemed to be only waiting to oust the United States from it.*

(U) The backdrop, the precondition, for all these plans was the retention of the B-52s in Thailand as a guarantee that North Vietnam would not overturn the peace agreement by military means. Although USSAG/7AF continued to maintain B-52 readiness as a deterrent against North Vietnamese aggression, and South Vietnam continued to believe in its validity, with the bombing cutoff of August 15, 1973, and subsequent developments the U.S. power commitment faded away. Once the U.S. power backup was gone, other measures such as trying to assure the survival of Laos and Cambodia, the support of Thailand, and the cooperation of the Soviet Union, and trying to persuade Hanoi with economic aid, proved inadequate.

* On February 6, 1973, a few days before Henry Kissinger's first visit to Hanoi after the cease-fire, the Russian newspaper Izvestia published an article, "Hands Off Southeast Asia," warning Hanoi against "the big monopolists of the imperialist powers who already dream of insinuating themselves into the economy of Vietnam and the other Indochinese countries in the guise of assistance, but actually for the purpose of economic domination. The victory in Vietnam is one over colonialism, and it should bring home to all Southeast Asia the great significance of an Asian system of collective security." North Vietnam would be the cornerstone of such a system, to be guaranteed by Moscow.

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CONTENTS

	Page
FOREWORDiii
PREFACE.	v
Chapter I: 1973	1
The Cease-Fire Agreement	2
Implementation Arrangements.	3
The Military Positions of South and North Vietnam.	8
Combat Activity.	10
Contradictory Conclusions.	12
The U.S. Position.	14
Redeployment	14
Maintaining a U.S. Power Position in Southeast Asia.	15
The Role of U.S. Air	19
USSAG/7AF.	19
Operations	21
U.S. Air Operations in Laos.	22
U.S. Air Operations in Cambodia.	23
Last Battles Before the Bombing Cutoff	25
The Deterrent Mission.	29
The Situation in Thailand - USAF Withdrawals	31
Non-Combat Air Operations.	33
Reconnaissance	34
Airlift Operations	37
Training	39
The Role of U.S. Military Aid.	42
RVNAF Aid vs. U.S. Military Resources: The One-	
for-One Replacement System.	43
Diplomatic Efforts	46
Summary.	48

~~TOP SECRET~~

	Page
Chapter II: 1974.	50
North and South Vietnamese Positions	50
Military Actions	53
Morale in South Vietnam.	54
Strategy Planning.	55
The U.S. Position.	58
USAF Operations 1974	60
Plans.	60
Operations	61
Reconnaissance	63
Combat Readiness	64
USAF Withdrawals from Thailand	66
The Role of Military Aid	69
The Battle Between the Embassy and Congress.	69
Change in Aid Administration and Further Reductions.	73
Soviet Aid to Hanoi.	79
Summary.	82
Chapter III: 1975	83
The 1975 Offensive	83
The Fall of Phuoc Binh	84
The Attack on Ban Me Thuot	86
Materiel Losses in the Highlands	91
The Debacle in Military Region 1	92
The Offensive Progresses in Military Region 2.	94
The Stand at Xuan Loc.	95
The Final Campaign: Saigon.	97
U.S. Aid During 1975	100
Reactions in Saigon.	101
Initial Washington Reactions	101
General Weyand's Visit to Saigon	103
The Last Campaign.	106
USAF Operations.	108



Evacuation Operations 109

 Early Evacuations 112

 Beginning of Saigon Evacuation Operations 115

 Decisions from Washington 116

 Fixed-Wing Airlift Evacuation 117

Option IV: Helicopter Operations 121

 Air America Operations. 122

 Helicopter Evacuation of the DAO Compound 123

 Helicopter Evacuations from the Embassy 124

Aircraft Evacuation 127

Epilogue. 133

Annex A - Eagle Pull. 140

Annex B - Capture and Release of the Mayaguez 144

Notes 148

Glossary. 170

Abstract. 173

MAPS

	Page
1. Areas of Control at Cease-Fire	5
2. Collapse in Military Region 2.	90
3. Encirclement of Saigon	98

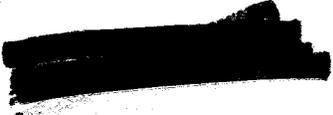
TABLES

1. Fixed-Wing Evacuation Statistics, April 5-30, 1975 . .	.119
2. VNAF Aircraft Inventory, April 23, 1975.128
3. VNAF Aircraft at U-Tapao, May 1, 1975.128
4. Aircraft Recovered from Vietnam.131

Chapter I: 1973

(U) Before recounting developments in 1973, it is advisable to review briefly the terms of the cease-fire agreement. On December 29, 1972, the White House announced the end of bombing of North Vietnam, and resumption of talks in Paris. Dr. Henry Kissinger, Presidential Assistant on National Security Affairs, returned to brief President Richard M. Nixon on January 14, and the next day the latter ordered all U.S. offensive military action against North Vietnam stopped. Gen. Alexander M. Haig, Jr., Kissinger's deputy, then went to Saigon where Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu reluctantly agreed to the terms negotiated by Kissinger.* On January 23 Kissinger and North Vietnam's chief negotiator

* It is well known that for months Thieu had been the major obstacle to getting a cease-fire. Very crucial, but not spelled out in the agreement, were Thieu's two major conditions for signing it: continuation of massive U.S. aid and prompt U.S. retaliation to serious North Vietnamese truce violations. Despite denials by Kissinger in January 1973 and by President Gerald R. Ford at the time of Thieu's resignation in April 1975 that there had been no secret understandings, all evidence points to the contrary. The Chief of Naval Operations, Adm. Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., [in his book On Watch, (New York: Times Books, 1976), p 413] says almost all of the emphasis in JCS talks with President Nixon in late November 1972 was on how to use U.S. aid to force President Thieu to accept the truce, and that "it was perfectly obvious to all of us at the time that the promises of massive American assistance to South Vietnam and of prompt U.S. retaliation to serious truce violations were the critical elements in securing the cease-fire and that the fulfillment of these promises would be the critical element in maintaining the cease-fire." Ambassador Graham A. Martin is positive the Vietnamese felt there was a firm commitment and noted that at the end of his resignation ceremony, President Thieu had produced some letters from President Nixon clearly implying this. Although President Ford refused to make these letters public, a former aide to Thieu has done so and there is no question of the commitments given to South Vietnam in them by President Nixon. Ambassador Martin further said the South Vietnamese felt they had been promised such support again in April 1973 during Thieu's visit to San Clemente. [Testimony before the House Committee on International Relations, Jan 27, 1976, pp 541, 587.] Former South Vietnamese Ambassador to the U.S., Bui Diem, present at that meeting, said Thieu had been even more pleased by what Nixon had said privately: "The U.S. will meet all contingencies in case the agreement is grossly violated" and "You can count on us." [RAND Report R-2208-OSD, Dec 1978, p 11.] The account of this meeting by Frank Snepp, the Central Intelligence Agency's chief analyst in Saigon, has Nixon assuring Thieu unequivocally of continued military aid at the "one billion dollar level" and "economic aid in the eight-hundred million range" for several years, while Kissinger promised him that if "Hanoi's lack of good faith in the agreement could be demonstrated," American retaliation would be "massive and brutal." [Frank W. Snepp, Decent Interval (New York: Random House, 1977), p 52.]


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Le Duc Tho initialed the agreement; Secretary of State William P. Rogers signed it formally in Paris on the 27th.

The Cease-Fire Agreement

(U) As of 2400 on January 27, throughout South Vietnam, both sides were to cease all forms of military activity against each other. The U.S. armed forces and those of its allies were to remain in place pending their withdrawal from South Vietnam (including the dismantling of all military bases) within sixty days. The armed forces of the two South Vietnamese parties, i.e., Thieu and the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG), were also to remain in place and cease offensive activities against each other. Return of prisoners of war (POWs) was to be carried out within sixty days. The U.S., on the assumption of an era of reconciliation, agreed to contribute funds for reconstruction aid to North Vietnam and the rest of Indochina (Article 21). U.S. and North Vietnamese replacement of destroyed or damaged war materiel was permitted to the two forces in South Vietnam on a one-for-one basis. Nothing was said about North Vietnam's receiving continued military aid from Russia and China. The fact that it continued was to prove significant later in ultimately helping alter the military balance in Vietnam.

(U) South Vietnam's right to self-determination was to be respected and the two South Vietnamese parties were to hold consultations immediately to set up a National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord. This council would organize free elections and promote democratic liberties, and settle the question of North Vietnam's armed forces in South Vietnam.

(U) Pending reunification, based on discussions and agreements between the North and the South, the demilitarized zone was to serve as a provisional (not a political or territorial) boundary and be respected as such by both sides. Neither side was to join any military bloc


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or alliance or permit foreign powers to maintain military bases, troops, or advisers in their respective territories.

Implementation Arrangements

(U) To insure joint action in implementing the above terms, a Four-Party Joint Military Commission was to be set up immediately, made up of representatives from the United States, North Vietnam, the Republic of Vietnam (Thieu's government), and the PRG. It was to be the medium of communications between its four members and for negotiating implementation of specific provisions of the agreement. It was to end its activities in sixty days, after the troop withdrawals and the return of captured military and civilian personnel. A Two-Party Joint Military Commission, made up of representatives of the two South Vietnamese parties, was to take over enforcement of the cease-fire after the Four-Party Joint Military Commission ceased activities.

(U) An International Commission of Control and Supervision (ICCS) was also to be set up immediately, composed of representatives from Canada, Hungary, Indonesia, and Poland. In addition to reporting to the Four-Party Commission, it was to form teams to supervise and control implementation of the agreement.

(U) Within thirty days of the signing of the January 27 agreement, an International Conference to acknowledge and guarantee its terms was to be convened. The Republic of China, France, the USSR, the United Kingdom, the four ICCS countries and the Secretary General of the United Nations, along with the four parties to the agreement were proposed as participants in this conference.

(U) And how did all this actually work out? The Four-Party Joint Military Commission which was to end its activities in sixty days in fact did so. The U.S. sought to extend its life briefly to help carry out the cease-fire agreement, but Hanoi would not agree. The

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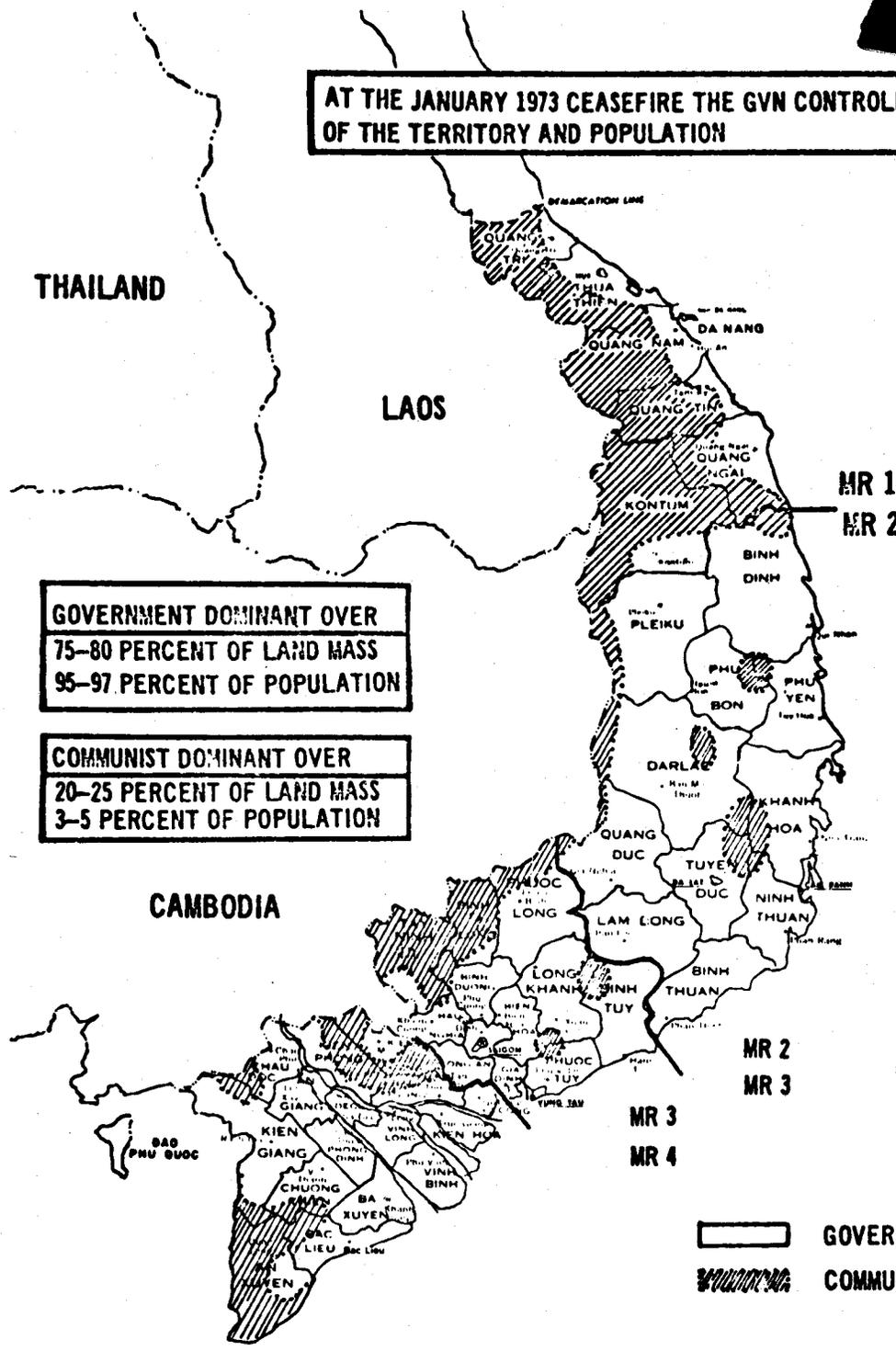
International Conference was held in Paris at the end of February. In it, as Secretary of State Rogers said, the United States sought "a collective international underwriting of the cease-fire to help make it endure and to promote the transition to lasting peace." Saigon's foreign minister, Tran Van Lam, commented that the unstated purpose of the meeting was "to de-Americanize the peace." Less reverent newsmen said the conference was supposed to get the United States off the Indochina hook by trying to get other nations to help enforce the agreement. Most observers agreed that the main thing the conference could achieve would probably be behind-the-scenes collaboration among the U.S., China, and the USSR about limiting weapons deliveries to Hanoi and Saigon.

(U) The other terms of the agreement were far less satisfactorily observed. Despite the fact that Article 3 of the agreement provided that both sides were to halt all hostilities, 51,000 North Vietnamese and 27,500 South Vietnamese were reported killed during 1973.¹ This situation appeared to stem primarily from different interpretations of the cease-fire agreement by the two sides. The North Vietnamese interpreted the agreement to mean that Saigon would implement the political provisions of the agreement which gave the communists a legal right to exist within South Vietnam. They expected that President Thieu and the PRG would meet and form the National Council of Unity and Concord to organize free elections as provided for in the agreement; that Thieu would provide diplomatic immunity to the communists and give at least some communist leaders the right to move freely through South Vietnam. North Vietnam in fact seemed to expect the United States to compel South Vietnam to do this.²

(U) Instead, President Thieu went right on with his previous policies, embodied in the "Four No's" slogan: No territorial and no political concessions to the communists, no recognition of their party, no commercial dealings with them. Less than a week after signing the cease-fire agreement he was reported as saying there could be no elections as long as a North Vietnamese army was in the south.³ Provincial and Army of the Republic of Vietnam

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AT THE JANUARY 1973 CEASEFIRE THE GVN CONTROLLED MOST OF THE TERRITORY AND POPULATION



GOVERNMENT DOMINANT OVER
75-80 PERCENT OF LAND MASS
95-97 PERCENT OF POPULATION

COMMUNIST DOMINANT OVER
20-25 PERCENT OF LAND MASS
3-5 PERCENT OF POPULATION

□ GOVERNMENT DOMINANCE
▨ COMMUNIST DOMINANCE

Source: Hq PACAF/IN

AREAS OF CONTROL AT CEASE - FIRE

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(ARVN) officers were ordered to refuse any informal contacts with North Vietnamese Army (NVA) or PRG personnel, as had occurred at first.⁴ Law 060, in effect reducing the number of political parties in favor of President Thieu's own party, was passed in late March while efforts to form a third force, as provided in the Paris agreement, were suppressed.⁵ Almost from the moment the agreement was signed, Saigon took the offensive in an attempt to eradicate the communists' "ink spots" (the twenty-five percent of the country they controlled) and confine them to their sanctuaries.⁶ The South Vietnamese threatened, stoned, and in some cases allegedly killed Viet Cong representatives trying to come into government areas to serve on the Four-Party Joint Military Commission. At least partially for this reason, there were only about 220 Viet Cong representatives at their joint military commission posts instead of the 875 authorized.⁷

(U) South Vietnam's main complaint about North Vietnam's interpretation of the agreement was the latter's continued infiltration of men and materiel in violation of the total ban on such movements. North Vietnam's reply was that they had to counter the huge Enhance Plus influx of supplies sent to South Vietnam in October-November 1972. As to troops infiltrated, most observers agreed that while large numbers of NVA troops had been funneled into the South, almost an equal number had returned home, leaving a net increase of some 30,000.

(U) Another complaint against North Vietnam, voiced more by the United States than by South Vietnam, was its continued use of Laos and Cambodia to support its operations in South Vietnam. Despite the stipulation that "foreign countries shall put an end to all military activities in Cambodia and Laos," the fighting in Laos had intensified after the peace agreement, with the Pathet Lao making major "land grabbing" efforts and the U.S. retaliating with stepped-up bombing. Dr. Kissinger had counted heavily on this aspect of the agreement as a means to keep Hanoi from mounting another offensive against South Vietnam.⁸

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(U) In view of the foregoing violations by both sides, it was not strange that the Two-Party Joint Military Commission made no progress on any substantive matters. However, because the U.S. administration needed to get North Vietnam's cooperation for a settlement in Cambodia, Nixon and Kissinger told Thieu (when he visited San Clemente in early April) it would be necessary to begin making preparations to establish the National Council for Reconciliation and Concord. Ineffective discussions had been taking place in Paris between Saigon and PRG representatives, but as a result of this U.S. prodding, these now intensified. As Frank Snepp rather graphically describes it in his book:

The proposals and counterproposals they exchanged were so at odds, it is a miracle they could carry on any discussion at all. But because Henry Kissinger was now hoping to placate the North Vietnamese through some show of reasonableness--he insisted that Thieu act as if he might be willing to bargain. Thieu reluctantly obliged him, and during late spring and early summer the two sides indulged in some exquisite haggling over such issues as to how the neutralist "third segment" of the proposed National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord was to be chosen.⁹

(U) Not all criticism for nonimplementation of the cease-fire agreement need be directed at the two Vietnams. The United States, which also signed the agreement, was not without blame. To a great degree it closed its eyes to South Vietnamese violations of the treaty.¹⁰ It did not strictly abide by Article 4 which specified that the United States "will not continue its military involvement or intervene in the internal affairs of South Vietnam." While it honored the first clause, it intervened directly or indirectly in the affairs of South Vietnam right up to the end in May 1975. The U.S. 1,250-man Defense Attache Office, which simply transferred tasks from military personnel to civilians to carry on MACV's functions, drew North Vietnamese objections as not in keeping with Article 5, providing for total withdrawal within sixty days of troops, military advisers, and military personnel.¹¹ And the United States, like North Vietnam, did not abide by Article 20 which said "foreign countries shall put an end to all military activities in Cambodia and Laos."

(U) Most important, however, was the U.S. divergence at this point from what Hanoi considered the basic provision of the peace agreement: establishment of a genuine coalition

TOP SECRET

arrangement between the two factions in South Vietnam leading to a united Vietnam. The agreement had clearly acknowledged the existence of the two South Vietnamese factions and one of its major tasks was the determination of which areas in South Vietnam were to be controlled by each, i.e., those in the greater part of the country controlled by Thieu, and those areas in the north and elsewhere controlled by the communist forces. But the U.S., like Thieu, tended to ignore this part of the agreement. President Nixon, in his January 23 speech announcing the agreement, stated "the United States will continue to recognize the Government of the Republic of Vietnam as the sole legitimate government of South Vietnam." Instead of getting the two sides to unite, Kissinger's strategy envisioned an equilibrium between the two sides so that neither could impose a military solution on the other. He strove for an eventual stalemate and a live-and-let-live attitude on both sides. Both he and the President were still committed to the ideal of a noncommunist South Vietnam as long as there was any chance of achieving it. They did not seriously consider promoting any coalition agreement until events forced them to do so.

The Military Positions of South and North Vietnam

South Vietnam's total military strength in January 1973 was 1,085,703, including Regional and Popular Forces; that of its ground forces (ARVN) was 452,430.¹² The latter had 1,900 tanks and armored personnel carriers and 1,600 artillery pieces.¹³ South Vietnam's logistical superiority was very great due to the large amounts of additional aid sent by the United States under the Enhance and Enhance Plus programs of 1972.* Furthermore, the South had received equipment previously used by Korean forces in Vietnam and some \$57 million worth of equipment left behind by U.S. contractors.

* Estimated by the Defense Department at \$753.3 million. However, knowledgeable U.S. officials agreed that much of the mass of materiel that poured in under the Enhance program had not been well utilized. Much of it was "sitting around rusting" because the South Vietnamese were not adequately trained to use or maintain it.

Two months after the cease-fire the South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) achieved a force level of 64,900 with 66 squadrons of 1,099 fixed- and 1,098 rotary-wing aircraft. This force structure, which accommodated the 549 additional Enhance Plus aircraft sent to help persuade Thieu to sign the peace agreement, was formally approved by Secretary of Defense Elliot L. Richardson on April 9, 1973.¹⁴ Reconnaissance capability was vested in seven RF-5As plus twelve RC-47s and the thousand-plus helicopter force distributed throughout the four military regions. There was some air defense capability in the F-5As and this was projected to increase with the introduction of the F-5Es due to arrive in Fiscal Year 1974. There was sufficient airlift to meet combat support requirements, provided it could be supported logistically.¹⁵

A study prepared by Secretary Richardson's staff in May 1972 found the VNAF would be able to cope with an offensive similar to that of Easter 1972, once enough pilots had been trained. This optimism was immediately squelched by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and the Commander in Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC). The latter called the study's favorable comparison of projected VNAF sorties with those required in 1972 a "numbers game" because it failed to take into account differences in USAF and VNAF aircraft capabilities. For similar reasons, the JCS found the study "misleading" and refused to concur in its findings.¹⁶

(U) North Vietnam had approximately 149,000 combat troops in South Vietnam at the time of the cease-fire. They had some 150 tanks, 225 artillery pieces, and four battalions of surface-to-air missiles deployed just south of the demilitarized zone.¹⁷ In mid-March 1973 an intelligence report cited by New York Times correspondent Fox Butterfield said North Vietnam had recently infiltrated 310 tanks, 150 artillery pieces, 150 antiaircraft guns, and upwards of 60,000 men down the Ho Chi Minh Trail into their areas of control in South Vietnam. With American bombing along the trail ended, reconnaissance showed they were moving these supplies in broad daylight, with little attempt at camouflage.¹⁸

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(U) There were differing opinions about this influx of troops and equipment. According to some of the official U.S. intelligence reports, the number of infiltrating troops was such that the South was being inundated with them.¹⁹ But other sources reported that the net increase was only 30,000 by early 1974.²⁰

(U) Similarly, a Senate staff report of May 1974 suggested Hanoi's 1973 infiltration of equipment represented an effort to make up for decreased deliveries during the period of U.S. mining and bombing in December 1972. North Vietnam said a previous agreement with Kissinger back in October 1972 would have enabled them to resupply their garrison in the South if it hadn't been for the Christmas bombing campaign. Further, they considered the U.S. delivery of Enhance Plus equipment to South Vietnam a violation of the spirit of the peace negotiations* and felt justified in shipping more equipment to their own forces in the South, but not all of it had arrived by the January 28 deadline of the peace agreement.²¹

(U) The communists' most significant activity during 1973 was their construction of a secure logistics and operations base within their areas deep in the western triborder highlands of Military Region 2. They built a whole new road system (including petroleum, oil, and lubricant POL pipelines) leading into it and extensive permanent storage facilities. The inaccessibility of the area, together with their antiaircraft artillery (AAA) units, made it relatively safe from South Vietnamese attack. The new complex gave them a capability to move and mass troops and had the overall effect of diminishing South Vietnam's logistical superiority.²²

Combat Activity

(U) Immediately before and after the signing of the Paris Agreement, both sides sought to seize last minute advantages. Each attempted to consolidate his area of predominant

* One of the main reasons the United States extended the October 1972 deadline for signing the peace treaty was to allow time for shipping much additional equipment (Enhance Plus) to South Vietnam as a means of persuading Thieu to sign the treaty.

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control, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in the mountains and the South Vietnamese on the coastal plain, and there was widespread fighting throughout the country. A measure of its intensity was the fact that Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) expenditure of artillery and use of tactical air reached levels higher than those they had used during the 1972 Easter Offensive.²³

(U) It has been generally acknowledged that in 1972 South Vietnam had the edge over the communists on the battlefield.²⁴ Immediately before and after the cease-fire the North Vietnamese forces had tried to expand the positions they already held, concentrating particularly on Quang Tri province and southern Quang Ngai province. They launched attacks against South Vietnamese airborne elements and gained a foothold on the south bank of the Thach Han River. In Quang Ngai Province they seized the Sa Huynh areas, gaining a deep-water port and cutting Route 1. They also attacked and infiltrated populated areas in Thua Thien and Quang Nam provinces.²⁵ However, as will be seen, they soon lost most of what they gained during these first weeks. For the next months they concentrated instead on building up their supply caches and strengthening their logistical position.

(U) From the outset, the South Vietnamese sought constantly to eliminate communist base areas and to gain control of contested areas. Within a few weeks, they cleared enemy units from Marine rear areas along the Cua Viet River and from the south bank of the Thach Han River where they had infiltrated airborne rear areas. They actively took to the offensive in trying to eradicate communist areas of control. If tactical confrontations failed they sought to deny the enemy control of the population by restricting freedom of movement and by shelling and harassing enemy-held areas.²⁶ At the end of the summer, President Thieu launched several large-scale military operations against the enemy. According to Frank Snepp, Sir Robert Thompson, a counterinsurgency expert, had persuaded Thieu that President Nixon would find a way around the bombing ban. So Thieu decided that the best thing was to demonstrate once again that he was worthy of American support, and in the

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next four months he scored impressively. A traditional communist enclave at the western tip of the delta was captured, and over seven hundred previously disputed hamlets were added to the list of those in which the government exercised dominant influence.²⁷

■ In addition to its military campaigns, ARVN also spearheaded the resettlement of 750,000 refugees, mainly in the foothills of Quang Ngai, Quang Tin, and Binh Dinh provinces in the north and in Binh Thuan, Long Khanh, and Phuoc Tuy provinces further south.²⁸ The South Vietnamese government was unwilling to accept the NVA occupation of parts of these areas as permanent (especially populous Binh Dinh province) and sought to persuade refugees to settle there by first providing security for them. Ambassador Bunker, reporting in March on ARVN clearing operations in an area of Binh Dinh province long held by the NVA, conceded it was questionable whether these operations were permissible under the Paris agreement, but said "the understandable GVN Government of Vietnam /ARVN attitude seems to be that one should make hay while the sun shines."²⁹

Contradictory Conclusions

■ Because of the differing reports and intelligence assessments and interpretations, it is not strange that by the end of the year two vastly different conclusions were reached by the two sides. With official U.S. intelligence reports speaking of a "red tide of . . . south-reaching tentacles of the insatiable North Vietnamese octopus,"³⁰ the JCS began to consider the possibility of being faced with another offensive of the dimensions of the Easter offensive of 1972, and to draft plans, including air attacks against the North, to counter it.³¹ North Vietnam, on the other hand, felt and repeatedly charged that the South was not living up to the peace agreement, but was intensifying its efforts to destroy the North's armed forces and bases in the areas it had liberated and was trying to regain control of the entire south.

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(U) According to diplomats in Saigon at the time, the communists evidently had thought there would be at least a period of peace and were unprepared for, and staggered by, the aggressiveness of the Saigon government's operation.³² According to Snapp, it was Saigon's stepped-up attacks in the summer and fall of 1973 that prompted North Vietnamese "hawks" to urge Hanoi to stop marking time and take some action.³³ At any rate, in October the North Vietnamese Central Committee's 21st Plenum adopted a resolution stating that "the path of the revolution in the south is the path of revolutionary violence. . . . Since the enemy fails to implement the agreement and continues to pursue Vietnamization. . . in an attempt to seize all the south, we have no alternative but to conduct a revolutionary war to destroy him and liberate the south."³⁴ This was the first step in subsequent North Vietnamese plans to resume a military offensive in the south. Their initial move was a series of "strategic raids" against selected targets in South Vietnam, beginning with the overrunning of two border outposts in Quang Duc province northeast of Saigon in the first week of November. When South Vietnam retaliated with air attacks on the areas, Hanoi responded on November 6 with a rocket attack against Bien Hoa airbase, calling forth numerous predictions that a new offensive was in the offing.³⁵

(U) Some analysts believed that the North's decision to move was not taken without considerable internal argument. In other words, Hanoi's "doves" were worried that, with no backing from their Russian and Chinese allies, there was nothing to keep Nixon from sending the B-52s back to North Vietnam.^{*36} Their military commanders were always reluctant to move without a significant superiority in equipment and supplies. Their apprehension turned out to be short-lived, however, because almost immediately, on November 7, the U.S. House

* Almost as if to confirm such fears, the U.S. State Department on October 26 delivered a protest note to the North Vietnamese in Paris, warning that Hanoi had made serious miscalculations about a U.S. response to their moves in the past and that the U.S. would respond to any major military action in the future "in the light of the circumstances." Balt Sun, Oct 31, 1973.


~~TOP SECRET~~

and Senate overrode a presidential veto and passed the War Powers Act, making it illegal for the President to introduce American forces into "hostile" situations for more than sixty days without congressional approval. The August 15 bombing ban, of course, already ruled out any retaliation by B-52s, but the new law served as a further indication of American intent and of Nixon's political weakness.

On November 8, U.S. Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger asked for a hard look at the military balance calculations in Vietnam. The answer of the commander of the U.S. Special Activities Group (USSAG) focused on South Vietnam's command and control deficiencies, weak leadership, and problems with maintenance and logistics management. The Air Staff and the JCS supported these views. CINCPAC's answer was that South Vietnamese forces could not, on balance, successfully defend against determined North Vietnamese attacks of comparable size without U.S. support. He said the United States should get in or get out but not again attempt half measures. He emphasized the importance of early and decisive action to support South Vietnam fully with air and naval forces, including execution of Linebacker III plans.³⁷

The U.S. Position

(U) When the cease-fire was signed on January 27, 1973, there were still 23,335 Americans in Vietnam, plus 35,396 South Koreans, and 113 others from Thailand, the Philippines, and the Republic of China.³⁸

Redeployment

(U) Redeployment of these forces from South Vietnam under Project Countdown began immediately on January 28 by air from Saigon and Da Nang. Between then and February 11, an average of 594 men were moved each day, for a total of 6,145. By February 27, the

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

number remaining was reduced to 12,605. Between February 28 and March 4 there was a brief hiatus because of communist delays in U.S. prisoner releases. The JCS suspended U.S. troop departures until the problem was solved. By March 16 U.S. strength was down to 6,289 when another hold was placed on U.S. redeployments due to problems in getting back American prisoners held by the Pathet Lao. The North Vietnamese helped break the impasse and on March 27 the first aircraft resuming U.S. redeployment operations left Tan Son Nhut as the first planeload of Pathet Lao-held prisoners left Hanoi. By March 29, sixty-one days after the cease-fire, all the remaining 23,335 U.S. personnel had redeployed except for U.S. military personnel attached to the U.S. delegation or the Four-Party Joint Military Commission, those assigned to the Defense Attache Office (DAO), and the 194-man embassy Marine guard. For the Air Force, the total number redeployed was 7,553.³⁹

Maintaining a U.S. Power Position in Southeast Asia

Although the U.S. military forces were thus gone from South Vietnam, this did not mean the United States was out of the picture in Southeast Asia or even in South Vietnam. Ever since October 1971, planning had been going on for two new agencies to carry on Department of Defense missions and responsibilities in Southeast Asia after withdrawal of U.S. troops.⁴⁰ The first was the Defense Attache Office, Saigon, which would permit the U.S. to retain a quasi-military position within South Vietnam itself. In addition to performing traditional attache functions, it was to continue RVNAF support previously provided by MACV, particularly in military assistance, logistics and intelligence reporting.⁴¹ It was of course not a typical attache office, being manned by 1,200 DOD civilian.*

* Recruited in the U.S., the civilians came primarily from the Air Force Logistics Command, Army Materiel Command, and the Navy counterpart commands. Interview with Col Garvin McCurdy, Air Attache Saigon Jun 1974-Apr 29, 1975, Office of Air Force History, Jun 3, 1975.

50 military, and 5,500 U.S. contractor personnel. Activated on January 28, 1973, it gradually assumed MACV's functions during February and March, the departing military and incoming civilian officials working closely together to insure an effective transition. The Defense Attache Office formally succeeded MACV on March 2, 1973.

(U) The second new U.S. agency (and from the USAF point of view the more important one) was the U.S. Support Activities Group/Seventh Air Force (USSAG/7AF) command, which allowed the United States to retain a full military position, not in South Vietnam, but in Thailand. Its considerable forces, in conjunction with Strategic Air Command (SAC) forces and the U.S. Seventh Fleet, were intended primarily as a deterrent and warning to North Vietnam not to overrun South Vietnam. There is no doubt that President Nixon believed he would be able to use American air power in Thailand to keep his promises to protect South Vietnam against North Vietnamese cease-fire violations. At a mid-March press conference he warned Hanoi that based on his actions of the past four years, they should not lightly disregard his expressions of concern over their violations. On April 1, on the Meet the Press television program, Defense Secretary Richardson warned Hanoi that failure to comply with the cease-fire agreement could result in a resumption of U.S. mining and bombing of the North Vietnamese heartland. A few days later, Deputy Secretary of Defense William P. Clements said the President had asked for and received a list of possible military actions to back up his warning. Clements said he didn't think "the President has any intention of letting this situation go down the drain."⁴² The fact that USSAG/7AF at this time developed a plan for reintroducing U.S. air forces into South Vietnam corroborates this view. (U) At this time, however, the Watergate case broke and the President reportedly postponed his retaliation plans because of it.⁴³ But he ordered less spectacular moves: air reconnaissance over North Vietnam was allowed to resume, clearing of mines from North Vietnam's harbors was halted, B-52s bombed Laos on April 15, 16, and 17, and the United States broke off negotiations with Hanoi on post-war economic aid in early May.⁴⁴ That

these moves were not without effect may be seen in Hanoi's strong protests at this time and in the reactions of the South Vietnamese Military Region 3 commander, Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Minh, who put his troops on full alert to be ready to fight if the communists moved to retaliate against President Nixon's decisions.⁴⁵

(U) The Watergate crisis had, in Henry Kissinger's words, "an enormously debilitating impact on our executive authority, without which, conducting foreign policy becomes extremely difficult."⁴⁶ But this was not the only factor in the failure of the administration's plan to use U.S. air power in Thailand to help maintain its position in Southeast Asia. The decline in executive power was accompanied by a strong upsurge of power in Congress with the latter passing more and more legislation undercutting the President's ability to commit U.S. forces abroad.

(U) Although this strong divergence between the Executive and Congress was bound up in the Watergate crisis, it also stemmed from the Nixon/Kissinger policy of secrecy in planning and strategy and, above all, of not stirring up further domestic disunity over Vietnam policy. Thus, while many U.S. officials knew of the commitments made to President Thieu, not even the Joint Chiefs of Staff, let alone the American public, were informed about them. Anxious for U.S. public acceptance of the treaty, the administration apparently felt it had to allow people to think the treaty meant the end of U.S. involvement.

(U) In light of this administration policy black-out, it is not strange that very few in Congress shared Kissinger's and Nixon's view of the need to preserve something of the position in Southeast Asia on which the country had invested so many lives, efforts, and dollars. Kissinger could say (as he did in early 1975) that "the overwhelming objective" of the United States in the truce agreement of 1973 was not to end the U.S. role, but only "to disengage American military forces from Indochina and return our prisoners."⁴⁷ But the overwhelming majority in Congress felt that once the agreement had been signed and United States forces and prisoners returned, the U.S. should have done with it all. No one took

TOP SECRET

seriously any of the comments about the United States leaving a power vacuum in the area or the possibility that the Soviets might move into it. The chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator J. William Fulbright, insisted there was no reason for the United States to have a sphere of influence in the area. It should simply withdraw, lock, stock, and barrel. This was the very widespread view in Congress, which wanted above all to be rid of any further spending on Vietnam. This attitude intensified greatly in succeeding weeks and culminated in the congressional vote on June 20 to cut off funds for all U.S. military activities in or over Indochina, effective August 15.

(U) President Nixon, determined that the historical record should show Congress' responsibility for this, on August 3 wrote to House Speaker Carl Albert and Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield:

This abandonment of a friend will have a profound impact in other countries... which have relied on the constancy and determination of the United States, and I want the Congress to be fully aware of the consequences of its action...

I can only hope that the North Vietnamese will not draw the erroneous conclusion from this congressional action that they are free to launch a military offensive in other areas in Indochina. North Vietnam would be making a very dangerous error if it mistook the cessation of bombing in Cambodia for an invitation to fresh aggression or further violations of the Paris agreements. The American people would respond to such aggression with appropriate action.⁴⁸

Nixon said he knew that, with the possibility of military action removed, he had only words with which to threaten and the communists knew this too. He related how when Kissinger raised the question of communist cease-fire violations in Cambodia with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly F. Dobrynin, the latter asked scornfully what else could be expected now that the United States had no leverage because of the bombing cutoff.⁴⁹ It was Nixon's firm belief that the war and the peace in Indochina that America had won at such cost over twelve years of sacrifice and fighting were lost within a matter of months by congressional refusal to fulfill U.S. treaty obligations.⁵⁰

(U) Regardless of the numerous other factors involved, the congressional decision to end all U.S. bombing on August 15 was certainly a key factor in insuring the ultimate failure of

TOP SECRET

the administration's aims in Southeast Asia, for President Nixon and Secretary Kissinger had geared all their plans, pegged their whole post-peace treaty position, to the remaining U.S. air power in Thailand and the ability to use, or threaten to use, it. Making use of the air weapon illegal cut the ground out from under their feet.

The Role of U.S. Air

■ At the beginning of 1973, the USAF was withdrawing from South Vietnam all personnel not being transferred to Thailand, where the new USSAG/7AF command was to be the administration's instrument for keeping its promise of retaliation if North Vietnam violated the treaty. The other military services had been largely freed of the Vietnam war burden, but the Air Force was still to have an important role. As Gen. John D. Ryan, the Air Force chief of staff, stated to Congress:

We are continuing to structure our forces to support the national strategy of realistic deterrence. At the same time, we are providing the principal military power supporting national decisions in Southeast Asia. This has been neither easy nor simple. Rather, within the constraints of resources available to us, we have had to determine the best balance between maintaining current force levels and modernizing for the future. The war has been costly, not only in dollar terms, but in effort and resources diverted from modernizing our forces.

But because the United States had reaffirmed its intent to remain allied with Pacific nations and to honor all mutual defense arrangements, the Air Force goal would be to provide the necessary forces to support this policy.⁵¹

USSAG/7AF

■ The organization in charge of the new Air Force mission in Southeast Asia was the U.S. Support Activities Group/Seventh Air Force Command (USSAG/7AF), located at Nakhon Phanom Air Base.* It was organized as a multi-service headquarters and Gen. John W. Vogt, Jr., Seventh Air Force commander, took over at its activation on February 10,

* In the vacated facilities of Task Force Alpha, the Seventh Air Force's former control center for filtering sensor information.

~~TOP SECRET~~

1973. The deputy commander was an Army major general and the chief of staff an Air Force major general, who was also deputy commander of the Seventh Air Force. USSAG/7AF assumed responsibility for the air war from the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) under CINCPAC* on February 15, and on MACV's disestablishment, on March 29, assumed operational command of the Defense Attache Office as well.⁵² Its mission was to plan for possible resumption of the air war in Southeast Asia; establish a command and control system for managing air assets; maintain a capability to interface with the VNAF Air Control System; conduct liaison with the RVNAF Joint General Staff, Carrier Task Force (CTF) 77, and USAF SAC elements; and control the DAO.⁵³ As of March 31, the headquarters had an authorized strength of 294 officers and an equal number of enlisted men, 474 of them Air Force, 90 Army, 21 Navy, and 2 Marine.⁵⁴ The total number of Air Force personnel in Thailand was 37,499 as of January 1, 1973.⁵⁵

* There had been some disagreement over how the new headquarters in Thailand would function. Both the Air Force and the Army chiefs of staff argued that it should have control over all resources committed in the Southeast Asia area, for combat operations. The Army chief of staff argued strongly that responsibility for the total air effort and authority to conduct it be vested in a single commander by providing USSAG/7AF both targeting and tasking authority over SAC and the Seventh Fleet air resources. The Air Force chief of staff argued for USSAG/7AF targeting and tasking authority over SAC, Navy, and Marine Corps resources for all combat air operations in Laos, Cambodia, and the two Vietnams. The chairman of the JCS, Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, however, disagreed completely and considered the proposals of the two service chiefs "tantamount to establishing a new unified commander in SEA," and out of keeping with any aim of reducing U.S. visibility and responsibilities. He insisted that CINCPAC should retain authority to assign and control the forces operating in his area, and this was the course recommended to Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird by the JCS and ultimately taken. [JCS 2339/360-6 (TS), Nov 13, 1972, App I, J and Enclosure B.] In early 1973, Gen. Lucius D. Clay, Jr., CINCPACAF, continued to push the single manager concept and appeared to have made some progress in getting Navy agreement. But in the course of discussions on the contingency plan, Tennis Racket, General Ryan, Air Force chief of staff, decided that SAC resources were so unique they merited exclusion from centralized control under certain circumstances. As a result, although USSAG/7AF remained the coordinating authority for Tennis Racket, SAC retained independent authority for tasking and targeting its forces in the plan. [USSAG/7AF in Thailand 1973-1975: Policy Changes and the Military Role, Project CHECO Rpt (S) by Claude G. Morita, Jan 27, 1979, pp 51-55.]

~~TOP SECRET~~

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As USSAG/7AF took over, forces under its control consisted of eighteen tactical fighter squadrons, one reconnaissance squadron, and one AC-130 squadron,⁵⁶ operating out of Ubon, Udorn, Korat, Nam Phong, Takhli, and Nakhon Phanom. SAC forces consisting of 203 B-52s and 109 KC-135s based at U-Tapao, Andersen, and Kadena maintained liaison with USSAG/7AF but were under the operational control of CINCSAC. USSAG strike aircraft included F-4s, F-111s, A-7s, Marine A-6s, and AC-130 gunships. C-130 Airborne Command and Control aircraft and OV-10 FAC aircraft provided direction for air strikes, and the C-130s were also used as relay platforms for signal transmissions from ground sensors monitoring enemy logistics activities. Other C-130s operating from Korat participated in intelligence collection operations directed by the USAF Security Service, and the C-130E at Takhli disseminated psychological warfare materials in the Khmer Republic. Additional support aircraft included EC-47s and U-21s used for the intelligence mission of airborne radio direction finding; RF-4s for photo reconnaissance; F-105s for SAM suppression; and EB-66s for jamming support for fighters and B-52s.⁵⁷

Operations

(U) For the first seven and a half months of 1973, or specifically until the August bombing halt, the United States continued to use its airpower to help achieve political objectives vis-a-vis North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

(S) In the first two weeks of 1973, Linebacker II strikes were still authorized over North Vietnam south of 20 degrees north latitude to interdict supplies flowing south and also presumably to bring pressure on North Vietnam as negotiations were being resumed. Storage and staging areas, communications lines, and motor vehicles carrying supplies south were the main targets. During these two weeks there were 535 B-52 sorties and 1,629 tactical air sorties, 716 of the latter by the U.S. Air Force, 863 by the U.S. Navy. One B-52 and one Navy A-6 were lost to SAMs.⁵⁸ On January 15, as negotiations made progress, all air

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

[REDACTED] strikes over North Vietnam were cancelled, and on January 27, the day the cease-fire was signed, all types of air operations north of the DMZ were stopped.

U.S. Air Operations in Laos

[REDACTED] After the January 27 signing of the cease-fire, the United States directed a major part of its air operations against North Vietnamese efforts to secure control of Laos and its territory in order to continue resupply of their forces in the South. President Nixon and Dr. Kissinger had hoped for a cease-fire in Laos concurrent with the one in Vietnam, which would maintain the Souvanna Phouma government in power rather than one dominated by North Vietnamese and Laotian communist elements. But when this did not eventuate, and North Vietnamese forces launched new attacks while making no move to withdraw as stipulated, the United States reverted to using air as a bargaining chip. Intensified U.S. air operations were concentrated against enemy troops, staging areas, truck parks, and motor vehicles. B-52 sorties, cut to 30 a day at the signing of the peace agreement, increased by the end of January to some 50 a day against special interest targets nominated by the U.S. embassy. U.S. tactical air sorties for the month totalled 4,000, of which 2,973 were U.S. Air Force, 491 U.S. Navy and 536 U.S. Marine Corps. The Royal Laotian Air Force (RLAF) share in the attack sorties was 4,482.⁵⁹

[REDACTED] In February, bombing of Laotian targets accounted for ninety-six percent of all B-52 sorties flown in Southeast Asia. Of these, 499 sorties were flown in northern Laos, where the targets were troop and weapon positions near Moung Soui, Bouam Long, and Luang Prabang in the Plain of Jars area. The other 948 were in southern Laos, against truck parks, supply storage areas, and enemy forces moving against Muong Phalane, Saravane, and Paksong. On February 22 a cease-fire agreement brought a halt in the B-52 bombings, but on the 23d the Laotian government requested three B-52 strikes in the Paksong area in response to cease-fire violations. After this, the cease-fire again went into effect. Later,

~~TOP SECRET~~

on April 15, 16, and 17, at the request of the U.S. ambassador in Vientiane, 41 B-52 sorties hit enemy troops attacking the village of Ban Thaviang, southeast of the Plain of Jars. These were the last B-52 strikes against targets in Laos.⁶⁰

Tactical air operations also continued in February against enemy infiltration and troop concentrations. Some 110 strike sorties a day were scheduled in northern Laos, including 12 Marine and 33 F-111 sorties. In southern Laos, daily strike allocations totalled approximately 280, including 88 Navy and 12 Marine sorties. There was also an average of 32 OV-10 sorties a day in the south and 6 in the north. These figures increased by about ten percent on February 21 in anticipation of an enemy push prior to the Laos cease-fire. Following the Laotian cease-fire on February 22, U.S. tactical air operations ended in that country. According to Secretary of State Rogers, the U.S. air strikes in Laos were an important element in the decision by North Vietnam and its Laotian allies to negotiate a cease-fire in Laos.⁶²

U.S. Air Operations in Cambodia

As in Laos, and encouraged by the results there, the administration also used air power to try to help gain its objective in Cambodia: a cease-fire that would guarantee the existing government of Lon Nol against its ever-encroaching communist opposition. In this use of air power, the U.S. embassy in Phnom Penh (as had been agreed by the JCS and the State Department) had final strike approval from a political standpoint, provided the Seventh Air Force approved the strike request and it met the Rules of Engagement.⁶³

When the cease-fire in Vietnam took place, the U.S. stopped its air attacks in Cambodia and the Lon Nol government tried for a parallel cease-fire on January 29. This failed, however, and U.S. air power, which had been used prior to this to bolster the government forces, was reintroduced. Total sorties in January were 870, of which 189 were B-52 sorties, 168 of them flown between January 20-23, against 59 special interest targets

~~TOP SECRET~~

[REDACTED]

nominated by the U.S. embassy.⁶⁴ In early February, the embassy forwarded a Cambodian Army FANK: [Forces Armees Nationales Khmer] request for limited U.S. air support to bolster key positions where their forces were receiving heavy enemy pressure.⁶⁵ During the first three weeks of February, still hopeful of lowered enemy activity, the U.S. held its air combat effort to a minimum.

[REDACTED] Later in the month, enemy presence intensified and on February 24 and 25, in response to a request for air support from the Lon Nol government, 200 tactical and 60 B-52 strike sorties were directed to help break the siege of Kampong Thom.⁶⁶ With the Laotian cease-fire preventing interdiction of logistic lines north of the Cambodian border, enemy supply flow also increased and on March 10 over 60 air strikes were directed against this logistics movement in eastern Cambodia. When enemy infiltration activity still increased, the JCS suggested, and the embassy approved, additional air strikes.⁶⁷ During March tactical air flew some 4,700 sorties interdicting enemy infiltration and supporting FANK forces in the field. In April this rate went up to 5,700, in May to 6,200, in June to 6,400.⁶⁸

[REDACTED] The parallel acceleration of B-52 sorties began on March 6, the bombers primarily hitting known enemy locations such as base camps, command posts, supply storage areas, and truck parks. The sortie rate increased from an initial 12 daily to 30 on March 10 and to 60 a day on March 14. In the last week of April the rate increased to 81 in support of government forces under intense enemy attack in Kampot, Kep, and Takeo. At one point the enemy was so sure of victory that Radio Hanoi announced Takeo had fallen. But the B-52 and U.S. tactical air strikes held them off.⁶⁹ After heavy ground fighting in these areas was reduced, the B-52 sortie rate fell back to 60,⁷⁰ with emphasis on supporting Mekong ship convoys, truck convoys along Route 4, and restoring Routes 4 and 5 to FANK control. There were 1,901 B-52 sorties in April.

[REDACTED] During May, thunderstorms lowered the effectiveness of B-52 strikes because of interference with the loran pathfinder missions.⁷¹ Nevertheless, there were 1,667 sorties,

~~TOP SECRET~~

primarily in the northeastern region against major traffic arteries leading south and east. On May 28 sortie rates were reduced from 60 to 39 a day to reduce operating costs and relieve air traffic congestion in target areas. During June the B-52s were active in defending Takeo and in keeping the vital Mekong River corridor free from enemy control. But towards the end of the month B-52 operations supporting the river convoys were shifted to the areas around Phnom Penh and Takeo and their major supply lines, with their strikes directed primarily against enemy troops in these hotly contested areas.⁷²

Last Battles Before the Bombing Cutoff

Obviously, the last weeks of the U.S. air efforts in Cambodia were spurred on by the knowledge that all air combat operations were to stop on August 15. It was desirable to render as much help to Cambodia before that date as possible (get convoys of supply through, and interdict those of the enemy, for example). For instance, in reaction to the June 29 announcement of the coming legislation, the JCS specifically allowed CINCPAC greater flexibility in response, permitting higher sortie rates except for B-52s.⁷³ And on August 3 they modified the Rules of Engagement to permit air strikes in the restricted area within two nautical miles of the Republic of [South] Vietnam (RVN) border where enemy forces were taking refuge.⁷⁴

At USSAG/7AF, General Vogt had begun immediately to plan: 1) a defensive line around Phnom Penh by forcing enemy withdrawals from areas where he had penetrated too close to the capitol, and 2) the securing of the west bank of the Mekong River to insure that Phnom Penh would not be deprived of its river convoys after USAF bombing ceased. Some U.S. officials were pessimistic about such efforts, prophesying that "neither the FANK nor the government will last long after the August 15 bombing halt."⁷⁵ Things looked very grim, it was true, and the enemy had drawn ever closer to Phnom Penh on all fronts. General Vogt felt the communists were determined to take Phnom Penh despite U.S. air power because of

~~TOP SECRET~~

the great boost this would give their morale throughout Southeast Asia. And, because he saw this as a challenge to any future U.S. air guarantee, General Vogt felt it was doubly important to prevent any such victory. At this point, to use his own words, "I brought our U.S. air power to bear on the immediate situation."⁷⁶ During following weeks up until August 15, U.S. air operations were to play a key part in repulsing enemy initiatives converging on the capital from four directions: the Route 2-201-3 area southwest of Phnom Penh, the Route 4-26 area northwest of the city, the Bassac River corridor to the south along Route 1, and enemy river efforts to interdict the Mekong convoys.

General Vogt's first priority was to try to stabilize the main front by neutralizing the enemy's penetration of friendly defenses. For three weeks he concentrated the main weight of U.S. air efforts on those enemy positions. Thus, from June onward, heavy enemy attacks coming up Routes 2 and 3 from the southwest had greatly narrowed the area of FANK control there. Convinced of success, the enemy had switched from guerrilla tactics to a more conventional attack requiring concentrations of troops. But this very massing of forces allowed U.S. air to inflict maximum casualties on them. Between June 20 and July 15 a total of 541 sorties, mostly tactical air, were flown on behalf of FANK troops in contact. But FANK forces had made no real headway, were in fact fleeing, when enemy razing of villages opened many areas to F-111 and B-52 clearance criteria. As a result the U.S. was able to apply massive air support right up to the battlefield, enabling FANK troops to stop the enemy's drive and begin counter-offensives. Between July 15 and August 7 there were 1,574 sorties, a large percentage of them by B-52s and F-111s. Tactical air alone, according to reports from aircrews and ground commanders, killed 900 and wounded more than 300 of the enemy. Various other sources indicated that enemy forces in the southwest region were withdrawing or requested to do so because of the serious losses from air strikes.⁷⁷

~~TOP SECRET~~

The greatest enemy penetration, however, had been in the northwest. As communist forces began approaching the Pochentong airfield in mid-July, air strikes supported FANK forces in sweep operations towards the airfield. F-4s, A-7s, and AC-130 gunships made most of the strikes because of the proximity of friendly forces and populated areas. Under cover of this type of bombing, FANK forces moved northward to Route 5 and southward toward Route 4, recapturing the recently fallen Kambol International Radio Station, and by August 10 moving on toward Route 26. Between the first of July and August 15, 743 tactical air and 37 B-52 strikes reportedly killed or wounded 2,100 and forced enemy withdrawal from the immediate Phnom Penh area.⁷⁸

The Mekong River was the single most important supply line to Phnom Penh, and during this period F-111s and B-52s continued to support the river convoys by striking known enemy locations along the river prior to the convoy's arrival. Air strikes by F-111s, F-4s, A-7s, and gunships would then follow as the convoy moved toward Phnom Penh, with the AC-130 gunships providing escort during the final part of the journey.⁷⁹ The second major priority in General Vogt's plan was to secure the west bank of the Mekong between Phnom Penh and Neak Luong in order to protect the Mekong convoys after August 15 when U.S. air support would be withdrawn. This he planned to do by clearing Route 1.

The campaign began on August 4 with B-52s and F-111s striking enemy locations along Route 1 on the east bank of the Mekong. On August 4, 5, and 6, there were 103 B-52 and 32 F-111 strikes. On August 7 friendly forces from the north started to push down Route 1 east of Dei Eth, while elements from the south started a similar drive northward. Both worked closely with forward air controllers and gunships for direct air support. B-52s continued to strike in the Bassac River corridor, while F-111s concentrated their attacks on the east bank of the river to neutralize enemy firing positions. On August 7 and 8 there were 155 tactical air (including 24 F-111), and 51 B-52 strikes in support of the FANK

sweep. The next day the FANK moved more than two kilometers in both directions, and on August 10 joined forces at Prek Treng. On the final two days of the operation there were 43 B-52, 28 F-111, and 60 tactical air strikes. This coordinated air and ground clearing operation allowed the FANK to gain control of the strategic west bank of the Mekong without suffering a single casualty, whereas enemy casualties due to air were later reported as high as sixty percent in some units. The FANK was able, as a result, to deny the enemy firing positions on the eastern bank, greatly reducing the potential for attacks on the river convoys.⁸⁰

In all, for the last forty-five days, from July 1 to August 15 there were 1,908 B-52 sorties⁸¹ and 10,360 tactical air sorties.⁸² The net result of the intensive campaign to strengthen Phnom Penh's position before August 15 was more than justified. Already some days before that date, the enemy began to fall back, unable to sustain the offensive. In General Vogt's own words:

About five or six days before the bombing halt, the whole enemy offensive collapsed on all fronts around the city of Phnom Penh, and they began a withdrawal. We had reports now, good, valid intelligence sources, indicating that the enemy literally lost thousands to air activity along that southern front. One commander reported, for example, the loss of over a thousand killed or wounded in his sector alone. Just the other day we received a report from another commander of a battalion-sized element which lost hundreds, and that did not include the sister battalions around him which suffered heavy losses. So the enemy offensive to seize Phnom Penh was turned off, and it was turned off by U.S. airpower.⁸³

A good picture of some of the operational problems encountered in these efforts to save Phnom Penh is also provided by General Vogt:

This has been the most difficult campaign that I've had to fight since I've been Commander of 7AF for the last sixteen months. We've been fighting in an area which is very small. . .about 50 miles from the center of Phnom Penh. . .a highly populated area with many villages. . .an area in which the air traffic density is heavy. Civilian airlines fly through there all day long--Japan Airlines, Thai Airways, Air Vietnam, Air France, etc. They fly right through the battle area every day. We have to fly around them, be sure that we do not drop bombs on them or run into them. . . . There are 300 to 350 airplanes flying in this very tightly compressed area every 24 hours.

This has imposed all kinds of restrictions on us. We have had to be very careful about population destruction. This has required the most precise targeting work. We have photography of all the areas which we are bombing. We compare targets against the photographs to make sure we are not bombing villages that are still occupied. We pick our way around them It has all added up to one of the most difficult air supporting tasks we have ever had. ⁸⁴

(U) The results of U.S. air operations in both Laos and Cambodia, up until August 15, had clearly furthered the administration's aims in those countries. General Vogt, perhaps elated by the success of the Cambodian campaign, could in August still see the possibility of Congress authorizing renewed bombing should there be a major provocation.⁸⁵ But, as matters turned out, the administration lost its battle on further use of force in Southeast Asia for good by the June 30 congressional legislation. From then on, and within the increasing constrictions of Watergate, the administration was forced to try to accomplish its aims by relying on the psychological effect of U.S. air strength in Thailand and using it in non-combat support of its allies, by continuing military aid, and by renewing its diplomatic efforts.

The Deterrent Mission

~~TOP SECRET~~ The August 15 congressional termination of U.S. combat activity nevertheless did not significantly alter the basic mission of USSAG/7AF. It was still required to maintain a command structure and plan for resumption of an effective air campaign should violations of the cease-fire require it. To this end, it adopted a plan called Tennis Racket, an extension of the concept executed during the Linebacker I and II campaigns of the previous year. Its basic targeting objective was the heartland of North Vietnam, with SAM sites and SAM

* Despite the efforts to be careful, however, two incidents occurred in the last weeks of the campaign. On August 6 at Neak Luong, a B-52 cell released approximate thirty-five MK-117 general purpose bombs on the town and surrounding fortifications, resulting in 137 killed and 268 wounded. The second incident involved an F-111 which hit friendly positions on an island in the Mekong River near Neak Luong. [USSAG/7AF Hist 1 Jul-30 Sep 73 (TS), pp 13-14; Air Operations in the Khmer Republic (S), p 63.]

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support facilities as highest priority targets.⁸⁶ As the enemy buildup in and around Khe Sanh became threatening in the spring of 1973, the Joint Chiefs of Staff drew up a contingency plan, Prime Hit, for possible air strikes against targets in this area or elsewhere in Southeast Asia.⁸⁷ The enemy continued his aggressive infiltration activities, however, causing General Vogt and his USSAG staff to make repeated changes to the plan reflecting these developments. Indeed, the changes became so numerous by the end of the year that General Vogt's successor, Gen. Timothy F. O'Keefe, decided to start over with a whole new plan, which was distributed in early 1974.⁸⁸ Besides Tennis Racket, Talon Eagle, a plan for reintroducing U.S. air forces into South Vietnam, was developed by USSAG/7AF during the second quarter and readied for final coordination at the end of June.⁸⁹

In addition to making plans to resume an effective air campaign, the USSAG command had regular programs for maintaining its readiness to implement these plans. In the latter part of 1973, it engaged in a major peacetime training exercise, Commando Scrimmage (7AF OPORD 73-1), to test U.S. capability to plan and execute a Linebacker-type operation in event of resumed hostilities against North Vietnam. It consisted of two phases, a munitions loading phase and a flying phase. The first, designed to exercise support personnel in readying a large strike force, took place on November 13. The flying phase, consisting of 100 sorties involving eighty-eight fighter aircraft (thirty-six designated as strike aircraft) and twelve support aircraft, was executed on November 15. The planes flew simulated airstrikes against Loei Airfield and two bridges nearby in the Udorn North Training Area. All times over target were met. Besides tactical strikes, air defense of the strike force, and a simulated search and rescue of a downed aircrew were included in the exercise. Planning began immediately afterwards for a second exercise, Commando Scrimmage Two. Its first, loading phase was conducted on December 17, but the flying phase was postponed until the following January due to a conflict with a Thai military exercise.⁹⁰

Along with planning for possible combat action, USSAG had also to plan for the emergency evacuation of personnel. CINCPAC had charged USSAG/7AF with responsibility

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for all such planning, and on April 17, 1973, the latter distributed the first tentative plan for evacuation operations in Cambodia, nicknamed Eagle Pull. In May, at the request of the commander of the Military Assistance Command, Thailand (MACTHAI), USSAG/7AF also assumed responsibility for updating the Laos evacuation plan, called Talon Blade. Both were worked on and refined during 1973.⁹¹

The Situation in Thailand-USAF Withdrawals

Although the deterrent mission was maintained, the plans for retaining a U.S. military position in Thailand were very much undercut by Congress' August 15 end to the bombing and by its drive to get the United States out of Southeast Asia. But domestic factors inside Thailand at this time also played a strong role. With the signing of the peace agreement and then the ending of the U.S. combat role after August 15, Thai public opinion began to question why there should be over 35,000 uniformed Americans, enjoying many special privileges, still in their country. The Thai military leaders, formerly so forthcoming, became much more aware of the people's demands, especially when strong, youthful forces constantly attacked the "American connection."⁹² In addition, while itself approving the U.S. air deterrent forces in the country, the Thai government was increasingly pressured by Hanoi and other Asian governments, with whom it would have to live in the future, to get these forces removed.⁹³ With the overthrow of the Thanom Kittikachorn government on October 14, opposition to the American presence in Thailand grew in succeeding months.

There was also the fact that there were too many U.S. military men and women in the country. The air augmentations in Thailand, both from the transfer of U.S. forces from South Vietnam and the earlier reinforcements sent to help fight the North Vietnamese during 1972, had swollen the numbers above authorized ceilings, at one point to a total of more than 50,000. Three days after the cease-fire, the Secretary of Defense asked for plans

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to withdraw some of these forces⁹⁴ and in February, the JCS recommended withdrawing one U.S. Marine A-6 squadron as a first step.⁹⁵ In March the American ambassador in Bangkok asked consideration of immediate withdrawal of Marine Air Group 15 from Nam Phong,⁹⁶ in order to return the base to Thai use. But just a few days later, President Nixon forbade any such withdrawals because of the uncertain military situation.⁹⁷

By June, however, the JCS was recommending, this time successfully, implementation of the entire Increment 1 of the JCS plan for reducing U.S. forces in Thailand.⁹⁸ Increment 1 consisted of Marine Group 15, three temporary duty tactical fighter squadrons, twelve F-111s, and ten KC-135s, all of which departed in early September. This left fifteen tactical air squadrons, one gunship squadron, and forty-three KC-135s in Thailand.⁹⁹ Concurrently, a plan was under consideration for withdrawing another six squadrons in Increments 2 and 3, leaving nine tactical fighter squadrons. Toward the end of August, after the bombing halt, the JCS approved and recommended this plan.¹⁰⁰ But the White House did not, and Dr. Kissinger asked for a study of additional options to withdrawing from Thailand.¹⁰¹ The study, forwarded in October, recommended cutting back U.S. personnel in Thailand to 6-8,000.¹⁰² But in November Kissinger told the Secretary of Defense the President had decided there should be no further U.S. force reductions in Thailand before the end of the Fiscal Year 1974 dry season,¹⁰³ and the State Department so informed the U.S. embassy in Bangkok on December 8, 1973.¹⁰⁴ Kissinger, however, did ask the Defense Secretary for a contingency plan for withdrawing some unessential, nonstrike capabilities on short notice during the next few months should internal pressures on the Thai government make this desirable.

Throughout the first half of 1973 there were still some two hundred B-52s in Southeast Asia, fifty at U-Tapao and the rest at Andersen.¹⁰⁵ In mid-July, with all bombing scheduled to end on August 15, the JCS authorized fifteen B-52Gs to return to the United States. On September 21, the return of fifteen more was authorized and in late October

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eighty-seven B-52s were redeployed to the United States from Guam because of the Middle East crisis.* This left seventy-five B-52s in Southeast Asia as 1973 ended, fifty at U-Tapao and twenty-five at Andersen.¹⁰⁶

The congressional funding decision of June 30 and its provision for an August 15 bombing halt brought much discussion about the future of USSAG/7AF, the U.S. military headquarters in Thailand. The Air Force chief of staff predicted on August 2 that the legislation foretold a phase-down to peacetime arrangements, and there was an extended exchange of views on this among USSAG/7AF, PACAF, and various subordinate CINCPAC commands. General Vogt, USSAG/7AF commander, maintained that it would seriously compromise the current political/military position of U.S. allies in Southeast Asia to disestablish or modify USSAG/7AF, or prematurely to redeploy the augmentation forces. PACAF and CINCPAC agreed, and on December 3, the JCS recommended retention of USSAG/7AF at least through May 1974.¹⁰⁷

Non-Combat Air Operations

(U) Besides the air strike operations noted above, the USAF throughout 1973 provided support in reconnaissance, airlift, search and rescue operations, and military assistance in varying degrees to all our Southeast Asia allies. The congressional constraint of August 15 did not forbid continuance of these operations. Indeed, with the cessation of combat operations on that date, they took on added emphasis because they were the sole remaining way (aside from financial aid and diplomacy) for the United States to continue to support its allies militarily.

* This developed as the result of the surprise Egyptian-Syrian attack on Israel on October 6, 1973.

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Reconnaissance

Even after the Vietnam cease-fire in January the military commanders still felt a need for strategic and tactical photo intelligence. Thus, although the JCS prohibited all reconnaissance over North Vietnam and its territorial waters at the time of the cease-fire, four days later MACV requested, and CINCPAC and the JCS approved, high priority Buffalo Hunter* coverage to monitor enemy movements near the DMZ.¹⁰⁸ On the same day, CINCPAC asked PACAF what the risk was in resuming RC-135 operations over the Gulf of Tonkin, and finding it limited, reinstated these operations on a daily basis.¹⁰⁹ On February 11 the JCS emphasized the need for almost daily surveillance of North Vietnam's logistical networks as well as more frequent peripheral coverage of its areas. Tactical air reconnaissance assumed responsibility for daily surveillance, and on April 19 and 24, the first two Giant Scale+ reconnaissance missions began increased peripheral coverage, flying over North Vietnam, and continuing on an average of once a week through 1973.¹¹⁰

In South Vietnam, after final withdrawal of United States forces, all kinds of air reconnaissance operations were authorized, but only when cleared by the South Vietnamese government. Tactical reconnaissance increased to eighteen scheduled sorties per day immediately following the cease-fire. Intensified interdiction efforts in Steel Tiger, and later in the Khmer Republic, necessitated recurring coverage of lines of communications (LOC) and traditional base camp areas used by the communist forces.¹¹¹

A most important photo reconnaissance task involved the detection of SAM sites in the Khe Sanh area. Seven sites were detected by the end of March. In mid-February all sensor strings in the passes along the North Vietnam/Laos border and the routes from Laos into northern South Vietnam were reseeded, extending their life to mid-June. However, in late

* SAC-conducted drone photographic reconnaissance in Southeast Asia.

+ SAC-conducted aerial reconnaissance of Southeast Asia by SR-71 aircraft.

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March sensor surveillance of the DMZ/MR-1 area of northern South Vietnam was discontinued because of the unacceptable risks to sensor implant aircraft from SAM and anti-aircraft artillery positions in MR 1. CINPAC concurred in this on March 29. As the threat in northern South Vietnam increased, tactical reconnaissance was also restricted as the result of AAA damage to an RF-4C.¹¹² Throughout, USSAG reconnaissance continued to help monitor enemy cease-fire violations in South Vietnam; it also fulfilled requests from the Joint Casualty Resolution Center for reconnaissance of known crash sites in the country.

In Laos, at the time of the Vietnam cease-fire, there had been no halt for U.S. reconnaissance aircraft, which were authorized to operate with armed escort and flak suppression except in the northern part of the Barrel Roll area and near known or suspected Chinese positions in its east and west parts. In February, reconnaissance efforts in Laos intensified to provide almost daily surveillance of logistics nets, depots and possible cease-fire violations, especially along North Vietnamese controlled lines of communications and logistics areas. On February 28 CINCPACAF requested that the Seventh Air Force develop a Comfy Gator* route in Thailand in case air operations authorities for Laos were curtailed. In reply, a route located along the eastern Thai border from a point northeast of Vientiane to a point northeast of Ubon was proposed. In March, following the AAA damage to the RF-4C operating in Steel Tiger, reconnaissance sorties began using armed fighter escorts. During April and May a continuing high level of enemy supply movement along the Laos line of communication required up to eight reconnaissance missions daily to provide adequate monitoring. In June, July, and August these missions were reduced to less than two a day because resources were needed to meet the crisis in Cambodia.¹¹³

On September 14, the two contending parties in Laos signed an agreement stating that all aerial reconnaissance would terminate pending official agreement on where such

* Operational program with remote controlled equipment on C-130 aircraft.

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operations would be permitted. But a week later, on September 21, President Nixon authorized resumption of such reconnaissance,¹¹⁴ and RF-4C sorties continued at the previous regular rate of two a day, usually at 20,000 feet. The primary objective was to monitor North Vietnamese withdrawals as demanded by the Laos peace accord, and to observe the progress in their "super highway" construction along major highway segments.*

Along with tactical reconnaissance, national reconnaissance platforms were used in Laos (primarily in areas denied to tactical aircraft) throughout this period to support USSAG as well as national intelligence objectives. Actually, the Giant Scale and Olympic Meet platforms flew relatively few sorties because of poor weather, but the Buffalo Hunter platform was more successful and missions were flown almost daily at low altitude with good results.¹¹⁵

In Cambodia, with the signing of the Vietnam cease-fire, the Seventh Air Force restricted overflights by all U.S. reconnaissance aircraft unless specifically authorized. But in early February, to support the increased interdiction desired by President Nixon, reconnaissance efforts intensified to eighteen sorties a day, monitoring infiltration as well as possible cease-fire violations. The emphasis was on eastern and southern Cambodia, and there was a gradual shift towards doing more bomb damage assessment for B-52s, F-111s, and Pave Phantoms.¹¹⁶ As the military situation worsened in April and May, very vigorous reconnaissance efforts tried to identify enemy troop and supply concentrations and movements, with special emphasis on lines of communication supporting the Phnom Penh and Takeo areas and the Mekong convoys. Beginning in June, as noted above, the great bulk of tactical reconnaissance sorties (seventy-four percent) were flown in Cambodia.¹¹⁷

* In accordance with the Laos accord, North Vietnam did withdraw a full division from the Plain of Jars. But this was no longer so significant because in the meantime Hanoi had completed its alternate road network down through the area it controlled in Military Region I of RVN and opened the small port of Dong Ha there to bring in supplies. [Snepp, pp 64-65.]

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During July and the first half of August, tactical reconnaissance continued to fly some eighteen sorties a day, including two infrared sorties each night, in Cambodia, with only two or three sorties a day still allocated to surveillance of communication lines in Laos.¹¹⁸

Airlift Operations

MACV's Airlift Section was transferred in the latter part of March to Nakhon Phanom to become the Operations Support Branch of USSAG/7AF, the office of primary responsibility for tactical airlift matters in Southeast Asia.¹¹⁹ Operational control of airlift forces, however, went to PACAF through the Airlift Control Center at U-Tapao Airfield, Thailand. The center at U-Tapao also absorbed the Saigon airlift control center, thus controlling all C-130s in Southeast Asia.¹²⁰

Between February 15 and March 22, 1973, the Airlift Section, using C-130s, airlifted a total of 9,212 tons. This included 998 tons of ammunition and rations delivered in sixty-six airdrop sorties to besieged friendly positions in Cambodia. It also included 42,230 passengers, among them 26,508 Provisional Republic Government (Viet Cong) and North Vietnamese Army POWs from Binh Thuy, Bien Hoa, An Thoi, and Con Son to offload stations at Camp Evans, Quang Ngai, Loc Ninh, Tay Ninh West, Bien Hoa, and Phu Cat. A total of 331 sorties was required to return the POWs and the 7,420 VNAF and ARVN Military Police guards which accompanied them.¹²¹

(U) One of the most important and gratifying missions of the Airlift Section was participation in the Military Airlift Command's Operation Homecoming, the return of the American prisoners held by the communists. On February 11 two C-130s of the 374th Wing flew from Ching Chuan Kang (Taiwan) to Clark as primary and spare ships carrying the recovery support team which was to administer the exchanges and provide initial care for the returnees. The team left Clark for Hanoi on the 12th as did another C-130 from Tan Son Nhut carrying members of the international commission to oversee the repatriations.


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The first of the MAC C-141s which were to bring out the men landed soon after the recovery team did, and members of the C-130's crew escorted each released prisoner to the C-141. That day 116 Americans were released at Gia Lam and lifted to Clark; 27 more Americans were released by the communists at Loc Ninh, leaving for Tan Son Nhut aboard six U.S. Army helicopters. Releases of the remaining Americans in Hanoi followed the pattern of the first day. They took place on February 18 and on seven dates in March, ending with the repatriation of the last 67 men on March 29.¹²²

By early April increased airlift support for Cambodia was required, because enemy military activity had again blocked surface routes into Phnom Penh, bringing on a new crisis in the capital. But getting the necessary funds was difficult in view of Congress' political sensitivity on the subject. On April 7, Secretary of Defense Richardson authorized aerial resupply of POL for Cambodia and on the 10th JCS approved an initial airlift of 826 tons of ammunition.¹²³ Between April 11 and June 30, 3,997 tons of ammunition, 652 tons of general cargo, 20 howitzers, and 268,000 gallons of jet fuel were airlifted to Cambodia. In addition, 2,072 tons of ammunition and 1,786 tons of rice were airdropped.¹²⁴ During this period all airlift support was accomplished with ten C-130s.¹²⁵

When Congress at the end of June announced the August 15 funding cutoff terminating U.S. combat activity in Southeast Asia, the big problem became finding ways to resupply Cambodia so its government could survive. The State Department on July 13 informed CINCPAC and the U.S. embassy in Phnom Penh that the United States government was prepared to undertake extraordinary measures (military, economic and diplomatic) to enhance the position of the Cambodian government prior to and after August 15, 1973.¹²⁶ The Secretary of Defense assigned the nickname Nimble Thrust to this provision of military articles and services to the Cambodian Armed Forces. In July, as part of this project, 254 airlift sorties brought Cambodia 3,665 tons of ammunition while another 70 sorties brought in 874 tons of rice and general cargo, including nine 105-mm howitzers. The amount of rice

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and ammunition brought in by airdrop remained roughly the same as in previous months. Between August and December, 1,935 C-130 sorties delivered 29,185 tons of ammunition and another 632 sorties brought in 8,037 tons of general cargo. In addition, 4,862 tons of ammunition and 1,319 tons of rice were brought in by airdrop.¹²⁷

(U) Miscellaneous airlift services provided by the USAF during 1973 included a weekly C-130 mission between Saigon and Hanoi for the North Vietnamese members of the Four-Party Joint Military Commission. Certain logistic airlift support was also provided for the South Vietnamese Air Force. This covered airlift service, either civilian or military, between Clark Air Base and the RVN to facilitate distribution of materiel and peak workload augmentation.¹²⁸

■ Besides reconnaissance and airlift, the U.S. Special Activities Group provided other noncombat support, which included electronic intelligence missions by EB-66s and C-130Es. There were also EC-121 radio relay aircraft orbiting over Cambodia and an RC-135 over the Gulf of Tonkin. USSAG also flew airborne radio direction finding (ARDF) missions in EC-47s from Nakhon Phanom to cover the Steel Tiger area and U.S. Army U-21s from the 7th Radio Research Field Station to cover the Barrel Roll area. USSAG provided search and rescue missions from resources that at the end of September 1973 included at Korat two HC-130 King (control) aircraft, four A-7 Sandy aircraft, and two HH-53 Jolly Green helicopters. And finally, their support included four F-4s armed with AIM-7E and AIM-9E missiles on air defense ground alert at Udorn.¹²⁹

Training

(U) Training and advisory support for South Vietnamese forces, which MACV had performed, became the responsibility of the Defense Attache Office in Saigon. There was a difference, however, in that while the various service divisions in the DAO were required to monitor, report on, and make recommendations for the security assistance programs, they were specifically enjoined not to function as advisers or provide direct training to the South

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Vietnamese armed forces. They were to support the self-sufficiency of the South's forces in all areas, but only in a managerial capacity. Ultimately, they were to facilitate termination of even contractual support, most of the contracts stipulating that RVNAF personnel be trained to take over the contractors' jobs.

(U) This limitation on direct U.S. participation did not preclude continuation of offshore training, including training in the Continental United States (CONUS), for VNAF personnel, particularly pilots. Between July and October 1973, 320 VNAF personnel were sent for offshore training.¹³⁰ A major effort during 1973 was CONUS training for a cadre of VNAF pilots and maintenance personnel to support the introduction of the F-5E aircraft into the weapons system inventory. Eight trained F-5E instructor-pilots returned to South Vietnam in December 1973 to head up the program. Twenty-two additional F-5E instructor-pilots were in training and another eight were to commence training the following March. During Fiscal Year 1974, a total of thirty-eight F-5A qualified pilots was to receive F-5E instructor pilot training and return to Vietnam to conduct the transition to combat crew training. The CONUS-trained maintenance cadre was training VNAF maintenance personnel in twelve prime skill areas at Bien Hoa Air Base in South Vietnam.¹³¹

(U) Within South Vietnam, training went on apace, both that undertaken by the VNAF itself and that administered under U.S. contract. The VNAF's own in-country training capability was being improved by sending technician-level instructors and resource management instructors off-shore for training. A total of 4,517 entered formal in-country VNAF-conducted training during the last quarter of 1973, while 5,422 graduated--an increase over the previous third quarter, when 3,432 entered and 2,707 graduated. Of these, a total of 519 were engaged during the last half of 1973 in T-41, T-37, UH-1, O-1, and liaison pilot training; 37 graduated during the period.¹³²

(U) The contractor-administered training environment was continuously upgraded to provide improved facilities and better training resources to raise VNAF proficiency. In 1973 the

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South Vietnamese Air Force had some fifty-one contracts with twenty-eight firms, at an estimated value of \$43 million, working to help the VNAF become capable of managing their mission requirements on their own. Joint VNAF/Defense Attache Office meetings were held weekly to achieve greater uniformity and coordination in the training effort, and U.S. training specialists visited the various bases, evaluating the various contractor programs in an effort to improve and refine them.¹³³ In-country F-5E maintenance training started on November 22, 1973, with the initiation of training on the F-5E mobile training set, a Contract Field Service Team (CFST) operation. This was to become a totally VNAF-conducted program before the end of Fiscal Year 1974. The CFST was teaching the first class of 176 VNAF students, the CONUS-trained VNAF instructors were to teach the second class with CFST monitoring, and after that the VNAF would be responsible for their own training.¹³⁴

(U) The foregoing comprised only part of the many training programs undertaken by the VNAF and monitored by USAF personnel at the Defense Attache Office. While the major emphasis was on logistics and maintenance, there were, in addition, many training programs in special fields including management, computer operations and effectiveness, administrative planning, civil engineering, transportation and communications equipment and installation.

(U) The above account of training seemed to indicate progress was being made. The defense attache, Maj. Gen. John E. Murray, was not optimistic however. He lamented the incompleteness of the "Vietnamization Program," the lack of a sense of urgency among the Vietnamese, and inaccuracy in reporting--data they submitted could no longer be validated through the advisory system. He was especially disturbed about the Vietnamese Air Force, whose training he found incomplete, its operational readiness unsatisfactory.¹³⁵

(U) On the other hand, the status of training in 1973 had still to be viewed in the light of the tremendous reorganization due to the Enhance and Enhance Plus programs. In other

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words, in the period right up to the cease-fire, the VNAF, as the result of these equipment aid programs, doubled in size. An organization of some 32,000 went up to one of about 65,000 in roughly a year's time. This created problems not only in training but in other fields as well. It was particularly complicated by the fact that the new influx of personnel had to draw on a nontechnical population and that the Vietnamese language itself lacked a technical vocabulary. For some months after the expansion, the training level charts would show almost everybody completely untrained. But this gradually began to change and by the following year was much improved.¹³⁶ As the U.S. air attache was to say later, the VNAF could do just about anything as far as training, acceptance of equipment, and development of skills were concerned. But he conceded they would have done better if the U.S. had been actively advising them as before.

The Role of U.S. Military Aid

(U) From the time of the cease-fire onward, the Pentagon and Congress tried to work out a new military aid program for Saigon. The administration wanted to stick to the letter of its commitment to support South Vietnam, but Congress and the American public grew increasingly unwilling to go along, particularly once the U.S. prisoners of war had been returned. Nevertheless, despite the ever-growing odds, the administration strove throughout the year to continue its policy of support.

On January 5, in a letter^{*} exhorting President Thieu to sign the cease-fire agreement, President Nixon wrote, "You have my assurance of continued assistance in the post-settlement period and that we will respond with full force should the settlement be violated by North Vietnam."¹³⁷ Supporting this policy, Secretary of Defense Richardson in early February directed the JCS and the services to make sure their munitions procurement and distribution planning was adequate to protect the United States' combat air surge

* One of the secret letters produced by Thieu by the time of his resignation.

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capability after the cease-fire and that the necessary surge levels (4,700 Air Force and 2,200 U.S. Navy tactical air and 1,000 B-52 sorties a month) could be maintained indefinitely.¹³⁸

(U) In April President Nixon, as already noted, promised Thieu continued military aid at the "one billion dollar level" and "economic aid in the eight hundred million range for several years."* On May 3, the President made a strong pitch to Congress for continued U.S. support to Cambodia, saying this would help force a cease-fire and keep the country from being used for North Vietnamese assaults on South Vietnam. The situation there was a serious threat to the hard-won peace in Vietnam, he said, and "if Hanoi still pursues aggression in Cambodia we would continue to provide U.S. air support and appropriate military assistance."¹³⁹

Despite the August 15 congressional bombing cutoff, the President nevertheless tried to sustain support for South Vietnam. For example, in October 1973, when defense planners talked of reducing the number of Defense Department civilians attached to the Defense Attache Office in Saigon, Nixon directed that the civilians be maintained at full strength subject to annual review. Any proposed reductions had to be fully justified, in order "to demonstrate that U.S. assistance to the RVNAF would not be diminished."¹⁴⁰

RVNAF Aid vs U.S. Military Resources: The One-for-One Replacement System

Indeed, in his efforts to maintain U.S. support of South Vietnam's military needs at a high level, the President sometimes acted at the expense of U.S. military needs. Thus, Secretary Richardson in mid-March said it would be imprudent for the U.S. to provide one-for-one replacement of South Vietnam's military equipment as provided for under the

* According to Bui Diem, then Saigon's ambassador to Washington, Thieu was on this occasion so pleased and relieved by these promises that he had champagne broken out to celebrate as soon as his plane was in the air. RAND report R-2208-OSD, Dec 78, pp 10-12.

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cease-fire terms because it was too costly. The Enhance and Enhance Plus programs had given South Vietnam equipment in excess of its requirements and in so doing had caused a significant drawdown in U.S. service inventories in some items which, because of funding limitations, production lead time and world-wide shortages, would be scarce for the foreseeable future. Adequate funds for a VNAF force structure fully utilizing all the additional Enhance Plus aircraft were not available and would be even less so in the future. He wanted to do the best the U.S. could by South Vietnam but "without incurring congressional wrath, reduced readiness for U.S. forces or extreme budgetary penalties."¹⁴¹ Actually, Richardson was being very perceptive about future realities and foresaw that the coming budget tightening was going to be a problem not only for the RVNAF, but for the U.S. military services as well.

President Nixon reacted unfavorably to this proposal and on March 29 Kissinger told Richardson to continue the one-for-one replacement; it was premature to move to a restricted or delayed policy now while North Vietnam was continuing a high resupply rate. The President was afraid South Vietnam "could and probably would" interpret a restricted policy as evidence of reduced U.S. support, and North Vietnam might misunderstand such a policy as a long-term rather than a temporary approach.¹⁴²

The chairman of the JCS, Admiral Moorer, agreed with President Nixon's view.¹⁴³ But CINCPAC, a few months later, outspokenly opposed the one-for-one policy. Commenting on the Fiscal Year 1975-79 Program Objective Memorandum Update for South Vietnam, he noted:

A major problem area concerns equipment levels and associated costs. Current policy requires RVNAF materiel posture to be maintained at inventory levels existing on 27 Jan 73. As the result of Enhance and Enhance Plus and other programs, equipment levels in many cases exceed TO&E authorizations. Justification for a program designed to maintain equipment not actually required to support an approved RVNAF force structure is tenuous. . . and replacement should not be made till on-hand assets drop below the TO&E table of organization and equipment authorizations.¹⁴⁴

And by the end of the year Admiral Moorer too became more concerned with the effect of the one-for-one policy on service resources. Commenting on the November 1973 RVNAF

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material requirements submitted by the Defense Attache Office Saigon, he said fulfillment of many of the requests would have "serious impact on U.S. readiness." He specifically recommended against giving the VNAF AC-130As as replacements for their gunships because it would eliminate the USAF capability. Moreover, the VNAF could not become qualified in the time frame under consideration.¹⁴⁵

The services did indeed have problems with implementing the policy, incurring replacement credits which they could not fund within their budgets. For example, during 1973 and on into 1974, the question of whether or not to retain a Maritime Air Patrol Squadron in the VNAF force structure was argued back and forth between the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and CINCPAC, all of whom, ultimately came to favor its deletion.¹⁴⁶ South Vietnam's Joint General Staff wanted to retain it.¹⁴⁷ At stake for USAF resources was the RC-119L modification program for the squadron. Of a total cost of \$5.58 million, USAF had committed \$3.25 million, and it would save some \$2.33 million if the modification program was terminated after completion of a prototype. The JCS concurred in such a termination in June,¹⁴⁸ but did not actually act on it until a year later when military aid funds had become so tight they could be used only for projects of highest priority. Even then, however, when the JCS specified that the twelve C-119s associated with the squadron be returned to USAF, Deputy Secretary of Defense Clements followed the Nixon line in insisting they remain in VNAF control. If they were withdrawn, "It would be the first occasion since the cease-fire that relatively large items of equipment were withdrawn from South Vietnam and this would be misinterpreted by both parties regarding U.S. policy assistance to RVN."¹⁴⁹

(U) Towards the end of 1973, General Murray, the defense attache in Saigon, was advised that Congress had cut the proposed aid from \$1.4 billion to roughly \$1 billion. This came as a great shock to him, all the more so because while waiting for the aid bill to be authorized, he had been drawing stop-gap funds, i.e., writing checks in advance against almost the full

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amount of the proposed \$1.4 billion. If the new, more modest proposal was enacted, only about \$40 million in "uncommitted funds" would be left to meet any unforeseen expenses before the end of the current fiscal year (and the next annual aid appropriation in June). The situation was not helped by the discovery late in 1973 of grave bookkeeping errors in Saigon's ammunition expenditures.¹⁵⁰

In addition to its strong support of formal aid, the administration tried in other, less direct ways, to assist South Vietnam, regardless of congressional moves to withdraw support. The President not only insisted, even after the bombing cutoff, on retaining high U.S. force levels in Thailand and opposing any reductions in Defense Attache Office personnel there, but when he thought it would enhance South Vietnam's security, he did not hesitate to intervene in operational matters. These interventions included authorizing resumption of reconnaissance in Laos and stepped-up bombing in Cambodia, countermanding a State Department decision to redeploy three U-21s to appease Thai political objections, and directing extraordinary measures prior to and after August 15 to support the Cambodian government.

Diplomatic Efforts

(U) Finally, in addition to its military potential in Thailand and its continued aid and support for South Vietnam through the Defense Attache Office, as well as through other channels, the U.S. also worked in the diplomatic area on other important facets of its strategy for turning the cease-fire into a lasting peace. "To give North Vietnam a stake in the peace," as President Nixon put it, the United States set up a U.S.-North Vietnamese Joint Economics Committee to discuss U.S. reconstruction aid to Hanoi. It began holding meetings in March. At the same time, the United States strove via Moscow to weaken Hanoi by turning off the flow of supplies to its forces in the South. Following up on the trade agreements negotiated with Moscow in 1972, the administration counted on the

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Soviets keeping their part of the bargain by cutting back military supplies to Hanoi. During 1973 this ploy was not without success.

(U) With the same objective in mind, the United States also doggedly pursued its efforts to get favorable* cease-fire agreements in Laos and Cambodia, hoping thereby to deprive Hanoi of its use of roads and sanctuaries in these countries. During the first half of the year it followed up successfully with air support of government forces in both countries as these tried to withstand communist efforts to topple them. During the spring and early summer Secretary Kissinger tried especially hard to get a settlement in Cambodia, the more so as he became aware of congressional intent to stop U.S. bombing there. In a last gamble he tied the U.S. agreement for reconstruction aid to Hanoi to withdrawal of all NVA troops from Laos and Cambodia. It was when North Vietnam refused this condition that the U.S. broke off the talks on aid to Hanoi for good.⁺¹⁵¹

(U) Towards the end of the year, faced with the growing hopelessness of getting additional South Vietnam aid through Congress, and the latter's November passage of the War Powers Act, as well as with North Vietnam's newly inaugurated (November) "strategic raids" campaign, the U.S. decided to make another direct effort at reviving the peace agreements with Hanoi. Kissinger met once again with Le Duc Tho on December 20 in Paris. While stressing the immutability of South Vietnam's current superior position, Kissinger promised to nudge Saigon again towards establishing the National Council on Reconciliation and Concord and to see to it that Thieu recognized North Vietnamese de facto lines of control in the central highlands and along the central coast.

* i.e., protecting the existing governments.

+ According to Tom Wicker in the New York Times, May 6, 1977, Kissinger insisted that the pledge of \$3.5 billion in U.S. aid to North Vietnam had been conditional on a cease-fire in Cambodia. In the renewed negotiations with North Vietnam later in 1973, Kissinger demanded a Cambodian cease-fire as a prior condition for postwar economic aid. After the negotiations failed to produce the cease-fire the U.S. withdrew from the aid negotiations for good on July 23.


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(U) In effect, the U.S. was going to try, almost a year late, to get Saigon to honor the terms of the cease-fire agreement. This was what Hanoi had been waiting for ever since January 27, 1973. Now, ironically, Le Duc Tho could not make a commitment to Kissinger because two months earlier, in October, Hanoi Party leaders had decided that political cooperation with the South was hopeless and had opted for the more aggressive path of the "strategic raids." Throughout the next months, Ambassador Martin was to continue to push South Vietnam on negotiating these matters with Hanoi, as an alternative to failure of further American aid.

Summary

(U) Through the first half of 1973, the United States continued to retain a position of strength in Southeast Asia. The cease-fire agreement was not being honored by either side, and North Vietnam concentrated primarily on building up its logistical position in its enclaves within South Vietnam. But the B-52s were still in Thailand and the two U.S. holding organizations, the Defense Attache Office in Saigon and the USSAG/Seventh Air Force command in Thailand, were at full strength and functioning in their role as successor to MACV. The United States was still supporting Thieu's government as sole ruler of South Vietnam and still bombing the enemy in Cambodia in the hope this would force Hanoi to bring about a cease-fire there. Not a few analysts were still optimistic about SVN's potential for survival.

(U) The second half of 1973, however, saw a rapid change in administration hopes, brought on by two factors: congressional decision to cut off funds for further U.S. military activities, and the emergence of the Watergate crisis, which effectively reduced the President's power to implement his plans for dealing with North Vietnam and for negotiating with any degree of credibility. After August 15, the United States was no longer able to use bombing as a lever to aid the noncommunists in Cambodia and negotiate a cease-fire there.

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Likewise, the threat of retaliation against North Vietnam by B-52s in Thailand faded away as an option. Kissinger, his previous threats of bombing no longer credible, was notably unsuccessful in his June-July negotiations with North Vietnam for a cease-fire in Cambodia. As a result, the United States dismantled the joint economic commission handling reconstruction aid to North Vietnam, thereby relinquishing another tactic planned for keeping NVN in line.

(U) Thus, although U.S. air remained (in diminishing numbers) in Thailand at the end of 1973 and USSAG still had the mission of being prepared to resume air operations against the enemy, the August 15 bombing halt effectively nullified any further power role for the U.S. air weapon. This in turn largely nullified further administration efforts to hold on to its position in Southeast Asia. Because it had so tied its plans to continuing to use air as a deterrent to Hanoi, its remaining options became closed off. And what might conceivably have been a unique and decisive political role for air power was eliminated almost at the outset.

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Chapter II: 1974

(U) The year 1974, though it began with considerable continuing optimism for South Vietnam, was to bring a gradual erosion in the South's position, while North Vietnam's strength grew and it became more active. Not unexpectedly, the South's fortunes were closely tied to developments in the United States, primarily to the decline of President Nixon's power and to congressional opposition to further aid for South Vietnam. The reorganization of the entire U.S. aid program for Southeast Asia also brought grave problems for Saigon. Unfortunately, while these factors reacted unfavorably on South Vietnam, they did just the opposite for the enemy, providing him aid and comfort by removing any remaining worries about U.S. intervention on behalf of Saigon.

North and South Vietnamese Positions

There were two schools of thought as to the relative positions of North and South Vietnam at the beginning of 1974: the optimistic and the pessimistic. Some U.S. military men on the scene in Saigon believed that Hanoi would try to topple the Saigon government by force within the first four or five months of 1974.¹ But certain civilian analysts attached to the U.S. embassy in Saigon, while anticipating some sharp fighting in the months ahead, did not believe there would be an all-out offensive, and the infiltration rate indicated no such development. They pointed to the absence of war recruiting in North Vietnam and the lack of directives to communist cadres to prepare for an offensive.

(U) The optimists noted that the imminent collapse of the Saigon regime following departure of the American troops had not occurred. They pointed to the fact that North Vietnam ruled no more of the country than they had a year earlier, due to South Vietnam's success in its military actions during 1973.³ Saigon had resettled some 80,000 peasants in

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Quang Tri Province by the beginning of 1974⁴ and was planning to resettle many more thousands in other parts of the country.* President Thieu was firmly in charge in South Vietnam and pushing his many plans for exercising tight government control over the entire country.

(U) The pessimists pointed to the fact that North Vietnam had large troop reserves just across the border at home, while the Saigon government had only one brigade, and that mainly on paper.⁵ They noted that the secure base of operations constructed by the North in its areas in the western border highlands of South Vietnam continued to be further improved in 1974. For example, enemy construction on South Vietnamese Route 14 opened up a 900-mile road between the DMZ and Loc Ninh, supplementing or even replacing the central route structure through Laos. Such improvements and the absence of air interdiction enabled the North Vietnamese to move men and supplies in a quarter of the time previously required and with no losses en route.⁺ With the improvements made at the port of Dong Ha in their area of control, they continued to increase their resupply via coastal shipping. By May 1974, they had roughly the same number of tanks as the South, and these were deployed further south than ever before, including a sizeable number of them in northern Binh Duong province above Saigon.

* Maynard Parker, writing in 1975 ("Vietnam: The War That Won't End," pp 365-66) put the total figure to be resettled at 750,000.

⁺ Commenting on a trip down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in December 1973, a PRG official, Mme Duong Quynh Hoa, expressed her surprise at finding the trail now a "very wide, heavily travelled road," where the relay stations served pork and chicken and the separate rooms were furnished with drapes and beds. In another interesting comment, she said that before the signing of the Paris agreement, the life of high-ranking cadre in communist-controlled areas was very easy and there was plenty of food "for the simple reason that they lived on Cambodian territory." As the peace agreement was about to be signed, they moved back to South Vietnam, as did the Viet Cong's Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), where they found a significant shortage of food. [Msg (S) to CINCPAC from DOD/PRO Camp Smith, HI, May 25, 1974, subj: Comments of PRG Minister of Public Health, Mme Duong Quynh Hoa.]


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(U) More significantly, Hanoi had also introduced additional long-range artillery and antiaircraft weapons. The enemy antiaircraft buildup was increasingly cited by U.S. military officers as a factor which, when coupled with the North's vastly improved interior lines of communication with its operations base, could pose serious problems for Saigon in the future. The build-up severely reduced the effectiveness of South Vietnamese tactical air support and aerial reconnaissance, and this was reflected in fewer sorties in 1974. Well defended by their antiaircraft units, the communists now had the capability of massing their artillery and attacking Saigon's fire bases from outside the range of the South Vietnamese guns. The overall effect was to diminish significantly the logistical advantage which the South had enjoyed in the past and to give the North a capability to move and mass troops in a manner hitherto impossible.⁶

(U) As would be borne out later, the differing interpretations of Hanoi's strength, and above all, its intentions, were to constitute a serious flaw in U.S. and South Vietnamese planning. A true picture of what was happening seemed to fall between the two stools of the overly pessimistic views of military intelligence and the overly optimistic outlook of some CIA and U.S. embassy personnel. While the former grew increasingly apprehensive,⁷ the latter, throughout most of 1974, believed Hanoi's plans called only for continued harassing attacks, i.e., no countrywide offensive, until matters were reassessed in late 1975.⁸ Actually, the enemy, having resolved in the preceding October to adopt a more militant strategy in the face of Saigon's political intransigence, decided to intensify this approach in 1974. The Central Military Party Committee, meeting in March, greatly amplified the "strategic attack" measures adopted in October and ordered a step-up in battlefield activities so as to gain the initiative and facilitate the launching of large-scale activities everywhere in 1975.⁹

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Military Actions

(U) South Vietnamese forces responded vigorously to the "strategic attacks" launched by the communists in November 1973, and formalized their response in tough announcements by President Thieu in early 1974 to the effect that South Vietnam was not going to wait for an enemy offensive to begin, but was going on the offensive itself. On January 4 Thieu said, "We must take appropriate actions to punish the communists' aggressive actions" and ordered the ARVN "to hit them in their base areas." Just about the time that General Murray's conservation cutbacks went into effect (see below) ARVN undertook these large-scale counteroffensive operations to shore up the government's holdings.¹⁰ One action was a division-sized operation in Military Region 3, north of Saigon, which caused the communists to temporarily evacuate their long-held Ho Bo woods area. Saigon forces turned back other communist attacks in Region 3 as well and followed up with a large-scale combined armor and infantry thrust into Cambodia against the withdrawing enemy forces.

(U) Between January and May, there was also heavy fighting in the upper delta provinces of Kien Tuong and Dinh Tuong, primarily due to South Vietnamese initiatives against communist base areas and continuing enemy infiltration from Cambodia's Parrot's Beak.¹¹ In these operations, the ARVN 7th and 9th divisions completely cleaned out Base Area 470, Tri Phap, and the 5th Division engaged the enemy forces in the Parrot's Beak. Although South Vietnam's forces were not as successful in the lower delta where many outposts fell to the communists, Saigon's overall control of people and land by May 1 had actually increased from the time of cease-fire.¹² In June, communist members of the ICCS were reporting back to their capitals that the military initiative was clearly in the hands of the South Vietnamese.¹³

(U) But North Vietnam, as a result of the decisions taken at the March meeting, called on its armed forces to regain the lost land and people and to undermine the fighting capabilities of the Saigon forces. The counterattack began on May 17, when a large North

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Vietnamese force lured the 18th ARVN Division into battle at Ben Cat in the Iron Triangle and succeeded in killing or wounding 2,600 ARVN soldiers and destroying forty armored vehicles. In rapid succession, a series of North Vietnamese-initiated engagements in the central highlands and the area south of the demilitarized zone recaptured almost all of the territory lost since the cease-fire.¹⁴ In the western highlands NVA units expanded their supply lines eastward toward the coast and looped Kontum and Pleiku Cities with interlocking road networks. Throughout the country the level of fighting continued to climb and by early September NVA initiatives near Hue and Da Nang had displaced over 700,000 villagers, completely reversing the gains the Saigon government had made in its resettlement program after the cease-fire.¹⁵

(U) NVA Chief of Staff Gen. Van Tien Dung's description of the above developments is probably not too inaccurate:

We then improved our antipacification operations. The enemy became passive and utterly weakened. . . . The morale and combat strength of the troops were clearly declining. Their total manpower had decreased by 15,000 men since 1973, with a heavy loss in combat strength. Their mobile strategic forces had bogged down. The reduction of US aid made it impossible for the troops to carry out their combat plan and build up their forces. Nguyen Van Thieu was forced to fight a poor man's war. . . . Enemy firepower had decreased by nearly 60 percent because of bomb and ammunition shortages. Its mobility was also reduced by half due to lack of aircraft, vehicles and fuel. Thus, the enemy had to shift from large-scale operations and heliborne deep-thrust and tank mounted attacks to small scale blocking, nibbling and searching operations.¹⁶

Morale in South Vietnam

(U) All this was only too true, but the U.S. embassy and military advisers in Saigon, while seeking additional aid for South Vietnam, did not properly advise Washington of the slippages of security in the South Vietnamese countryside, the decline in the army's morale, and the corruption in the government and the military.¹⁷ Morale within Saigon's army was indeed wearing thin, not only due to the ever-tightening quotas on use of supplies and ammunition which made for increased casualties, but above all because the inflationary prices of

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everything (100 percent since the cease-fire) in the face of low army salaries, led only too easily to desertions, petty thievery, and corruption. In August, Nguyen Ngoc Huy, a former Thieu supporter who had represented the government at some of the talks in Paris, delivered the following critique in the course of an interview with CIA:

Except for a few special cases, in which officers look after their troops and help them surmount financial difficulties, the soldiers are unable to feed their families and no longer have the will to fight. They are demoralized because of shameless exploitation by their superiors. . . . Generally speaking, the army has become a vast enterprise for corruption; even artillery support must be paid for. ¹⁸

Col. Garvin McGurdy, air attache in Saigon during the last year before the end, shed additional light on this problem:

No U.S. aid could be directed to upkeep of the Vietnamese armed forces. . . this was a function of the Vietnamese government. But. . . the government deliberately cut corners here, in order to make the budget balance. . . the pay of even senior officers was insufficient to feed, house, clothe, and educate. . . . The effect. . . was to build in what we've called corruption, and it's not a wonder why the Vietnamese were as dishonest as they were. . . . There were no pay cuts, but there was a constant inflation. . . . There were young Vietnamese officers who were hungry, continually. This includes pilots--undernourished. And that was one of the very basic problems. . . the VNAF had to face. ¹⁹

Strategy Planning

(U) It was not only on the battlefield that matters improved for Hanoi, but also in the adverse internal U.S. developments of Watergate, the oil crisis, and congressional opposition to further aid to South Vietnam. Hanoi did not quite know what to make of Nixon's resignation. Unsure of President Ford, the NVN leaders finally decided that the turmoil in Washington could not help but benefit their cause, if only to the extent of frightening and confusing Saigon. Soon Radio Hanoi was proclaiming that the Nixon resignation had created "new opportunities" for "liberation forces" to deliver decisive blows against the enemy. ²⁰ The increasingly stubborn struggle between the U.S. Executive and Congress over further aid to South Vietnam was certainly an "opportunity" for them. So were the U.S. oil conservation programs which forced highly restricted use of oil and reduced operations for SVN. Though

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the constraints were eased by midyear, the 157-percent oil price increase brought new problems: the \$42 million originally programmed for oil in Fiscal Year 1974 escalated to \$78 million, despite a twenty-two percent reduction in consumption.

(U) Hanoi also benefited from President Thieu's difficulties with internal political unrest at this time. As long as security was good and living standards decent, the South Vietnamese people tolerated corruption and inefficiency. Now, with living standards and security both declining, opposition to Thieu began to rise. Beginning in August, several opposition groups began agitating to eliminate corruption in government. Though promising reform, Thieu did nothing. But the demonstrations continued until, in October, he was forced to fire four members of his cabinet, remove three of his four regional commanders, and demote nearly 400 field-grade officers, all because of charges of corruption. Hanoi viewed this unrest in the South as final proof of the growing fragility of the Thieu regime and a symptom of a widening breach between Saigon and Washington, some even suggesting the U.S. was sponsoring the unrest. The "hawks" in Hanoi used this to argue for more military activity. The way things were, they declared, Washington would never intervene massively to save Thieu from defeat. Although it might reintroduce air power in the wake of initial government setbacks, any bombing would be limited in time and scope, posing no real danger to North Vietnam's long-term economic potential.²¹

(U) At a conference in October about a week later, Hanoi's military and political leaders heatedly discussed this question of whether the United States would reenter the war if a large-scale offensive was launched that led to the collapse of Saigon's troops. Party First Secretary Le Duan drew a conclusion that became a resolution: "Having already withdrawn from the south, the United States could hardly jump back in, and no matter how it might intervene, it would be unable to save the Saigon administration from collapse."²²

(U) At this meeting the NVN leaders decided to make the central highlands the main theater of their large-scale 1975 offensive. They considered it a very mobile

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battlefield, with much potential for developing southward along Route 14, or eastward along Routes 19, 7, and 21. One could easily build roads there and develop technical and mobile capabilities, and Saigon's two main-force divisions defending it were spread over many areas.²³ Hanoi's decision called for an offensive to begin in mid-December, which would be aimed at identifying South Vietnamese vulnerabilities; the next phase was to exploit such vulnerabilities, and successive phases were to be predicated on the success of the previous ones. On December 23, Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, North Vietnam's defense minister and chief military strategist, told the National Assembly, "Now that the U.S. is beset with difficulties. . .the prospects of the revolution in South Vietnam are very good."²⁴

(U) While North Vietnamese leaders were planning the 1975 offensive in October 1974, U.S. military advisers were warning President Thieu that in view of the communists' steady expansion in the central highlands and the "inadequacies" of the RVNAF maintenance and logistics system, he should consider withdrawing from the region. This option had been under consideration for some time, but while considered militarily desirable, was not deemed politically acceptable. Thieu rejected the advice.²⁵

■ If no decisive action was taken by the South Vietnamese at this time, it was at least partly due to the conflicting intelligence they received from the Americans on whose word they depended so much. While some U.S. intelligence personnel at the embassy were making very alarmist predictions about North Vietnamese intentions, others were insisting there would be only selective attacks, undertaken to give Hanoi leverage in the coming negotiations. The Central Intelligence Agency headquarters in Washington was the most optimistic of all. In its 1974 year-end National Intelligence Estimate the CIA insisted that while the North Vietnamese were stronger than ever before, the South Vietnamese army was itself still "strong and resilient" despite leadership problems, corruption, and a recent decline in the quality of militia units. While CIA analysts were willing to allow for some kind of communist initiative in the near future, they felt nothing "significant" would occur

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before 1976.^{26*} They noted SVN had abandoned a number of its more vulnerable outposts, but considered that this had relieved it of the burden of supporting "essentially indefensible positions" thus "improving the RVNAF defense posture in the long run."²⁷

(S) By contrast, CINCPAC in November considered the communists stronger militarily than at any time and by the end of the year acknowledged that they were posing the greatest threat in the history of the war.²⁸

(U) In early December the North Vietnamese launched their offensive. By the 16th, they had overrun two district towns northeast of Saigon and seized several outposts in the delta. By the end of December they had overrun all of the district towns in Phuc Long Province and were attacking Nui Ba Den, fifty miles northwest of Saigon.²⁹

The U.S. Position

(U) As already noted, the U.S. position in Southeast Asia in 1974 was directly affected by two domestic developments: Watergate, and the rise in the power of Congress, which increasingly pressed for withdrawal from Vietnam and further reductions in military aid. As opinion polls showed, the mood in Congress largely reflected that of the U.S. public and the impact of these developments on Saigon's future became ever clearer. President Thieu seemed to recognize the significance of the change in U.S. public opinion early on. Questioned in May 1974, he said a general attack would come when the North Vietnamese recognized that the Americans were "out of it." He said, "When South Vietnam loses American moral support, political support, and material support, then surely the communists will attack."³⁰

(U) In early 1974, as Ambassador Martin and Secretary Kissinger considered the difficulties for South Vietnam if no further military aid was forthcoming, they began to emphasize the

* According to Snapp, CIA Director Colby confided to him after the fall of Saigon that it was he who had set the upbeat tone of the year-end estimate, and was responsible for the judgment nothing significant would happen until 1976. [Snapp, Decent Interval, p 132.]

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possibility of renewed efforts to delineate areas of North Vietnamese control in regions north and west of Saigon as provided in the peace agreement. As noted, U.S. military officials in Saigon also tried to convince the South Vietnamese they might well have to give up territory if they did not have the means to defend it. But the net result of this, far from helping bring about further negotiations, was to stir both sides to further land-grabbing efforts in order to extend their areas of control in case the boundary-making efforts took place--which they did not.³¹

(C) The United States continued to maintain its military establishment at USSAG/7AF as well as its requirement for an air strike capability to be used if needed. At the same time it went ahead with its scheduled plans for reducing U.S. forces, particularly in Thailand where domestic political concerns hastened the process. At a series of frank meetings among U.S. embassy officials in September, the question was brought up (as it had been frequently brought up by Thai officials) of the validity of the deterrent capability of the U.S. Air Force contingent in Thailand "hampered as it was by congressional restraints and a domestic political situation in the United States that precluded its use against the North Vietnamese."³² The reply of the U.S. ambassador to Thailand, William R. Kintner, emphasized the importance not only of the deterrent capability, but also the will to use it, as well as the principle of uncertainty involved. He said North Vietnamese planners could never be certain Congress might not support a U.S. response to North Vietnamese attack, citing the way Congress had supported the President in the Middle East crisis in October 1973.³³

(U) Immediately after President Nixon resigned, President Ford sent President Thieu a letter assuring him of the continuity of U.S. support for South Vietnam. In October, Secretary Kissinger reactivated the ad hoc group on Vietnam* because "recent events

* The top-level decision-making group on matters relating to Vietnam, established February 13, 1969.

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indicated a need for continuing interdepartmental coordination and cooperation on matters concerning Indochina."³⁴ In November, top-level CIA analysts released their report saying they felt nothing "significant" would occur before 1976. During the same month, Secretary Kissinger, at the Ford-Brezhnev meeting in Vladivostok, once more tried to relate the problem of Vietnam to U.S.-Soviet detente agreements. The one thing all these U.S. moves to shore up its position had in common was their futility--as events were all too soon to show.

USAF Operations 1974

Plans

[REDACTED] During 1974, USSAG/7AF continued to plan for resumption of the air war in Southeast Asia if the need arose. A revised list for Tennis Racket, the contingency plan for attacks against North Vietnam, was published on January 29, 1974. The new list contained 144 North Vietnam targets, with 69 based on assets in PACOM and 75 identified for strike by air augmentation forces. Several revisions to this list were approved by CINCPAC during 1974. Likewise, the Prime Hit plan of spring 1973, directed against SAM sites and equipment at Khe Sanh, was continually updated during 1974.³⁵

[REDACTED] Concurrent with these plans for combat action were other plans for emergency evacuation of personnel. For, among the confusion and uncertainties as to how the North Vietnamese were going to move, there were some Americans who were pretty sure they saw the handwriting on the wall. In April 1974, CINCPAC directed USSAG/7AF to develop a contingency plan to assist the American embassy in Saigon to protect and evacuate American citizens and designated aliens. USSAG began work on such a plan in May, naming it Talon Vise. At the beginning of July, representatives of the embassy and consulates general, the Defense Attache Office, and all other major supporting commands met in

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Saigon to put the plans into final form. On July 26 USSAG/7AF endorsed the plan and forwarded it to CINCPAC who approved it in December.³⁶

Similar evacuation plans had already been drawn up by USSAG/7AF for Cambodia as well as for Laos. Extensive planning and preparations to meet actual conditions for evacuation went forward throughout 1974, particularly on the plans for Cambodia (nicknamed Eagle Pull) and South Vietnam. Numerous conferences, briefings, and visits to CINCPAC, USSAG/7AF, and embassy personnel took place. Repeated surveys were taken as to the number of persons to be evacuated, and photographic information was compiled on evacuation sites.³⁷

Operations

U.S. air support for friendly forces continued to consist of airlift and reconnaissance flights flown primarily in Cambodia. When Cambodian government forces were able in February to stop the enemy offensive begun against Phnom Penh in January, the communists reverted to interdicting the city's lines of communication and putting pressure on government-held provincial capitals. To meet this need, convoys up the Mekong and airlift of supplies into Pochentong airfield by USAF C-130s continued. Cambodian Air Force C-47s and C-123s also continued to airlift supplies to government-controlled areas outside the capital. USAF airlift averaged eight sorties a day plus three airdrop sorties to areas where safe landings were not assured. The latter were increasingly relied on when the enemy interdicted lines of communications.³⁸

There was, however, continuing U.S. domestic sensitivity to actual U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia operations, even the airlifting of supplies to Cambodia. The possible loss of USAF aircraft and crews in the course of such operations prompted the Defense and State Departments in May to ask for alternatives to dependence on the USAF C-130s. The U.S.

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ambassadors in Cambodia and Thailand both suggested greater Cambodian self-sufficiency in this mission and the introduction of contractor support to help do the job. After involved discussions with Thailand over contract negotiations and worries about being charged with a new "Air America"* association, a contract was signed with a Thai contractor, Birdair, on August 28.³⁹ As part of the agreement the Thai government also required that a contract be let to Thai Airways Company (TAC) to provide flight clearance and monitoring service for the contracted activity. Birdair signed a contract for \$1.78 million, and TAC signed for \$120,000. The operation was to consist of unmarked, USAF-supported⁺ C-130s equipped with Adverse Weather Air Delivery Systems operating out of U-Tapao into Cambodia. The contractor was to provide civilian crews for all the Cambodian airlift missions, and USAF aircrews were to phase out of such missions as Birdair assumed its operational responsibilities. Under terms of the contract, all civilian crews were to receive flight checks and certification from USAF personnel. The first all-civilian airdrop mission was flown on September 26.⁴⁰

(To enhance Cambodia's own C-123K airlift capability, as proposed, a plan was adopted in September to provide six additional C-123Ks, plus two C-123s, twenty C-123K aircrews, and 150 maintenance personnel, as well as minimal facilities construction at Pochentong Airport.⁴¹ This increased Cambodian capability, plus Birdair operations and improved waterway delivery, permitted a significant drop in USAF C-130 missions to a total of 275 missions in the last quarter of 1974 delivering 3,141 short tons of ammunitions, rice, and general cargo. This represented a twenty-four percent reduction from sorties flown in the previous quarter. After Birdair assumed full responsibility on October 8, subsequent

* U.S. government-subsidized airline in the Pacific Command.

⁺The USAF chief of staff originally proposed that nondedicated aircraft from the Clark AB pool be used. Instead Thailand wanted only five serial numbers on unmarked C-130s and the chief of staff agreed.

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USAF C-130 airlift operations were limited to surge and emergency operations beyond Birdair capability. CINCPAC approval was required to permit USAF crew members aboard C-130s employed in these operations.⁴²

Reconnaissance

At the beginning of the year, reconnaissance planes continued to fly an average of eight combat sorties a day, two allocated to surveillance of Laotian lines of communication and the remainder in support of air operations in Cambodia. On May 24, with the installation of a provisional government in Laos, the Laos missions ceased except for U-2 and SR-71 flights. Instead, coverage was concentrated in Cambodia, with emphasis on supporting the defense of provincial capitals and trying to keep the enemy from mounting effective offensives.⁴³ In the last months of the year, additional missions were flown over Vietnam, covering logistics routes, artillery, tanks, POL pipelines, and NVA troop concentrations.

Buffalo Hunter photo reconnaissance drones also flew an average of five sorties a week during the first months of the year to provide coverage within the high threat areas of South Vietnam. During April, three of these aircraft suffered antiaircraft attack but were successfully recovered. In June, however, there was a similar attack and the aircraft was never recovered.⁴⁴ During July and August these drone missions increased from twenty to twenty-five a month to thirty-three in order to cover the central highlands route structure to monitor the enemy's logistics offensive and increasing cease-fire violations.⁴⁵ In the last months of the year, two more Buffalo Hunter drones were lost, one failing to return from its mission and the other crashing in the recovery area.⁴⁶ Giant Scale SR-71 reconnaissance missions were flown at the previous average of once a week during the first part of the year, weather permitting. The number then declined, but by the end of the year

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It was back to twice a month.⁴⁷ Combat Apple* missions were a primary source of electronic intelligence collection, but these too declined from twenty missions a month at the beginning of the year, to eight in April and less thereafter.

In July, the JCS decided that, effective in November, all Southeast Asia reconnaissance would be submitted, approved, and accounted for under the Peacetime Aerial Reconnaissance Program, including RC-135s, U-21s and RF-4s, as well as other platforms flying in the area.⁴⁸ Earlier, on May 15, another reconnaissance program had been phased down. EC-47 Airborne Radio Direction Finding missions, flown continuously since 1966, were discontinued and the responsibility for this task was assumed by the 7th Radio Research Field Station at Ramasun Station in Thailand.⁴⁹

(U) The Operational Intelligence Division of USSAG continued through 1974 to provide the commander with assessments of the current situation with regard to enemy intentions throughout Southeast Asia. During the first half of the year, Cambodia received the most attention, with many reports and analyses of specific enemy actions. As the year wore on, however, increasing attention was given to North Vietnamese operations: pipeline development, air order of battle, air defense activities.

Combat Readiness

As already noted, USSAG still had the mission of being prepared to resume an effective air campaign should renewed hostilities require it. The January 1974 planning guidance for Southeast Asia stipulated that through Fiscal Year 1975 the Air Force would maintain the capability to fly 1,800 B-52 sorties a month, with no more than one week's notice, and 7,000 attack sorties a month (including 400 gunship sorties), with no more than two weeks'

* SAC RC-135 Electronic Intelligence (ELINT) collector based at Kadena AB, Okinawa. The RC-135 aircraft which perform special reconnaissance in support of U.S. forces in Southeast Asia and National Intelligence requirements.

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notice.⁵⁰ For this purpose, USSAG/7AF operated various readiness programs. Simulation of Linebacker-type missions continued to be the focal point of attention. In early January, weapons and tactics personnel drafted six separate exercise scenarios. These had to be considered by the the Royal Thai Government, which ultimately accepted two of them, Commando Scrimmage Alpha and Bravo.

The first such exercise was conducted on January 19 and 20, with final approval for it received just a few hours prior to the first scheduled takeoff. This exercise included most of the operational units in Thailand, and was designed to maintain tactical air forces, command and control nets, and support units at the required proficiency level. When USSAG/7AF requested approval for a second Commando Scrimmage in February, the Thai government disapproved it, stating that it would approve only one such exercise every sixty days. As a result, the commander of USSAG/7AF directed weekly exercises at the wing level of combat training exercises and wing composite strike exercises. The former was a non-flying plane-loading exercise, and the latter a flying training event. The next Command Scrimmage exercise was held on March 18-19. Units reported the accomplishment of much training despite the fact that fifty-three percent of the sorties were unsuccessful due to bad weather. The 155 sorties of the January exercise and the 362 sorties of the March exercise, as all subsequent ones, were flown against simulated targets within Thailand.⁵¹ Both types of exercises continued to be flown throughout the year.⁵²

The B-52 Operations Division also continued operational staff support for the USSAG deterrent mission by training to maintain proficiency and update of operating procedures to be used in the event of renewed hostilities. Weekly exercises were conducted to maintain the capability of processing and validating Arc Light targets and to practice coordination efforts with SAC ADVON in order to strike selected targets. Besides submitting simulated targets in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam for strike planning proficiency, the division

provided SAC ADVON with actual targets, with the B-52 training missions flown in Thailand.⁵³

The 400 gunship sorties a month required under the 1974 planning guidance came into question at the end of the year when CINCPACAF advised CINCPAC on December 19 that this requirement was no longer realistic. Throughout 1974, the aircraft had experienced unusual maintenance and supply problems, with chronic fuel leaks and a high rate of cannibalization. CINCPACAF wanted the sortie requirement reduced to 200 a month, and approval to return some AC-130s from Thailand to the CONUS when maintenance was required. CINCPAC concurred with these recommendations as did COMUSSAG/7AF, and the JCS was so advised on December 14.⁵⁴ But on February 18, 1975, the JCS replied that it did not seem prudent to reduce the gunship sortie requirements or the AC-130 force level, in view of the continuing combat activity in Cambodia and South Vietnam.⁵⁵

USAF Withdrawals from Thailand

While U.S. air units in Thailand worked on maintaining readiness for their potential combat mission, the great bulk of effort centered on withdrawal actions. Planning in 1973, spurred on by political unrest in Thailand, envisaged reducing the approximately 40,000 personnel authorized at the beginning of 1974 to a residual force of 6,100 over the next three years. On April 27, 1974 the Secretaries of State and Defense outlined an April-to-October drawdown reducing both forces and bases. Military personnel would decrease from an authorized 38,000 in April to 28,000 in October.⁵⁶ Since Air Force personnel were in the great majority, most of the specific redeployments involved them. From 28,666 on January 1 they were reduced to 20,576 by the end of 1974.⁵⁴

The first withdrawal involved the entire EB-66 fleet assigned to 42nd Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron. This had been directed already in December 1973, but the movements actually began on January 2, 1974, and were completed at Clark on January 17.

About 600 personnel were redeployed with the move, and the aircraft were to be completely withdrawn from the USAF inventory. In April, one temporary duty A-7 squadron was rotated from Thailand to the United States. On May 3 the President approved further air withdrawals from Thailand: eight EC-121s of Detachment 1, 552d Airborne Electronic Warfare & Control Wing, sixteen C-130s, and eighteen A-7Ds of the 358th Tactical Fighter Squadron, all to be withdrawn between the 15th and the end of May. At the same time, the JCS directed CINCSAC to withdraw nine B-52Ds and to redeploy fourteen KC-135s.⁵⁸ (As the year began, there had been seventy-five B-52s left in Southeast Asia, twenty-five at Andersen on Guam and fifty at U-Tapao.)

The moves directed in May continued throughout the year. In June twenty-five OV-10s redeployed from Nakhon Phanom, twenty-six F-4Es transferred to Osan Air Base, and the 361st Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron with twenty-two EC-47s was inactivated at Nakhon Phanom. Within Thailand, thirteen F-4Ds went from Ubon to Udorn and thirteen F-4Es from Korat to Udorn. CINCSAC withdrew nine B-52s, and nine more in July. Also in July, twenty F-4Ds were redeployed from Udorn to USAF Europe, twenty-two F-4Ds were transferred from Udorn to Korat, and fourteen of them from Ubon to Udorn; thirty-six F-111s went from Takhli to Korat and seventeen AC-130s from Ubon to Korat. The last of the moves directed by the JCS in May took place with the redeployment in August of six more B-52s to the U.S., nine F-4Ds from Ubon to USAF Europe, and two from Ubon to the Tactical Air Command. At the same time, fourteen F-4Ds were transferred from Ubon to Udorn. In mid-August, the Air Force chief of staff, Gen. David C. Jones, recommended that the F-105 Wild Weasel squadron, because of age and maintenance problems, be brought back to the U.S. from Thailand as soon as possible. As an alternative, he suggested using F-4C Wild Weasel aircraft in the theatre, which could provide such a capability on forty-eight hours' notice. The JCS recommended approval and accordingly, on October 30 the twelve F-105Gs of the 17th Wild Weasel Squadron departed Korat for the United States.⁵⁹

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As of July 1, 1974, SAC had forty-eight B-52Ds in Southeast Asia, (twenty-three at Andersen and twenty-five at U-Tapao), and by JCS direction this was further reduced to forty-two by August 1. Because the surge requirement of 1,800 sorties a month still remained, it was not planned to reduce the B-52s any further until June 1975, when their number was scheduled to be stabilized at twenty-nine.⁶⁰ In November SAC proposed redeploying the thirteen due to be withdrawn the following year to reach the figure of twenty-nine. SAC was confident it could make good the existing sortie requirement from total SAC resources without the need for keeping the thirteen B-52s and 750 manpower spaces in the Western Pacific. After consulting COMUSSAG/7AF, COMUSMACTHAI, and CINCPACAF, CINCPAC concurred in this proposal on November 15, providing the contingency requirements were assured and advance consultation with the Thai government arranged.⁶¹

In mid-December, Senate Armed Services Committee members visiting PACAF asked how many air squadrons were left and what the plans were for their withdrawal. They were advised that eight tactical fighter squadrons, one tactical reconnaissance squadron, two special operations squadrons, and one tactical air support squadron remained. The current program called for withdrawal down to two tactical fighter squadrons by fall of 1975. Asked about the rationale behind the withdrawal plans, the visitors were told that the force was sized to maintain a sortie capability as directed by the Secretary of Defense.⁶²

(U) Takhli Air Base, as planned, was returned to the Thai government (ahead of schedule) on September 12.⁶³ On November 1, Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base was placed on standby status by the USAF. All U.S. tactical aircraft departed Ubon as of August 4, 1974 and a standby force of 350 U.S. personnel remained to maintain the facilities and provide the initial capability to receive aircraft units back at the base. At the end of the year, the Thirteenth Air Force had identified 114 facilities as excess and approved for transfer to the Royal Thai Air Force.⁶⁴

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~~TOP SECRET~~

The Role of Military Aid

(U) The decline in Saigon's military fortunes in the second half of 1974 was more than matched by the decline in support from its protector, the United States. Although this support was always expressed in terms of military aid, the net effect was broader because the South Vietnamese perceived the aid as a symbol of the wider U.S. commitment to their support. Thus, threatened as it was by the North Vietnamese, Saigon had even more cause to be concerned in 1974 by developments at the decisionmaking level in Washington: the deepening struggle between the Executive and Congress over control of U.S. foreign policy, growing congressional opposition to spending any more money on Vietnam, and moves to exert tighter control over aid funds by changing the administration of them. All these factors became decisive for South Vietnam in 1974.

The Battle Between the Embassy and Congress

(U) The business of trying to get Congress to vote additional aid became increasingly urgent as 1974 went on. Ambassador Martin took on powerful members of Congress (including Senator Edward M. Kennedy) as well as the press for opposing additional aid to Saigon to bolster its morale. Accusing one reporter of being a mouthpiece for Hanoi, he barred further embassy contacts with the New York Times and the Washington Post. The U.S. defense attache, General Murray, was advised by the Pentagon in early February that although a final effort would be made to restore what had been cut from the aid budget, it had little chance of success.

Despite the ambassador's reluctance to alarm Saigon, General Murray in the first months of 1974 preached conservation to the RVNAF very convincingly and set an example by economizing and cutting back in his own staff operations.⁶⁵ As a result, by summer more than half of the available armored vehicles were taken out of commission to conserve


TOP SECRET

petroleum; bombing missions and harassing artillery fire were cut back; eleven South Vietnamese air force squadrons were grounded; flying hours for September were to be reduced sixty-seven percent; and consideration was being given to decreasing VNAF ammunition reserves as a way of getting money for more flying time.⁶⁶ Even though these moves jeopardized their troop operations, South Vietnamese military officials were long accustomed to agreeing with their American counterparts and now followed their advice in the hope of retaining further U.S. support.⁶⁷

(U) Convinced that Congress was bent on making South Vietnam a military invalid, General Murray began pushing a variant of Kissinger's December proposal to accede to truncation by recognizing North Vietnamese lines of control in the northern part of South Vietnam. In a June 1, 1974 cable, Murray told the Pentagon it could roughly equate cuts in Saigon's military budget with cuts in real estate--any further reductions would mean surrendering territory to North Vietnam as its position grew stronger and that of Saigon weaker. Taking their cue from General Murray, Saigon's top commanders drew up a study in mid-summer drawing similar conclusions. Ambassador Martin followed up with a cable to the Defense Department explaining the need and the logic of truncation in the face of further aid cuts. In August, Prime Minister Tran Thien Khiem warned regional commanders in the northernmost provinces that it might be necessary to surrender real estate there to buy time. And Thieu's influential cousin, Information Minister Hoang Duc Nha, conducted a contingency study on how to move all three million people in the northern quarter of the country to the Saigon and delta area if truncation became necessary.⁶⁸

(U) Ambassador Martin spent much time in Washington during June and July stumping for the aid program before several congressional committees. He told them South Vietnam's longer-range economic prospects were quite good and that all the essential conditions were present in South Vietnam for an economic breakthrough along the lines achieved in Taiwan and Korea.⁶⁹ But Congress had become skeptical, and matters were not helped by the


TOP SECRET

publication of a Senate Foreign Relations Committee report on a recent staff visit to South Vietnam. Published on August 5, just before Congress was to vote on aid, the report had a strong impact. It charged that the embassy was too closely identified with Saigon government policies, and the report was very pessimistic about South Vietnam's future. One of its major conclusions was that probably the only way to end the fighting was for the major world powers to cut off aid to their Vietnamese clients.

Proponents of U.S. aid cuts had been saying the same thing for some time and freely acknowledged this as their aim.^{70*} Ambassador Martin retorted that sharply cutting U.S. aid to South Vietnam would bring peace only if "the peace you desire is abject surrender to a communist military victory."⁷¹ President Thieu said the Americans had done their negotiating in a war setting where they could apply military pressure against Hanoi. They had a whip with which at times they struck North Vietnam, while South Vietnam had no means of applying pressure. "If I had B-52s, if I could blockade Haiphong, I would be happy to continue to talk," Thieu said.⁷²

(U) As if to confirm the belief that getting the two Vietnams to negotiate would solve everything, Congress, after having voted a \$1-billion ceiling on the new aid program at the end of July, cut this to \$700 million a day or two after President Nixon's resignation. What the cutters did not perceive was that they were cutting South Vietnam's aid when the latter was still in a favorable position and just as the North was intensifying its "strategic attacks" campaign. The South Vietnamese military were particularly upset at this timing, feeling that Congress had played right into the hands of the communists.⁷³ With the aid cuts, the soaring inflation (up to eighty percent), and the departure of President Nixon, their

* Already in April, Thieu's Information Minister, Hoang Duc Nha, had reported that South Vietnam would receive "zero aid" from the United States in 1976, because Secretary of State Kissinger was going to use the aid question to pressure South Vietnam to force a conciliation with Hanoi and "accomplish something in Vietnam" in face of the upcoming November congressional elections. [Msg. S, to CINCPAC from DOD/PRO Camp Smith, HI, 10 May 74.]

~~TOP SECRET~~

staunchest supporter, South Vietnam suffered a series of crippling reverses--all from external causes--only to be met with a bruising new enemy offensive. Further, no one foresaw that there would be no reduction, but rather an escalation, in Soviet aid to Hanoi, and that all these developments would put North Vietnam in a position where they had no need to negotiate. As President Ford would tell Congress in January 1975: "Last year, some believed that cutting back our military assistance to the South Vietnamese government would induce negotiations for a political settlement. Instead, the opposite has happened. North Vietnam is refusing negotiations and is increasing its military pressure."⁷⁴

(U) General Murray retired in late summer, stating, "We must give the RVNAF support of two kinds. One, money, translated into hardware and logistics, and two, a close-by U.S. air threat, backed by a will to use it."⁷⁵ Before he left he also gave several unauthorized press interviews expressing his disillusionment. He charged that the South Vietnamese were being forced to substitute "bodies, bone and blood for bullets" and described the budget makers in the Pentagon as "fiscal whores."⁷⁶ "We set one standard for ourselves and another for the Vietnamese," he told a reporter. "If an American officer began to take casualties, he would stop and call in the air and artillery and generally blast the hell out of enemy positions. Today the South Vietnamese are forced to hoard their air power and artillery, and so they get more people killed and wounded. It's not only sadistic, it's racist."⁷⁷ On August 16 in his last meeting before leaving for the U.S., he and other American officers again pleaded with Saigon's top commanders to give up territory and adopt an enclave-type strategy to conserve their resources. Generals Cao Van Vien and Dan Van Khuyen agreed that the idea was militarily sound, but politically it was still out of the question. Stopping in Honolulu on his way home, General Murray warned Admiral Gayler that without proper support the South Vietnamese were going to lose, "maybe not next week or next month, but after the year they are going to go through."⁷⁸

~~TOP SECRET~~

(U) In the midst of these deepening fiscal problems, the new U.S. President, Gerald Ford, sent President Thieu a personal letter on August 9, the day after Nixon's resignation, assuring him of continued support. It was an explicit reassertion of American commitments to Vietnam at a time when Congress was giving every indication it opposed strengthening them. Ford wrote:

I know you must be concerned by the initial steps taken by Congress on the current fiscal year appropriations for both economic and military assistance to the Republic of Vietnam. Our legislative process is a complicated one and it is not yet completed. Although it may take a little time I do want to assure you of my confidence that in the end our support will be adequate on both counts.

President Thieu interpreted the letter as a sign of continued U.S. backing, and displayed it at a meeting of the Council of Ministers in Saigon, apparently in an attempt to boost the morale of his entourage and that of the members of his government.⁷⁹

Change In Aid Administration and Further Reductions

(U) The congressional cuts were not the only problem for the aid program in the second half of 1974. Beginning July 1, the Defense Department transferred the currently used Military Assistance Service Funded program to a separate Defense Department account using Military Assistance Program procedures, involving a stricter form of accounting. Under the former system, the services had developed and administered their own aid programs, and funds were often drawn against next year's account or transferred from one program to another to make ends meet. Now, a single Department of Defense accounting rigidly controlled all outlays of funds. Under the new system, Defense found that the services had overobligated some \$296.3 million, which now had to be deducted from Saigon's new Fiscal Year 1975 aid funds. This meant that of the \$700 million to which Congress had cut the Fiscal Year 1975 appropriation after Nixon's resignation, there would effectively be less than \$450 million in Saigon's aid account.

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~(S)~~ The next blow came with Secretary of Defense Schlesinger's mid-July abolition of the one-for-one equipment replacement policy specified under the cease-fire agreement, "because current and projected funding would not support it."⁸⁰ It will be remembered that Secretary of Defense Richardson had tried to do this in 1973 but had been turned down on it by President Nixon. In intervening months an accumulation of one-for-one replacement credits had developed which the services could not fund within current authorizations. And, according to Ambassador Graham Martin, it was "a matter of cold, hard statistical records that the U.S. did not replace military supplies on the one-for-one basis in any category."⁸¹ Thus, Secretary Schlesinger was now formalizing a policy of selective replacement which the services had already been following for some time.

~~(S)~~ One of the most controversial issues affected by Schlesinger's move was the funding for additional F-5Es for South Vietnam. In considering the severe new restrictions on aid, the JCS at the end of May weighed the priorities. They conceded that continued delivery of the F-5Es to replace the less capable F-5As would materially improve the RVNAF's capability to meet the enemy threat, both in air-to-air and air-to-ground missions, giving it the only counter to an enemy air threat. Delaying or halting their delivery would reduce South Vietnam's potential to defend itself and might convey a negative political signal to both Vietnams. But the JCS ended up recommending that first priority must be given to maintaining South Vietnam's current forces and providing them with an adequate level of war consumables such as ammunition, POL, supplies, and spares. If political and funding considerations were prohibitive, then previously programmed funds for F-5E aircraft for South Vietnam should be cancelled.⁸² When Congress cut the new bill to \$700 million in early August, the stipulation to recover \$77.4 million from the F-5E program was included.⁸³

~~(S)~~ Ambassador Martin, Adm. Noel A. M. Gayler, CINCPAC, and General O'Keefe, commander of USSAG/7AF, strenuously opposed the ruling. Ambassador Martin contended

~~TOP SECRET~~

that since eighty-three F-5Es had been funded under prior years, the programmed F-5Es for the VNAF had all been paid for. Admiral Gayler said that even if the entire \$700 million were available, it would not support RVNAF's needs under current combat intensity, and that senior RVNAF leaders were shocked and dismayed. USSAG's commander, General O'Keefe, said the decision not to fund the balance of the F-5Es would have a serious impact on the government and high command of South Vietnam. If the decision was not reversed or modified, it would be an additional sign of the direction U.S. support was taking, and could turn uneasiness to despair, with consequent effect on morale and dedication.⁸⁴

Other stringent measures had to be taken or programmed to adjust RVNAF operations and force structure in accordance with the reduced appropriation. For the VNAF this meant, in simplest terms, that the force had to be cut down to the number of planes it could maintain. Thus, in September CINCPAC concurred with the defense attache's plans to remove all A-1H, O-2, C-7, AC-47, AC-119G, T-37, and T-41 aircraft from operational status. This reduced the 2,073 aircraft of twenty-five types in VNAF's January 1973 inventory by 224 aircraft of seven types,* cuts representing a thirty-percent reduction, with the number of squadrons reduced by ten.⁸⁵ On October 8 the \$700 million was appropriated for Fiscal Year 1975, of which the VNAF share was \$159 million or about twenty-seven percent of what was required.⁸⁶ By November the inactivation of VNAF aircraft had reduced flying hours from about 672,000 to 345,000.

As of December 1974, the 224-aircraft reduction, plus combat and accident attrition, brought the total VNAF inventory down to 1,484 aircraft of sixteen types. But according to a review forwarded by CINCPAC to the JCS on December 13, even this force structure was "not supportable at current funding levels, considering other vital RVNAF needs. It is

* Ever since the great influx of additional aircraft in the Enhance Plus program it had been obvious to most qualified observers that the VNAF could not operate such a large air force with so many different types of aircraft. So it was a wise move, in view of the new financial restraints, to cut down on the types of aircraft by putting them in storage.

~~TOP SECRET~~

limited by shortage of parts and POL. Supply stocks are depleting and flying hours are inadequate to support all aircrews at minimum proficiency levels." Of three suggested alternative forces, CINCPAC recommended one providing for 1,308 aircraft as "best meeting military requirements." The first alternative had suggested a force of 1,594 aircraft which CINCPAC agreed "if properly utilized, would give RVNAF a significant edge over the NVA, strong in mobility and close air support, but it is not supportable within expected funding levels and is not recommended."⁸⁷

The U.S. air attache in Saigon, Colonel McCurdy, described what the VNAF had to absorb in 1974 as the reduction of 11 squadrons out of 66. The decision to buy 54 F-5Es instead of around 154, meant three squadrons would now be equipped with them instead of six. The cutback in funds eliminated almost all U.S. contract maintenance support, which had an unfortunate impact particularly on the sophisticated aircraft, like the F-5Es and C-130s. There was an excess of pilots at the same time that flying time was cut by forty percent. Morale suffered because pilots and personnel on the line were not busy working and make-do work had to be found for them, and there was regression in skills. Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese soon noticed the reduction in aerial activity, in types that were flying, and in the degree of helicopter support for the Army. They saw, or were informed, of how machines started getting parked over in a corner of the airfields, how personnel started working on them with preservatives, stopping up the orifices with tape, and covering the plexiglass so it wouldn't get sunrazed.⁸⁸

A forceful appraisal of the aid cuts as viewed by a foreign government in the area was furnished by Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew to Deputy Secretary of Defense Clements at a meeting in September:

It is clear that Congress is tired of providing support for Vietnam. . . . If Congress could regain its perspective. . . maybe the situation can be saved, but once confidence in the U.S. is gone, it is the beginning of the end. . . . At the time of the Paris Peace Accords. . . there was a 50-50 chance for peace in Vietnam, then Watergate came along and the tide turned. The situation in Thailand deteriorated, the bombing was halted, and people in the region began to lose confidence in the United States.

~~TOP SECRET~~



When Secretary Clements assured him that the administration was going to seek a supplemental appropriation in the next year and was not going to abandon Indochina, Lee replied that the Peoples Republic of China and Russia were going to continue to be involved in the region. There had to be a countervailing force which could only be the U.S.--the security of the entire region depended on a continuing American interest and visible, credible presence.⁸⁹

(U) When Congress in early October refused to appropriate more than \$700 million, Ambassador Martin immediately proposed seeking a supplemental appropriation. The White House, more attuned to what it could expect from Congress, decided to hold off for a while, and then decided on a new approach. Towards the end of October, Secretary Kissinger relayed to Defense, CIA, AID, and the Deputy Secretary of State instructions from the President for a "comprehensive review of U.S. assistance policy and programs for South Vietnam."

(S) The review was to be in two parts: the first, an intelligence appraisal, would serve as the basis for the second part, a review of the assistance programs. The latter was to "present options for South Vietnam's economic policies and U.S. assistance policies which would complement each other and alternate aid flows from the United States and third country sources to support these over a five year period." The review also was to explore the extent to which, in the face of the threat, changes in South Vietnam's domestic economic policy or military strategy could make up for resource shortfalls. Options were to be stated "in sufficient detail to form the basis for appropriate programs to secure legislative approval and the support of other nations." The review was to be prepared on a closehold, need-to-know basis.⁹⁰ This plan, surely born of despair over getting any help from Congress, seemed to envisage some sort of sleight of hand by which South Vietnam, with aid from the U.S. and third-world countries and some change in its economic policies and its

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I would add that Hanoi's perception of future changes in U.S. support and of trends in the strength and stability of GVN, will be key factors determining North Vietnam's future policies. If Hanoi came to believe that a major decline either of U.S. support or of GVN's own strength was occurring,⁹¹ these factors alone would stimulate more aggressive action by North Vietnam.

CINCPAC agreed that uncertainty about U.S. reaction had deterred North Vietnam in the recent past. U.S. aircraft in Thailand and the carriers in the area had kept that deterrent credible. But the reductions of Thai-based forces and reduced military assistance were eroding this credibility, lessening the North's uncertainty, and encouraging its aggressiveness. Compared to the ambiguous views expressed by the CIA and others in the intelligence community, CINCPAC's view was stark and unequivocal: South Vietnam did not have the means to equip and logistically support the necessary military force to counter the North. Such support would have to be provided by the United States if South Vietnam was to survive. CINCPAC said only three courses of action were open:

- (1) Continue to provide the South Vietnamese the means to fight and to live.
They have the courage; supported, they will have the resolve.
- (2) Induce a political accommodation between South Vietnam and North Vietnam.
- (3) Or, watch them succumb to the North.⁹²

Soviet Aid to Hanoi

(U) Important as was the impact on Hanoi of U.S. aid cutbacks, the rise or fall in aid from its Moscow and Peking allies was probably even more so. Throughout 1973 and most of 1974, the Soviets had kept their military assistance to Hanoi down while increasing general economic aid. This was in line with the bargain struck between the United States and the Soviet Union in 1972: a SALT agreement and Moscow's aid in persuading Hanoi to end the war (including the withholding of Soviet military aid to Hanoi) in return for greatly

~~TOP SECRET~~

increased U.S. trade and credit arrangements for the USSR.* In fact, in June and July 1973, right after the Nixon-Brezhnev summit in June, Hanoi's Le Duan, no doubt unaware of the U.S.-Soviet agreement, was surprised to meet with almost a cold shoulder in his efforts to seek more military aid in Moscow and Peking. This uncertainty about support from their allies was reportedly an important debating point used by Hanoi's "doves" in the fall of 1973 in opposing a military offensive. Premier Pham Van Dong warned that without the backing of their traditional allies, there would be nothing to keep Nixon from sending the B-52s back to Hanoi. (The nuclear alert ordered by the Nixon administration on October 25, in response to the Middle East war, lent some credence to these fears.)

Again, in the summer of 1974, Hanoi's aid talks with their communist allies were very long and drawn out and slanted toward economic rather than military assistance.⁹⁴ In November, a CIA report noted that external communist aid to Hanoi had remained at reduced levels during 1974, according to its "very limited evidence."⁹⁵ But, according to Ambassador Graham Martin, the embassy heard in the fall of 1974 that the Soviets had advised Hanoi to "go for broke" since support for keeping the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam had irretrievably eroded in Congress. They suggested maximum pressure on Saigon before the latter arranged for arms from sources other than the United States.⁹⁶⁺ However, some U.S. officials, both in Washington and Saigon, continued to believe that Hanoi would not launch a major attack because it could not be sure of the needed large-scale military support from China and the USSR.⁹⁷

* See The Air Force in Southeast Asia: Air Power Helps Stop the Invasion and End the War 1972, by E. Hartsook, Office of Air Force History, Hq USAF, 1978(TS), pp 115, 117-18.

+ In his prepared statement for Congress, Ambassador Martin said Tran Van Lam, President of South Vietnam's Senate, on returning from Washington in January 1975 was so pessimistic that GVN leaders began tentative arrangements to transfer the gold reserves to Switzerland to provide collateral for loans to buy ammunition in Europe. Subsequently, they explored the possibility of doing this by getting foreign loans to be secured by future oil revenues.

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(U) But in December 1974 all this changed. In the latter part of the month, General Viktor Kulikov, chief of the Soviet armed forces, flew to Hanoi to take part in the Politburo's deliberations. And in the weeks following his visit, seaborne shipments of Soviet war materiel to North Vietnam increased fourfold in volume as Moscow gave full aid and comfort to Hanoi in its final offensive.⁹⁸ How did this shift come about? Ambassador Martin thought the temptation was just too great for the Soviets to resist when they saw the unexpectedly high reductions in U.S. aid and commitment to South Vietnam. He felt that they had decided that they might as well establish their own assistance to North Vietnam at the end and take whatever advantage they could in the long run of a much-improved position in Southeast Asia, perhaps Cam Ranh Bay for the Soviet Navy.⁹⁹

(U) But the Soviets had another reason for increasing their aid to Hanoi. Their previous cooperation in cutting back aid to North Vietnam had been directly tied to the secret trade and credits agreement negotiated by Nixon and Kissinger in 1972. The whole force of these arrangements had declined greatly with President Nixon's resignation in August 1974, and Senator Henry M. Jackson, in particular, was seriously jeopardizing the trade agreement by conditioning its passage on Soviet liberalization of Jewish emigration. When President Ford met Brezhnev in November at Vladivostok, Kissinger could--and did--still insist on the trade-agreement Vietnam bargain. But by mid-December, it had become clear that Senator Jackson would get his way, as occurred when his amendment was passed on January 3, 1975. So the Soviets had reason to complain that their original understandings had broken down. This was a far cry from the "most favored nation" trade status Kissinger had led them to expect, and they no longer felt compelled to abide by their side of the bargain.*

* Although these agreements were arrived at in 1972, neither the U.S. nor the USSR had ever made them public. In January 1975 Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian and Pacific Affairs, Philip C. Habib, testified to a congressional committee that while he understood Secretary Kissinger had confirmed there had been U.S.-Soviet discussions on the halting of Soviet military aid to North Vietnam, he himself was not in a position to discuss the matter.

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They protested the linkage of trade and emigration issues and warned of retaliation, and in the meantime sent General Kulikov to Hanoi.¹⁰⁰

Summary

(U) If 1973 was the year in which South Vietnam was cut off from all further U.S. combat support, real or potential (the B-52s), 1974 was the year when they were increasingly detached from all remaining U.S. support. USSAG still prepared to fulfill its mission of air operational preparedness vis-a-vis North Vietnam. But by the end of the year, due to pressures in both Congress and Thailand, there were only twenty-nine B-52s and twelve tactical air squadrons left in Southeast Asia. U.S. air reconnaissance, though reduced, was still flown over Cambodia, with additional flights later in the year monitoring the growing enemy activities in Vietnam. U.S. airlift and airdrop missions in Cambodia were increasingly turned over to a contract airline or to the Cambodians, partly for fear any loss of U.S. lives might bring charges of continued U.S. military involvement.

For the first six months of 1974, matters still seemed to favor the South Vietnamese, the communist members of the ICCS even reporting, as noted, to this effect to their superiors. But after mid-year, the deterioration was very rapid due to: the drastic effect of the July 1 change in aid administration, along with further congressional cuts in funding, and the resulting austerity measures forced on the South Vietnamese military; President Nixon's resignation in August; the ever-growing indifference, if not outright hostility, of U.S. public opinion toward South Vietnam; and finally, the increasingly sharp and effective North Vietnamese military attacks. For, as the South grew weaker and more demoralized, North Vietnam grew stronger and more confident. With its logistical position ever more firmly consolidated in Military Region 1 and its spirits encouraged by Saigon's problems, it stepped up its "strategic attacks" with such success that by the end of 1974 it was preparing to launch the country-wide offensive it had been planning for 1976.

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Chapter III: 1975

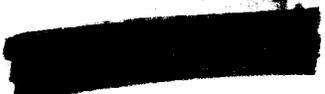
(U) The first four months of 1975 saw the complete unravelling of the South Vietnamese position, although the chief protagonists, especially President Thieu and some U.S. officials, continued to be unaware the end was so near. Thus, Hanoi's chief planners held an important conference from December 18, 1974 to January 8, 1975, attended by Soviet General Kulikov, at which crucial strategy decisions about the upcoming offensive were taken. Top U.S. intelligence officials at the embassy in Saigon not only knew nothing of this meeting and its decisions, but they accounted for the lapse, in part, as follows:

Le Duan had a special editorial prepared for the January issue of the party journal. The article spelled out succinctly and explicitly the logic behind his views and Hanoi's current planning, and if we had had immediate access to it in Saigon, we might have been in a better position to anticipate what was in the offing. But through a foul-up in the international mails the embassy's copy of the party journal did not arrive until early March. By then it was too late.¹

The 1975 Offensive

(U) During the important strategy meetings which began in mid-December 1974 and spanned the old and the new year, the battle for Phuoc Long, capital of Phuoc Binh Province, continued. All roads to the city had been cut, its airfield bracketed by mortar and artillery, and over 8,000 NVA regulars had arrived to confront the 3,000 defenders, mostly undertrained militiamen. Shortly after New Year's Day, after intense artillery and rocket fire, ground attacks smashed into the city and President Thieu prepared to concede the province. A few hours later, he changed his mind and sent 200 of his elite rangers to reinforce it, reportedly hoping, according to a CIA agent in his cabinet, to buy time so Congress would "reconsider" its ban on American combat operations in Vietnam.² But according to a subsequent report by Col. Nguyen Huy Loi, special assistant to the South

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Vietnamese Joint General Staff Inspector General, the needed helicopters for the operation had not arrived on time or in sufficient numbers to carry the troops. Headquarters of III Corps, which had responsibility for the action, didn't have a man to coordinate the whole, to check out everything beforehand. The Vietnamese Air Force had tried to carry out something that the Americans did before, but this time without their support. They had just landed the troops, knowing they could not be supported.³

The Fall of Phuoc Binh

(U) The intense shelling drove most residents and militiamen out of Phuoc Long, leaving only the rangers and a few army regulars to hold the line. The VNAF concentrated their attacks on the northern part of the city, but were soon attacked by enemy antiaircraft which forced them to stay at 10,000 feet or higher. A senior VNAF commander reported losing some twenty aircraft at Phuoc Long because of antiaircraft and SA-7 missiles, calling the latter almost impossible to suppress. This was the highest loss rate since the cease-fire.⁴ Another South Vietnamese officer said the pilots felt a sense of "utter hopelessness" looking down on the town, which appeared like a "tiny, agonizing dot of smoke." A pilot of an old AC-119 gunship said the chief of Phuoc Binh Province, Col. Nguyen Cong Thanh, had been personally keeping radio contact with planes dropping flares and bombing communist positions at night. "If you go away and Phuoc Binh falls, you will be responsible," the colonel reportedly shouted to the pilots overhead.⁵ By January 6 only a handful of rangers remained. Flares and gunships continued to support them and friendly aircraft maintained contact with government troops outside the headquarters, but on the following day, January 7, the city fell to the communists.⁶

(U) Just as there had been hope on Thieu's part that the extremity of the situation might cause Congress to "reconsider" its ban on American combat operations in Vietnam, there had likewise been some North Vietnamese apprehension that the Americans might do so. If this

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happened, there was still time to draw back from their larger plans. As we know, there was no U.S. intervention. Again the words of General Dung, propaganda overtones aside, were not too inaccurate:

At first, the United States aggressively sent the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier Enterprise leading a special Seventh Fleet force from the Philippines toward the Vietnamese coasts, and ordered the Third U.S. Marine Division onto emergency alert status. The warlike clique in the Pentagon threatened to resume bombing the north. Finally, U.S. Defense Secretary Schlesinger who wanted to ignore the Phuoc Long event, stated that this was not a massive offensive by North Vietnam.*

(U) Actually, a six-ship naval task force headed by the nuclear aircraft carrier Enterprise did leave Subic Bay in the Philippines ahead of schedule on January 6 for an operational mission at an undeclared destination. The press immediately connected this with the fall of Phuoc Binh, and a UPI report from Saigon quoted American diplomatic sources as saying the task force was sailing into Vietnamese waters to demonstrate support for South Vietnam and to warn North Vietnam.⁸ This report, immediately denied by the U.S. government, eclipsed the fall of Phuoc Binh in the public mind because it implied possible U.S. reentry into the war. Even with all the disclaimers, some news analysts continued to suspect that American strategists secretly planned to worry North Vietnam with the fleet movements.

(U) Although Phuoc Binh had been of marginal military value, psychologically its loss was a devastating blow to the Saigon government. And conversely, its capture was an immense stimulant to Hanoi. The day after it fell, Le Duan went before his colleagues to press for a bolder military strategy and to get them to adopt a two-year timetable for victory, as well as a recommendation that if opportunities presented themselves in 1975, South Vietnam should be liberated that year. The Central Military Committee then decided to begin the offensive in the central highlands by attacking Ban Me Thuot. But preparations for this

* As he, President Ford, and other officials stated at the time. On January 7, State Department spokesman Robert Andersen said the U.S. did not consider the taking of Phuoc Binh "abrogates the Paris agreement." [Wash Post, Jan 8, 1975.]

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were to be kept very secret to make South Vietnam think the main attack would come north of the central highlands.^{9*}

The Attack on Ban Me Thuot

(U) With the greatest care, the North Vietnamese concealed their real intentions from Saigon's forces. The latter, believing the attack would come in the north, concentrated on defending Pleiku and Kontum 90 and 115 miles due north of Ban Me Thuot. As a result, the latter city was defended only by elements of the 23d ARVN Division, completely inadequate for dealing with the three NVA divisions hidden nearby.¹⁰ On March 4 the NVA forces began interdicting principal lines of communication in the area, while launching minor attacks against Pleiku and Kontum to reinforce the deception about their true target. The real offensive began early in the morning of March 10, with NVA tanks breaking through their camouflage and heading for Ban Me Thuot.

(U) At this point, Gen. Pham Van Phu, the MR 2 commander, realized what was happening. He immediately ordered another regiment to be airlifted from Pleiku to Ban Me Thuot but found that only one of his four giant CH-47s was in flyable condition. He anxiously petitioned Saigon for replacements, but none was available. The U.S. embassy briefly considered mobilizing several Air America choppers on his behalf, but gave it up out of deference to the Paris agreement forbidding renewed U.S. involvement in the war.¹¹ The VNAF was called in during the first few hours to support the defenders, but their bombing,

* The two-month lull before the attack began was interpreted by the U.S. Defense Attache Office in Saigon as a calculated pause by Hanoi to test U.S. reaction to Phuoc Long's fall and await the outcome of the U.S. aid debate. [Report, Defense Attache Office Saigon, subj: RVNAF Final Assessment, Jan thru Apr, Jun 15, 1975, hereinafter cited as DAO Final Assessment, pp 1-3.]

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from 10,000 feet,* was reportedly inaccurate, causing them to accidentally hit an ARVN command post. This was denied by the VNAF chief, Lt. Gen. Tran Van Minh, who said the destruction stemmed from the fact that there were tanks inside the defense perimeter at the time and the VNAF had been directed to hit them.¹² Colonel McCurdy confirmed this, but lamented the operation because of the panic and confusion it caused.¹³

(U) President Thieu ordered General Phu to hold Ban Me Thuot at all costs. The general directed troops of the 23rd ARVN Division to occupy all of the high buildings, and when the NVA began entering the city the ARVN troops, firing from high up in the buildings, repulsed them for a time. But when the NVA subsequently came on in strength, supported by tanks, they took over the heart of the city by late afternoon and before noon the next day, the 11th, informed the communist commander, General Dung, that the battle was virtually won.¹⁴

(U) The South Vietnamese were not yet ready to give up, however. They sent a veritable armada of helicopters through heavy anti-aircraft fire two days later to ferry thousands of reinforcements, including two regiments from Pleiku, to help the defenders. General Dung noted that the VNAF was mobilized to a high degree, bombing the city on the 12th with A-37s and intensifying reconnaissance over Phuoc An and Hoa Binh airfields.¹⁵ This was later confirmed by the VNAF chief and his deputy, who both said that "more air power than was needed" was used at Ban Me Thuot. But they acknowledged heavy helicopter losses, especially CH-47s.¹⁶ For several days, elements of two ARVN battalions clung to a small airstrip on the edge of town, fighting against impossible odds, but were finally forced to withdraw. Ban Me Thuot came under NVA control on the 14th.

* The fact that the VNAF flew this high to stay out of reach of enemy SAMs was a great weakness, for which it incurred much blame. But the USAF itself in 1972 and also Israel in 1973 had had the same problem and with far more sophisticated aircraft than the VNAF had for coping with it. By March, SA-2s covered MR 1 down to Quang Tri as well as the area around Khe Sanh. Kontum, Pleiku and the Parrot's Beak were protected by radar-directed AAA and SA-7s. [The VNAF 1951-75: An Analysis of Its Role in Combat, draft study by Gen William W. Momyer, p 64.]

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(U) In Saigon, neither the government, the U.S. embassy, nor the CIA knew the actual situation, unaware of the presence of the three NVA divisions that had surrounded Ban Me Thuot, and unaware that the battle had ended three days earlier on March 11. "The only available intelligence," according to Frank Snepp, "came from high-altitude photographs taken from Air America and South Vietnamese aircraft, and they told us next to nothing."¹⁷ When Kissinger heard the news, he was puzzled, but according to staffers accompanying him, he felt Ban Me Thuot was of marginal importance and that Saigon had probably given it up as part of its effort to adjust its commitments to its resources.

(U) On March 14, President Thieu directed General Phu to withdraw from Kontum and Pleiku. This was done ostensibly to make additional forces available for the recapture of Ban Me Thuot, but primarily to begin his new plan of "strategic withdrawal" from the north in order to concentrate forces around Saigon. This decision to alter his entire strategy was taken on March 13. It had long been advocated by some of his advisers as well as by U.S. officials, but it still came as a shock to his staff. Thieu ordered them to tell no one of the plan, not even the Americans. They had had their chance to help, and had failed him.¹⁸ According to Nguyen Ba Can, a political ally and confidante of President Thieu, the latter repeatedly blamed his reverses on Washington's failure to keep its promises, and once exploded: "If they [the U.S.] grant full aid we will hold the whole country, but if they only give half of it, we will only hold half the country."¹⁹

(U) Buu Vien, a close adviser of Thieu and a former Assistant Secretary of Defense, called the attack on Phuoc Binh a communist move to test the will of South Vietnamese forces, but "especially to gauge reaction of the U.S. government. . ." noting that the latter "due to domestic difficulties did not make any significant move to deter the communists from further aggression."²⁰ Other South Vietnamese officials saw Thieu's redeployment order as a way to generate a climate of crisis and compel the United States to supply more aid, one general describing it as "a ploy for the ideas of the U.S. Congress." Most saw it as an

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attempt to tighten South Vietnam's defense lines, although several senior officers saw it as a move to guard against the possibility of a coup in Saigon.²¹

General Phu decided to pull out from Kontum and Pleiku the very next day and move his headquarters to Nha Trang. But the NVA had already interdicted the main highways, especially Route 19, the intended primary withdrawal route for his forces. So they had to use Route 7B, a poorly repaired secondary road, which had also to accommodate the hordes of civilian refugees from Pleiku and over 1,500 vehicles, all fleeing from the NVA. Because of a complete lack of command and control and a widespread sense of panic, the retreat ended in tragedy. ARVN units fought among themselves and even committed atrocities against civilians. The exodus resulted in the loss of six ranger groups; the remaining two battalions of the 44th Regiment, 23rd Armored Division; all the territorial forces in Kontum, Pleiku, and Phu Bon provinces; and virtually all GVN armor and artillery in those areas.²² The VNAF, however, did set up an airlift and got more than 10,000 people (including many VNAF dependents) out of Pleiku. The VNAF pilots used C-130s, C-47s, helicopters, any kind or shape of aircraft, and flew them day and night for three days. All aircraft that had been in temporary storage or out of commission were left behind, although the VNAF flew in later and tried to destroy some of them.²³

(U) The withdrawal from Pleiku and Kontum was the most criticized action of the many terrible events of the last weeks of the war. One general called it the greatest disaster in ARVN's history. Many officers believed it was a mistake to have withdrawn at all. There were supplies for at least fifteen days and more might have been brought in by air, so that Pleiku might have held on from two weeks to two months, with great cost to the enemy. This, in turn, might have changed U.S. congressional opinion and brought in more U.S. support. According to Col. Le Khac Ly, the II Corps Chief of Staff, effectively in charge when General Phu* moved his headquarters to Nha Trang:

* General Phu later committed suicide.

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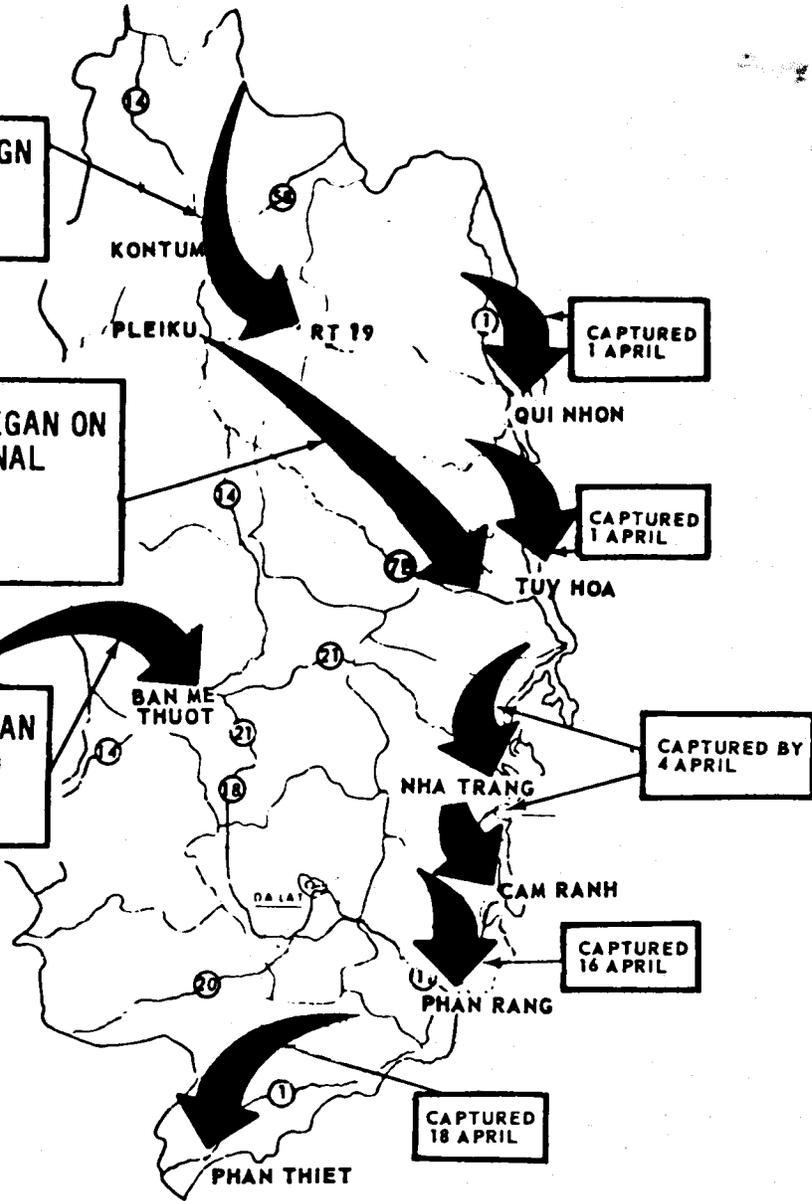
POORLY EXECUTED WITHDRAWAL FROM CENTRAL HIGHLANDS RESULTED IN DISASTER FOR THE RVNAF

NVA-VC BEGAN CAMPAIGN WITH ATTACKS ON RT 19 4 MARCH

DISASTROUS MARCH TO COAST BEGAN ON 15 MARCH, ONLY 60,000 OF ORIGINAL 200,000 TO 300,000 PARTICIPANTS COMPLETED THE JOURNEY.

HEAVY NVA-VC ATTACKS BEGAN ON 10 MARCH. CITY CAPTURED ON 14 MARCH.

SOUTH VIETNAM



COLLAPSE IN MILITARY REGION 2

At least three or four unit commanders came to me . . . and said, "Why do we leave?" I said I can't give you an answer. That's the order. . . . We have to leave. And they said "Why, we want to fight. Even me, I want to die here. We still have enough supplies and assets to fight. The enemy cannot take over Kontum and Pleiku." I said, "What can we do?"²⁴

(U) Meanwhile, in accordance with Thieu's orders, the ARVN still sought to drive the NVA out of Ban Me Thuot, airlifting into the fight elements of the 44th, 45th, and 53rd Regiments of the 23d Division, two ranger battalions, and two regional force battalions. These forces were almost annihilated after two days' fighting, however, and retreating first to Phuoc An and subsequently to Khanh Hoa Province, they were further decimated. The VNAF launched limited attacks but, flying at high altitudes, could not really support the troops on the ground.²⁵

(U) On March 20, President Thieu for the first time admitted the loss of Ban Me Thuot to his people and sought to explain the abandonment of Pleiku and Kontum. The South Vietnamese were demoralized and frightened by the rapidity of their losses. The North Vietnamese were elated. Their decision to go for an all-out victory in early May 1975, before the rainy season, was made on March 24 as a result of the complete collapse of the ARVN in the central highlands.²⁶

Materiel Losses in the Highlands

■ Equipment lost in the Pleiku/Kontum/Ban Me Thuot areas was estimated at \$327 million, the great bulk of it falling into enemy hands. All flyable aircraft--about eighty planes--had been evacuated from Pleiku to Phan Rang Air Base, but all of the stored aircraft at Pleiku were lost to the communists, as well as 3,100 barrels of JP-4 jet fuel, 3,900 barrels of aviation gasoline, \$5.5 million worth of spare parts, and over 6,000 tons of ammunition.²⁷

■ The United States was powerless to do anything about these losses, but it did rescue some nuclear fuel from an atomic reactor it had installed at Da Lat in 1963. At JCS

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direction two C-130s of the 374th Tactical Airlift Wing, carrying special nuclear fuel containers and other equipment, on March 30 brought the fuel from Da Lat to Clark AB where it was loaded aboard a C-141 and taken to Johnston Atoll. There it was added to the island's collection of Herbicide Orange defoliant and nerve and mustard gases.²⁸ The NVA occupied Da Lat a few days later.

The Debacle in Military Region 1

(U) Although the North Vietnamese had centered their main attack in the highlands, on March 2 they had struck simultaneously in Quang Tri Province and southward in upper Thua Thien Province, leaving 100,000 refugees streaming toward Hue a week later. Anxious about the safety of Saigon itself, President Thieu on March 12 ordered the airborne division returned there from Da Nang. Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong, the MR 1 commander, after considerable argument, got Thieu's consent to stagger the airborne division's removal to allow time to shift the Marine division from Quang Tri Province to take its place. But when the central highland forces began to crumble, Thieu insisted the airborne division be sent immediately, even before the marines were in place. On March 19, however, large-scale enemy attacks began against the northern RVNAF defense line and the NVA occupied Quang Tri City that same day. RVNAF confusion, as the airborne division pulled out and the marines moved south toward Da Nang, was a great boon for the attacking NVA, as was also the ensuing panic in the civilian population. The demoralized South Vietnamese forces offered only token resistance, falling back nearly as fast as the North Vietnamese could advance.

(U) The RVNAF began to move as much equipment as possible down Route 1, but the NVA cut this vital highway north of Da Nang, forcing the thousands of refugees into the access roads to the coast and making it impossible to move the materiel.²⁹ On March 24 the enemy occupied Hue, and on the same day Tan Ky, the capital of Quang Tin Province, fell,

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as did most of Quang Ngai Province, the southernmost province in MR 1.³⁰ This left Da Nang, now cut off on all sides except the sea, as the only remaining SVN-controlled territory in MR 1. The NVA began its assault on the city by attacking GVN forces on Highway 1 as masses of refugees still hopefully moved toward it, until there were an estimated half million of them in the city, many of them armed, panicky, unpredictable soldier-deserters. For example, the airport at Da Nang really became unusable before any overt enemy activity was taken against it, before any rounds hit the airport, because of the panicky situation among the people that were coming to get on the aircraft and the demoralization of the troops.³¹

(U) Against the 30,000 to 35,000 NVA troops tightening the circle around the city, the RVNAF could muster only two effective divisions, the Marine division in the hills to the north, and the 3d ARVN Division on the high ground to the west. The latter held when attacked on March 28, but one day later it fell prey to the familiar "family virus"* and disintegrated within a matter of hours. Only a miracle would have enabled the understrength Marine division to stop the four tough NVA divisions around Da Nang, and it did not occur. On the 30th, the NVA troops marched in and thousands of South Vietnamese soldiers surrendered without firing a shot.³² The effect of this on South Vietnamese morale was certainly crucial to what followed. Thereafter, the ARVN was usually beaten before the enemy came in sight. Conversely, the NVA now knew that Saigon could be taken in a matter of weeks instead of years.

~~TOP SECRET~~ The RVNAF managed to extract some 16,000 troops, including 4,000 marines, from MR 1, but the 1st, 2d, and 3d ARVN Divisions were lost as identifiable military units together with territorial and ranger forces. Nearly all heavy equipment was left behind, as

* ARVN soldiers all had their families in close proximity to their areas of operation. As the fighting worsened, both officers and men became increasingly apprehensive about the welfare of their families and in some cases simply pulled out of the line to get them to safety.

were 10,000 tons of air munitions worth \$18 million, various ground radar equipment, and 176 aircraft, including an F-5E, 5 F-5As, 24 A-37s and 80 UH-1 helicopters.³³

The Offensive Progresses in Military Region 2

■ Saigon had planned to use troops retreating from Kontum and Pleiku to bolster the coastal defenses, but the disorderly retreat led to their decimation by enemy forces, and few of them ever reached the coast. For nearly two weeks a brave stand by elements of the ARVN 22d Division stood off a communist attack at Binh Khe Pass on Highway 19, preventing access to the coast and protecting Phu Cat Air Base. After nearly two-thirds of these troops were killed, the division had to give in towards the last of March and Phu Cat was overrun on the 31st. Left intact at their air base for future North Vietnamese use were 5,500 tons of air munitions worth \$10 million and some fifty aircraft. Of approximately eighty planes known to have been at the field, only some thirty were flown out to safety.³⁴

● By April 1, the remaining provinces in the southern inland part of MR 2 had fallen and resistance in the coastal enclaves had crumbled. MR 2 headquarters, which had just relocated to Nha Trang from Pleiku, hastily abandoned its new home, which was occupied three days later by the NVA.³⁵ The same day, Cam Ranh Bay, twenty-five miles to the south, also fell to the communists. There was a lull while the NVA regrouped and the GVN tried to establish new defense lines in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan Provinces. But in the latter province, the prevailing panic caused the ARVN and VNAF to abandon Phan Rang Base on April 2, even before any immediate threat was evident.³⁶ Two days later, when they realized the evacuation had been premature, South Vietnamese forces flew back in and reoccupied the base. The NVA attacked in strength on the 14th, however, and on the 16th Phan Rang was abandoned for good. Here the conquerors fell heir to fourteen A-37s, thirty-three UH-1 helicopters, and forty other aircraft.³⁷ By April 18, Binh Thuan Province, the last province in MR 2 in GVN hands, had fallen to the NVA.

During these shattering developments, the Senate met in Saigon during the first days of April to debate the conduct of the war and the need for a new government of national unity. They stressed the need for appeals to the United States for help. Senate President Tran Van Lam said he knew it was too much to ask for the B-52s, but he hoped the U.S. might tell Hanoi that they could go just so far as they had done and no farther. Such a statement, he said, would provide a tremendous boost to the morale of the South.³⁸ A day or so later, VNAF Maj. Gen. Nguyen Cao Ky, meeting with various senior officers and government officials, urged action to form a new government composed of both civilian and military leaders. This was to boost the morale of the armed forces and provide a basis for negotiations with the communists. Although Ky had considerable support among the military and made clear he favored no violence, Prime Minister Khiem was unwilling to grant him a leadership role and effectively circumvented his proposals.³⁹

The Stand at Xuan Loc

(U) After all the retreats and calamities, the RVNAF demonstrated one last test of its morale at Xuan Loc, the capital of Long Khanh Province, astride Highway 1, 38 miles northeast of Saigon. The communists attacked on April 9 with a 4,000-round barrage of artillery mortars and rockets that set half the town of 38,000 afire and hit Bien Hoa Air Base about half-way to Saigon. Tanks, followed by waves of troops, entered Xuan Loc and took most of the city.⁴⁰ But South Vietnamese troops (the 18th ARVN Division) fought better here than at any time during the communist offensive. On April 10, after a twelve-hour fight, they drove the communists back with heavy losses. South Vietnamese military leaders stripped Saigon of half of its own inner defenses to reinforce the units at Xuan Loc, sending in the 1st Airborne Brigade and a regiment of the 5th ARVN Division.⁴¹ On April 11 the NVA made one of its heaviest attacks since the 1973 cease-fire, committing six regiments to the battle. The VNAF took to the air in force in support of the fighting.

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Helicopters attacked communist positions at Hung Loc, and F-5s and A-1s pounded suspected positions north and south of Route 1. They used C-130s to drop bombs strapped onto wooden pallets and rolled out of rear cargo hatches, including 15,000-pound "Daisy Cutters"* and CBUs (cluster bomb units). Gen. Tran Van Don, the minister of defense, credited the latter with having "stopped the communists" at Xuan Loc, but due to the VNAF's very limited supply of these weapons, this tactic could not be sustained.⁴²

(U) On April 12 the battle continued, with ARVN, territorial forces, airborne units, and rangers fighting to hold the city, capture the enemy's heavy guns, and reopen stretches of highway. The VNAF sent in 106 close air support sorties. The battle was made the centerpiece of a big propaganda campaign to "boost the morale" of the entire country. Gen. Le Minh Dao, commander of the defending 18th Division, said: "We must fight a resounding battle to win world admiration and more U.S. aid."⁴³

On the 13th the enemy bombardment of the city from outside declined by about half, and South Vietnamese forces repulsed another NVA assault. Fighter bombers continued their strikes against NVA troop concentrations around the city, and CH-47 Chinook helicopters airlifted supplies to the troops and evacuated several hundred civilians. According to the RVNAF, more than 1,800 enemy troops were killed during the battle, many as the result of "well planned and extremely effective artillery and air support."⁴⁴ On the 15th, the NVA struck to the west of Xuan Loc with a 1,000-round artillery barrage and a massive ground assault, forcing the ARVN to withdraw. On the 16th fighting continued and NVA gunners hit Bien Hoa Air Base again, damaging six F-5s and fourteen A-37s. Two A-37s which had managed to take off were downed by SA-7 missiles in the Mekong Delta, thirty-six miles southeast of Saigon.⁴⁵

* Bombs designed to explode just above ground level to kill personnel and to defoliate.

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The Final Campaign: Saigon

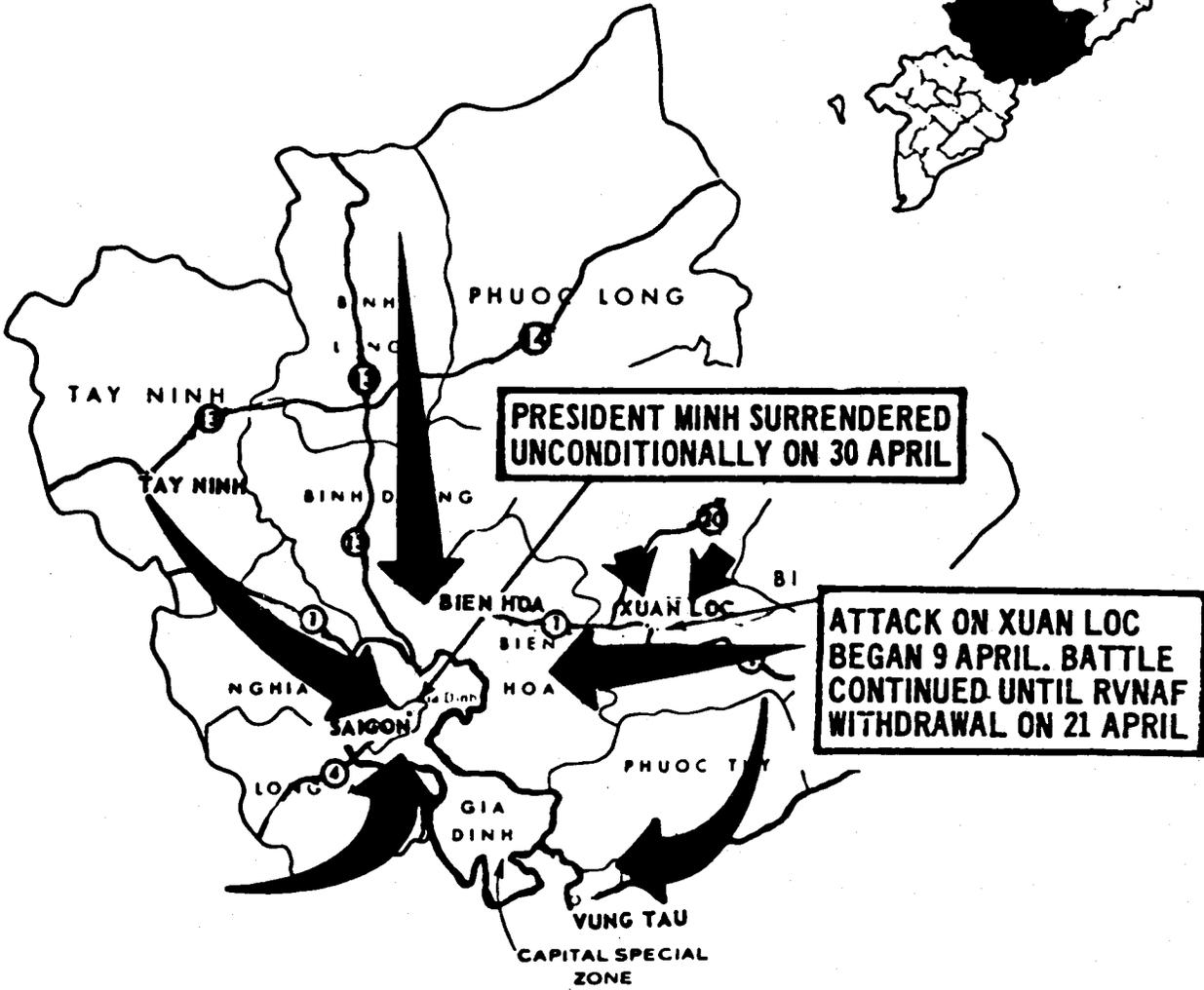
(U) While the fighting at Xuan Loc went on, the enemy edged ever nearer to Saigon. On April 17, communist commandos struck Phu Lam, only five miles from the heart of the capital. There was growing concern that the effort devoted to defending Xuan Loc was dangerous for Saigon, since the forces sent there might be cut off from returning. To forestall this and preserve the forces from eventual annihilation, the RVN high command on April 21 ordered the RVNAF to abandon Xuan Loc. The fall of the city almost coincided with the fall of Ham Tan, the capital of Binh Tuy Province, seventy-five miles east of Saigon, which gave the communists twenty-one of SVN's forty-four provincial capitals and more than two-thirds of its land area.

(U) As the enemy forces around Saigon got ever closer, political pressures finally forced President Thieu's resignation on the 22d. It was hoped that the enemy, as had been hinted, would deal more favorably with a successor, but this did not eventuate. Neither Thieu's immediate successor Tran Van Huong nor Huong's replacement, Gen. Duong Van Minh, was able to negotiate with the communists. Thieu pleaded for vindication, saying he had only signed the cease-fire after President Nixon had promised to use military force to halt any communist offensive. But domestic difficulties, including Watergate, had destroyed America's resolve to aid Vietnam, and Washington had deserted its ally.⁴⁶

(U) Some of the South Vietnamese generals wanted to make one last try to try to show that negotiations were still a two-way street. Only hours after Thieu resigned, Gen. Nguyen Van Toan, the commander of Military Region 3, suggested asking the Americans for one last B-52 raid. When this idea was dismissed by his superiors, who knew there would be no more B-52s, a substitute proposal was put forward. South Vietnamese pilots, with the help of defense attache technicians, rigged up a special bomb rack for a CBU-55; that afternoon a C-130 took off with it from Tan Son Nhut, circled once over Xuan Loc to the east, and dropped the bomb virtually on top of the command post of the 341st NVA Division

SOUTH VIETNAM
MR-3

**NVA-VC HAD CONCENTRATED
OVERWHELMING FORCE IN MR 3
BY LATE APRIL**



ENCIRCLEMENT OF SAIGON

just outside the newly captured town. The casualties were enormous, including over 250 dead in the post-explosion vacuum. There were rumors of a special Wild Weasel strike by U.S. attack planes against a convoy of mobile SA-2 launchers in northeastern MR 3 at this time, but there was no official confirmation of this.⁴⁷ There were also reports of a U.S. bombing raid in South Vietnam during the American evacuation, but this was denied by the administration, including Ambassador Martin.⁴⁸

(U) Within hours of the CBU strike, the North Vietnamese shelling of Bien Hoa airfield intensified to a point that the runways were no longer fully serviceable. The F-5As there were pulled back to Saigon, and the remaining A-37s shifted to Can Tho. There was an increasing threat to air operations at Tan Son Nhut, including attacks by artillery fire, anti-aircraft artillery, and SAMs. On the 28th five A-37s bombed Tan Son Nhut Air Base, destroying at least ten aircraft and badly damaging the operations center. It was not until a year later that the NVA's General Dung revealed that the leader of the attack was former VNAF Lt. Dinh Thanh Trung, who guided four North Vietnamese pilots to the target.^{49*}

(U) On April 29, communist troops attacked the western defenses of Saigon and again heavily shelled Bien Hoa Air Base. Three VNAF aircraft sent to break up the troop concentrations were shot down, and an incoming rocket destroyed one of the USAF C-130s sent in to pick up refugees on the ground at Tan Son Nhut Air Base.⁵⁰ Almost incredibly, there were still VNAF strikes on the 29th and 30th. VNAF A-37s from Binh Thuy AB at Can Tho, which had been largely by-passed by enemy forces rushing towards Saigon, attacked NVA armored columns entering the Saigon area, and in one of their last attacks destroyed

* According to a National Liberation Front newspaper of September 1975, cited in The Fall and Evacuation of South Vietnam, p 50, Lt. Trung had been a communist agent for years. He had joined the VNAF in the early 70s and became a pilot. On April 8, 1975 he had tried unsuccessfully to bomb Thieu's palace. Then he flew to a communist-controlled airfield in SVN and began training North Vietnamese pilots to fly their newly acquired A-37s.

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several tanks inside the city limits near Tan Son Nhut. They returned to Binh Thuy where, hearing of Saigon's surrender, they stripped down their aircraft and flew to U-Tapao.⁵¹

(U) On April 29 the Minh government ordered all U.S. embassy and military personnel to be out of the country by noon the next day, and the next morning at 1024 announced its readiness to surrender unconditionally to the PRG, in order "to avoid any unnecessary bloodshed in the population." About ninety minutes later a communist armored force appeared at the palace and at 1215 Saigon Radio, taken over by the PRG, proclaimed to the world that Saigon had been "totally liberated."

(U) It had been fifty-two days since the attack on Ban Me Thuot in the central highlands began the North Vietnamese offensive.

U.S. Aid During 1975

(U) The Soviets in late 1974 and early 1975 were, as we have seen, actively encouraging and supporting the North Vietnamese in their final offensive, advising them that since Congress was not likely to grant any additional economic or military assistance to Saigon, their chances for decisive gains were better than ever. And true enough, at this time the U.S. administration was having rough going trying to get Congress to appropriate a supplemental \$300 million to tide South Vietnam over until June. President Ford insisted in his January 10 speech and again on January 28 that the U.S. had a special obligation to South Vietnam and that the \$300 million was needed "as a minimum" to prevent "serious reverses," but his words had little impact. Nor did warnings by Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller, or urgent testimony of leading State and Defense Department officials, some of whom felt sure Congress would have to question "how we can abandon a country where 55,000 Americans gave their lives."⁵² Even Henry Kissinger, formerly so lionized, was now tinged with the Watergate accusations of secrecy and abuse of executive power, and faced growing antipathy each time he went to Congress to argue for aid to Indochina.

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Reactions in Saigon

(U) While President Ford continued to ask Congress for maximum aid, intelligence reports from Saigon confirmed the worst suspicions--security in the countryside had seriously eroded in the last few months and army morale was on the verge of collapse. President Thieu, in an interview with foreign journalists two days later, was apparently not too cheered by Ford's speech, saying:

Every time I go into the field to visit the field commands, the only complaint is not to have enough ammunition, not to have enough mobility, not enough air support. We are fighting now a more cruel war, with no B-52, with no tactical air, with no heavy artillery like we had before. We have consequently, more wounded. . . . It is not yet time to say that the U.S. has "betrayed" South Vietnam. But most of the people of South Vietnam are beginning to believe that the Americans who "lured" them into the struggle, were now abandoning them. ⁵³

(U) Whatever the difference of opinion over just how badly South Vietnam needed further U.S. military aid, there was no real doubt that what South Vietnam needed most was some sign that the United States had not completely abandoned it. With further combat support forbidden by Congress, aid was perceived as the symbol of such support. To emphasize that meeting this psychological need was more important than any particular amount of money, some U.S. officials in Saigon suggested asking Congress for a lesser amount than the \$300 million. Efforts were also made to enlist public sympathy for Saigon's plight, both the Pentagon and State calling for a massive propaganda effort on this.

Initial Washington Reactions

(U) Meanwhile, on January 7, Kissinger called an emergency meeting of the Washington Special Action Group (WSAG) to consider ways of damping down the fire in Indochina. CIA Director Colby opened the meeting, noting that the latest National Intelligence Estimate

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ruled out a general offensive this year. As a form of saber rattling, WSAG decided to leak word to the press that several warships just departing from the Philippines would swing past North Vietnam to dramatize Washington's concern over communist "cease-fire violations." But, according to Snepp, someone neglected to alert the Navy, and the fleet put in at the Strait of Malacca without so much as a brief tack toward Vietnam.⁵⁴

(U) The USAF reacted with a more concrete form of support when General Jones, the Air Force chief of staff, went out to Saigon in early January to help improve the VNAF's maintenance and supply system. His discussions included meeting with a team of thirty people, located at Clark AB, who coordinated the Far East nations' grant aid for PACAF. He expressed dissatisfaction with the current credit policy toward the Vietnamese Air Force and wanted a survey made of the best means of providing forward locations the stocks required. These were to be a part of U.S. inventories and were to be immediately available on VNAF demand, including a five-day supply response time, calling for daily airlift and commuter management.⁵⁵ To help expedite these measures, VNAF headquarters provided twenty-seven officers and ninety-seven airmen, and PACAF seventeen temporary duty USAF airman supply specialists. General Jones directed his attention particularly to the VNAF's C-130 problems--lack of spares and the chronic troubles with fuel leaks. He made C-130 parts available to the VNAF from PACAF assets wherever they might be and raised to 2 their overall supply priority.^{56*}

(U) In early February Ambassador Martin again went to Washington to try to help with the aid debate. President Ford finally endorsed Martin's new plan for a massive aid program sufficient to leave Saigon "economically independent in three years." But Congress was skeptical. Even before things were acknowledged as desperate in Saigon, a bipartisan move

* Supply priority 2 meant highly expedited delivery.

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was developing in the U.S. Senate to terminate all military assistance to South Vietnam by June 30.

(U) Up until this time, the CIA in Saigon was still giving Washington the impression that, although things were going badly, more U.S. aid just might save the day. They were still hoping to shock Congress into coming to Saigon's rescue. By March 25, however, with the whole northern defenses collapsing, they were forced into giving the facts:

In the face of recent supply losses and continuing NVA pressure on all fronts, government forces are not likely to regain the initiative or recoup their strength in the near future, since the very factors that sparked the current crisis are still operating unchecked in Saigon, Hanoi and in Washington. The entire complexion of the Vietnam war has altered in a matter of weeks, and the government is in imminent danger of decisive military defeat.⁵⁷

That very day, March 25, Kissinger convened his top-level Vietnam advisers to discuss what the United States could do to help Saigon's battered forces. General Murray's successor as defense attache in Saigon, Maj. Gen. Homer D. Smith, USA, in Saigon, had already asked that arms and supplies on order be delivered as quickly as possible; this was approved by the President. This airlift of emergency supplies got into high gear in early April, with large numbers of C-141 cargo planes shuttling between Clark AB and Tan Son Nhut.⁵⁸ It was decided to send Gen. Fredrick C. Weyand, the Army chief of staff and last MACV commander, to Saigon to make an independent assessment, and to send with him Erich F. von Marbod, the Pentagon's leading Vietnam logistics expert, to update Thieu's shopping lists.

General Weyand's Visit to Saigon

(U) General Weyand and his team arrived in Saigon on March 28 and spent eight days. Aside from fact-finding, he concentrated heavily on developing a new strategy of survival for the South Vietnamese, suggesting that a new defense perimeter be anchored at Phan Rang, with Xuan Loc as its centerpiece and Tay Ninh as its western hinge. Since Thieu had little

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choice, he accepted the proposal outright. He reportedly asked only one thing. At a session with Weyand, Martin, and several others on April 3, he asked if B-52s might be brought into play to help with Saigon's defense. Von Marbod, dismayed that Thieu might still be counting on American bombing, explained that this was impossible.* But he promised to make available an array of sophisticated weapons, including "Daisy Cutter" and CBU bombs, that would enable the South Vietnamese to maximize the effectiveness of their air force.⁵⁹ North Vietnamese General Van Tien reported in his account that an emergency airlift of C-5s transported hundreds of artillery pieces and new weapons and munitions to Tan Son Nhut from the U.S. and from Bangkok.⁶⁰ But South Vietnamese General Tinh, commander of the Artillery Command, later recalled his disappointment at the limited number of artillery pieces and other equipment delivered by the American cargo planes at Tan Son Nhut in April, which, in his view, constituted only a drop of water in an arid desert and would not show the American will to continue the engagement.⁶¹

(U) Thieu and his commanders agreed to do everything they could to rebuild some of the units that had been evacuated from Military Regions 1 and 2. A strike force headquarters for defending the Saigon area was set up using the staff of the former MR 1 Command under the continued direction of its commander, General Truong. Their force was to consist of the Marine and airborne divisions, the former being then reconstituted at Vung Tau. Enough materiel had been flown in from the U.S. or was being processed from the overhaul lines to equip two Marine brigades. The one brigade finally put together was committed

* There were indeed senior South Vietnamese officers who still believed that III Corps might be defended if substantial U.S. air were available. Maj. Gen. Nguyen Xuan Tinh said, "In April 1975 they, the communists, never could have placed their divisions around Saigon if the U.S. had intervened with B-52s. Truly, this bomber could have changed the face of the Vietnam war." But another senior commander disagreed, saying the B-52 strikes could not have been effective because at that point there was no longer any discipline or organization within the South Vietnamese forces, only panic. [RAND rpt R-2208-OSD, pp 119, 120.]

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almost immediately. Efforts were also made to reconstitute the 22d ARVN Division, and a combination of the 1st and 3d ARVN Divisions under Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duy Hinh, but this was not accomplished in time. According to General Smith, ARVN had simply run out of materiel and what was coming from the U.S. did not materialize soon enough.⁶²

(U) With Saigon's high command and forces in such disarray, General Smith and his staff shouldered many basic tasks, such as locating and distributing Saigon's remaining supply stocks and parceling out the equipment newly delivered from the United States. They were so efficient that they soon had supplies flowing to the field faster than the South Vietnamese could rebuild their units. Other staff members helped the VNAF rig up and use the new weapons arranged for by General Weyand. For the first time since the cease-fire Hanoi could justifiably claim that a large number of Americans were serving as "military advisers" to Thieu's forces.

(U) General Weyand and his team flew back on April 5 and reported to the President that the situation in Vietnam was critical, but that South Vietnam was continuing to defend itself with the resources available. They favored asking Congress for a new emergency military aid allocation--\$722 million.⁶³ Subsequently, General Weyand told congressional committees that South Vietnam could not survive without additional U.S. military aid--but conceded he was not certain they could survive, even with the aid.⁶⁴ Secretary Kissinger agreed with Weyand's assessment that the military situation was retrievable, if just barely.* He added that there was a moral question of whether, when an ally with whom the United States had been associated for ten years wished to defend itself, the United States should keep it from doing so by withholding supplies.

* Evidence of this is seen in his efforts (unsuccessful) at this time to get South Korea to provide SVN with \$4.1 million in military aid. [Msg (S), Kissinger to American Embassy Seoul, April 11, 1975.] A week later Kissinger was also recommending that 400 reparable engines and 75 damaged aircraft be taken for repair outside South Vietnam and returned, as both a practical and morale-building aid to the VNAF's combat capabilities. [Msg (S), from SecState to SecDef, CINCPAC, April 19, 1975.]

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The Last Campaign

(U) On April 8, WSAG and the National Security Council began two days of secret sessions to consider Weyand's report and debate his \$722 million aid proposal. On April 10, President Ford went before a joint session of Congress and called for \$722 million in military aid and \$250 million in emergency economic assistance, saying the money was needed to "enable Saigon to stem the onrushing aggression and permit the chance of a negotiated political settlement."⁶⁵ His speech met with a generally favorable reaction and boosted morale in Saigon, according to the U.S. embassy report to Washington. Some Saigon officials, however, felt the speech was not strong enough and were disappointed that no mention was made of U.S. military intervention. One senior official said "a single B-52 strike would do more for the morale of the Vietnamese than all of the fancy words." But congressional reaction was swift and almost uniformly negative. Within hours, even senators and congressmen normally sympathetic toward South Vietnam were decrying the uselessness of throwing more good money after bad.

(U) Unbelievably, in spite of such resistance, Kissinger and his colleagues were still hopeful of rallying Congress behind the \$722 million. On April 15 they launched a last, concerted assault on the various congressional groups that held the key to the aid vote. Kissinger spent most of the day with the increasingly skeptical Senate Appropriations Committee. General Weyand, appearing before the same committee, claimed that Saigon would collapse in one month without additional assistance, and Secretary Schlesinger warned that over 200,000 Vietnamese would face death if the communists seized power.⁶⁶ Congress remained unmoved and skeptical. On the 17th, not quite two weeks before the fall of Saigon, the Senate Armed Services Committee voted not to support additional military aid at any price. Although several other committees were still to be heard from, Kissinger, dejected, conceded defeat. "The Vietnam debate is over," he said. "The Administration will accept the Congress verdict without recrimination or vindictiveness."⁶⁷

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As noted before, there was a divergence of opinion as to how much the lack of aid contributed to South Vietnam's defeat. President Thieu, on April 19 said that if he was "the" block to South Vietnam's receiving U.S. aid (as had been rumored) he would step down, but only if this ensured quick and sufficient assistance as pledged by the U.S. However, if the U.S. was only using him as an excuse to abandon South Vietnam, then congressional opposition to aid was only an excuse to "cover up a scheme to heartlessly turn South Vietnam over to the communists."⁶⁸ The President of Indonesia and the King of Thailand were bitter about South Vietnam's fate, suggesting that the United States had intentionally withheld its support, and drawing conclusions about their own future expectations as allies.⁶⁹

Two Americans, Ambassador Martin and General Smith, the defense attache, had no doubts whatsoever about the importance of U.S. aid. Martin later testified to Congress that the resignation of President Nixon, coupled with the simultaneous catastrophe of the reduction in the Fiscal Year 1975 fund appropriation, was interpreted in South Vietnam as a signal that the U.S. commitment would decline. Of the two he perceived the aid reduction as far more serious, and went so far as to say that South Vietnam's morale did not really fade until President Ford's last-minute appeal for aid in April was turned down.

General Smith was even more explicit in his view of the role played by U.S. aid. In his final defense attache report he said:

I think is only fair at this time to say that the funding constraints materially contributed to the total defeat of RVNAF and surrender of the Government of South Vietnam. . . .

There are those who will argue that RVNAF still had sufficient materiel to fight for several months. While that may have been true to a degree, the lack of any positive indication or, as time passed, any reason to hope for the material and moral support promised by the United States, broke their spirit. . . .

Historians will long debate the fundamental developments leading to and forming the basis of the ill-fated American experience in South Vietnam. Whether or not the fundamental motivation was right or wrong, the United States had the capacity to achieve its objectives in Vietnam. This held true as late as thirty days before the fall of Saigon.

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I do not intend to reiterate the whys and wherefores of the failure of the United States to do what it might have done. The decisions were political. Suffice to say, we simply did not carry out our part of the bargain insofar as the Paris Peace Accords of January 1973 were concerned. . . .

USAF Operations

(TS) In the first months of 1975 the USAF continued to maintain readiness for resuming the air war in Southeast Asia if so ordered. Contingency plans for air strikes against various targets were maintained until the end, CINCPAC not being relieved of this responsibility until May 7, 1975.⁷² A Commando Scrimmage exercise (simulating Linebacker operations) was scheduled for mid-January, with USAF units in Thailand, except for B-52s, flying some 128 sorties.⁷³

Administration of the Cambodia airlift continued to be a task until the end of the fighting in that country in mid-April. In January, resupply of Cambodia via the Mekong River had become critically difficult to the point where CINCPAC recommended sending in USAF C-130s from the U.S. as the only solution.⁷⁴ Instead, action was taken to increase the Birdair contract by \$1.9 million. Under its operating contract, Birdair used U.S. government-furnished C-130s, and twenty more of these were now assigned to a Thailand forward operating location. In addition, the Military Airlift Command contracted for commercial DC-8 support for twelve days at a cost of \$1.2 million. On March 4, Gen. George S. Brown, chairman of the JCS, personally expressed his appreciation to the Departments of State and Defense, the services, the unified commands and the country teams for their combined efforts in making this operation successful.⁷⁵

USAF reconnaissance operations, including Buffalo Hunter missions, also continued through April, particularly over the high threat areas of South Vietnam and Cambodia. Likewise, USSAG's Operational Intelligence Division continued to provide the commander with assessments of current enemy intentions and activities. Although under the Paris agreement U.S. military personnel were forbidden to aid or even advise their South

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Vietnamese counterparts, in the last days of April they relaxed the rules somewhat and did what they could to help the desperate plight of the South Vietnamese military. Above all, however, USAF operations during the last months were concerned with evacuation planning and actions.

Evacuation Operations

The last Air Force task in Vietnam was participation in the evacuation of U.S. and South Vietnamese personnel from the country. USSAG/7AF had responsibility for planning the operation and, together with the Navy, Marines, and various civilian airlines, for carrying it out. The civilian airlines played a large role because U.S. military aircraft were initially restricted to taking out only U.S. personnel and their dependents. The plan for Saigon evacuation operations, nicknamed Talon Vise,* was published in February 1975 but did not get to all agencies involved until March 26.⁷⁶ Two of its basic assumptions proved to be incorrect: that the total number of evacuees would be approximately 10,000 and that the evacuation would be conducted in a non-hostile environment. The rapid South Vietnamese military collapse during March and April was not foreseen in February, nor the huge numbers of Vietnamese eventually identified for evacuation.

A complicating factor was the concurrent planning for the evacuation of Phnom Penh, Cambodia (Operation Eagle Pull), with no one certain which of the two evacuations might be ordered first. Navy and Air Force assets had already been committed to Eagle Pull, so dual estimates had to be made for Talon Vise, one which included the Cambodia-committed assets, and one which did not.⁷⁷

By early April, the defense attache, General Smith, had set up two groups to plan and execute the Saigon operation. The Special Planning Group was to prepare the defense

* Talon Vise was the original nickname of the Saigon evacuation plan. After it became compromised in the press a new nickname, Frequent Wind, was assigned in April 1975.

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attache's complex at Tan Son Nhut as a defensible facility capable of processing thousands of people for evacuation. The second group, the Evacuation Control Center, was primarily responsible for directing the flow of aircraft into and out of Saigon and matching this flow and the numbers of evacuees. There were to be fixed-wing airlift and sealift, either method to be augmented by helicopters and a ground security force if needed. The plan called for four separate options:

Option I: The ambassador would control and direct the evacuation, using transportation he either arranged for or directly controlled. USSAG/7AF would be ready to provide limited airlift and/or sealift transportation at the ambassador's request.

Option II: As requested by the ambassador and directed by CINCPAC, USSAG/7AF would conduct an evacuation by fixed-wing aircraft, using helicopters, a ground security force, and an amphibious task force, if required.

Option III: In response to the ambassador and CINCPAC, USSAG/7AF would conduct a sealift evacuation. A ground security force, helicopters, and amphibious forces could be used if needed.

Option IV: At the direction of the ambassador and CINCPAC, USSAG/7AF would evacuate U.S. non-combatants and designated aliens from Saigon and its vicinity using only helicopters. A ground security force could be used if needed. *78

(U) To provide the helicopters for Option IV, plans had already been made to convert the attack aircraft carrier USS Hancock, which would accommodate about thirty large Marine helicopters, for such operations. The carrier USS Midway would ferry helicopters from Okinawa to the Philippines for boarding the Hancock, and after this take aboard Thailand-based USAF CH-HH-53 helicopters. Having USAF helicopters operate from a Navy carrier came about because there were not enough Navy and Marine helicopters to do

* As the enemy offensive developed, deriving an accurate estimate of the number of potential evacuees became difficult, so USSAG was subsequently directed to plan for as many as 200,000 persons. It developed for this purpose a fifth option, published on April 24, calling for large-scale fixed-wing and sealift evacuation. One of its major assumptions was that operations would be conducted in a non-hostile environment. With the rapid escalation of North Vietnamese hostilities, neither time nor the conditions permitted implementation of this option.

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the job. Air Force helicopters had never operated from an aircraft carrier in any significant numbers before, but problems were found to be minimal. The Air Force flight and maintenance crews aboard the Midway consisted of ninety-eight officers and airmen, and there were eight CH-53s and two HH-53s.⁷⁹

Option IV also called for a 3,800-man ground security force if needed.* Helicopters from the USS Okinawa and the Hancock were to insert such a force to secure the helicopter landing zones and protect evacuees isolated in Saigon. The DAO/Air America complex was selected as the security area and preparations were made there for up to two battalions, depending on the need.⁸⁰ Since enemy fire might have to be neutralized before the Marine security force could be flown in or the refugees taken out, it was planned to have Air Force and Navy tactical air on station continuously to support the ground security force during the evacuation. If operations went on after sundown, AC-130 gunships would furnish illumination and fire support. If the Saigon evacuation took place after the Cambodian one (as occurred), Seventh Air Force and Pacific Fleet tactical air would be integrated through the USAF C-130 Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center aircraft which would participate in the action. Air Force assets available after the Cambodian evacuation included F-4s from Udorn and A-7s, F-4s, AC-130s, and F-111s from Korat, in Thailand.⁸¹

(U) On March 20, the State Department notified the Secretary of Defense that the operation of such ships and airlift in an evacuation would come under the control of the

* On March 26, CINCPAC, anticipating the possible need for U.S. troops to protect an evacuation, had activated 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade for use as a security force. Its chief, Brig. Gen. Richard E. Carey, reported to the commander of Task Force 76 on April 11 and by the 20th the entire brigade was aboard the task force ships. The concept of a military force to help with the evacuation had been fervently opposed by Ambassador Martin throughout. When General Smith's deputy, USAF Brig. Gen. Richard M. Baughn, inadvertently sent a message endorsing CINCPAC's moves without having it properly cleared by Martin, the latter abruptly had Baughn recalled by the Pentagon on April 11 for insubordination. [Snepp, pp 334-35; Interview with Col. McCurdy (S), pp 74-75.]

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Department of Defense.* On the 29th, the JCS designated CINCPAC as the DOD coordinator for the evacuation and also reminded him of the prohibition against putting ashore in South Vietnam any U.S. military personnel, craft, or shipboard equipment. Above all, no U.S. forces were to be "introduced into hostilities" or "involved in combat activities."⁸²

Early Evacuations

(U) As matters turned out, there were other, unanticipated, evacuation operations in Vietnam before the one in Saigon took place. The first occurred when communist forces were threatening to take Quang Tri in mid-March. During the night of March 18/19, all U.S. government employees were evacuated from Hue to Da Nang by Air America helicopters. Some returned, however, to conduct business until March 23 when the NVA attacked in earnest and the Americans left the city for good.⁸³

When Hue was occupied on the 24th, it became obvious that Da Nang would also soon fall, and U.S. and GVN evacuation planners began working out strategy for getting as many soldier and civilian refugees out of there as possible. A major problem was that no one was prepared for the unexpected speed of the RVNAF retreat and of the fall of Da Nang. Thus, on the 25th, Saigon asked the U.S. embassy for assistance in airlifting large numbers of refugees from Da Nang. But by the 28th when the State Department asked the Secretary of Defense to charter two World Airways 727s and three Birdair DC-6s, it was too late. As of the 29th, the Da Nang airport was so packed with frantic soldiers and civilians fighting to

* Because the DOD was to control the evacuation forces, Option I, which placed control with the ambassador, was thus effectively deleted. However, under the other options execution would still not occur until asked for by the ambassador, a prerogative which Ambassador Martin exercised to the end. On April 19, Admiral Gayler, CINCPAC, with his full retinue, paid Martin a visit to urge him to take quicker action on evacuation. When the frosty interview ended, Martin reportedly told Gayler he would take his suggestions under consideration and cable his own recommendations to the White House. [Snepp, pp 384-85.]

board any plane that arrived, that it was impossible for any rescue planes to land. Similarly, on March 26, USSAG recommended a daylight airlift evacuation as soon as possible. Plans were quickly drawn up, but before anything could be done, Da Nang had fallen. In Washington the JCS decided a sealift was the only practical means to evacuate the thousands trying to leave Da Nang, but the ships also were unable to get to Da Nang before it fell on the 30th.⁸⁴

(U) Other, less official, efforts proved more successful. During the last week of March, the U.S. Agency for International Development contracted for a World Airways 727 to make twenty-five round trips between Da Nang and Cam Ranh Bay during a six-day period, and some Air America helicopters helped evacuate limited numbers of U.S. and special evacuees. And on March 24, five tugboats and six barges previously used in Mekong River operations in Cambodia and three Military Airlift Command vessels and an LST [Landing Ship, Tank] of Korean registry were acquired for sealift evacuation operations. They were joined by various Vietnamese craft, some ships of third-country registry, and at least one U.S. Navy ship, the Sergeant Andrew Miller. All this was done under orders of General Smith in Saigon, despite protests about whether he might be violating congressional mandates.⁸⁵ Tens of thousands of refugees got out on the ships, the last one leaving on March 30 with more than 7,000 refugees, most of them going to Cam Ranh Bay, a few to Nha Trang and Vung Tau.⁸⁶ General Smith estimated the number of refugees in Da Nang at one million, of whom about 100,000 were able to escape to the south.⁸⁷

(U) A Da Nang evacuation plan for the removal of U.S. citizens was more successful. Ambassador Martin had throughout insisted on evacuating Americans as inconspicuously as possible to avoid further demoralizing the South Vietnamese. Accordingly, the American consul general at Da Nang, Albert A. Francis, had been evacuating U.S. citizens in a "low profile" way during the last two weeks of March by mixing them with Vietnamese nationals flying out of Da Nang on regularly scheduled commercial flights to Saigon.

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By March 26 there were only 250 Americans left, and by the time the airport was closed on March 28, only about 15 remained. They were subsequently evacuated by sea. Mr. Francis had less success in trying to get official help for the evacuation. On the 25th, Colonel McCurdy tried to "pry some USAF helicopters loose" to help Francis. But when the colonel phoned the Special Advisory Group in Thailand asking for two helicopters, USSAG's chief of staff told him his entire helicopter fleet was committed to Eagle Pull and none could be diverted elsewhere without Washington's approval, which would take time.⁸⁸

(U) One individual Da Nang rescue attempt rates mention. Edward J. Daley, president and owner of World Airways, after trying unsuccessfully for permission to fly into Da Nang and bring out as many women and children as he could, went ahead on March 29 and ordered his Boeing 727 to Da Nang, with or without clearance. As the flight landed at Da Nang it was completely mobbed by struggling soldiers and civilians, particularly the tough Black Panther unit of the 1st ARVN Division. Attacked with hand grenades on take-off by vindictive soldiers who had not been able to get aboard, the plane's flight was almost immobilized by the crowded refugees, including eight who crawled into the wheelwells. As the flight landed at Tan Son Nhut, the crew estimated between 300 and 330 refugees made it out, some 10 or 12 of them women and children.⁸⁹

(U) After Da Nang fell on March 30, it was only a matter of days until the refugees who had fled to Nha Trang and Cam Ranh Bay were again faced with evacuation as these areas became threatened. On April 1 Ambassador Martin announced a combined sealift/airlift to transport these refugees to more secure areas in Military Regions 3 and 4. The vessels were to take positions in the water east of Cam Ranh Bay, with the commander of Task Force 76, aboard the USS Blue Ridge, as the commander.⁹⁰ The operation began in the first days of April and ended on the 9th. By the 10th, all the ships had been offloaded, either at Vung Tau or at Phu Quoc Island, having brought out over 72,000 refugees.⁹¹

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Beginning of Saigon Evacuation Operations

(U) The defense attache, General Smith, on April 1 asked permission to reduce his staff to a more manageable number should total evacuation become necessary. Ambassador Martin concurred, provided it was carried out in a low-key manner, and on April 4 CINCPAC authorized the general to cut his staff to any level he and the ambassador thought prudent.*

On April 8 the embassy provided the State Department with an estimate of between 126,000 and 176,000 evacuees for whom the United States might be responsible in the event of an all-out evacuation. Of these, 5,644 were U.S. citizens. The rest included alien dependents of U.S. citizens, foreign diplomats, third-country nationals, 18,000 U.S. mission employees and some 100,000 to 150,000 of the latter's dependents.

(U) General Smith intended to thin out U.S. citizens and their immediate dependents first, by sending them back in the empty USAF C-141s which had brought out materiel for the RVNAF. However, the first days of April went by and the C-141s were returning to the U.S. virtually empty. The problem was that many Americans would not leave because of affiliations with local nationals, and there was no regular way to secure exit papers for these people. After about ten days, however, Saigon consulate personnel worked out a travel permit which allowed personnel to leave the country within three days, and the American consulate began using a parole document permitting entry of certain Vietnamese into the Philippines.⁹²

(U) Even so, a growing number of undocumented Vietnamese were making their way on board MAC and MAC contract aircraft, and on April 10 the JCS reemphasized that no aliens were to board such flights without specific embassy approval. Almost 200 aliens had arrived

* Since ninety percent of his staff were civilians, General Smith had to get special permission to waive the Civil Service rules requiring lengthy prior notification before termination of service.

TOP SECRET

at Clark Air Base in the Philippines, and American officials were holding over 800 "illegals" at U-Tapao Air Base in Thailand. The Thirteenth Air Force was permitted to provide humanitarian assistance to the undocumented aliens at Clark AB, but had to hold them there until the State Department or the JCS decided what to do with them. It was subsequently found that DAO people in Saigon, far from preventing unauthorized departure, had in fact been helping them. Immediately, the Thirteenth Air Force sent an officer to Tan Son Nhut AB to put a stop to these violations, and the U.S. ambassador to the Philippines asked both the Saigon embassy and the DAO to assist in this.⁹³

(U) Meanwhile, a humanitarian effort to evacuate Vietnamese orphans, authorized by President Ford, brought one of the worst tragedies of the whole evacuation operation. A C-5A carrying 143 orphans and their adult escorts (part of a larger program to bring over 2,000 Vietnamese orphans to the United States) crashed shortly after take-off on April 4, killing 79 orphans, 51 U.S. citizens including aircraft crew members, and 8 third-country nationals. The evacuation of orphans resumed, however, using both MAC C-141s and civilian contract aircraft, and 2,926 orphans had been brought out by May 9.⁹⁴

Decisions from Washington

President Ford, recognizing the magnitude and complexity of a last-minute pull-out from Saigon, on April 18 set up a Special Interagency Task Force on Refugees, headed by retired diplomat L. Dean Brown. The JCS assured the State Department that plenty of aircraft were available to accelerate the evacuation. That same day, USSAG/7AF, fearing Saigon would soon be "under a SAM umbrella" (as Defense intelligence sources were predicting), asked CINCPAC to send ten F-4C Wild Weasel aircraft to Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base from Kadena in Okinawa. The aircraft arrived at Korat on the 20th and 21st.⁹⁵

(U) On the 19th, an advance element of the Marine ground security forces flew to Saigon and began preparing helicopter landing sites within the DAO compound and photographing

TOP SECRET

planned helicopter routes into and out of the city. Secretary Kissinger cabled Ambassador Martin on the 18th to evacuate not only the U.S. mission employees, but also all nonofficial American citizens who could be persuaded to leave Vietnam. He wanted no more than 2,000 Americans remaining in South Vietnam and wanted Martin to persuade the GVN to further relax its restrictions on Vietnamese wanting to leave the country.⁹⁶

● As the end came nearer, U.S. officials began to revise upward the numbers they would try to evacuate, the U.S. embassy on the 19th providing a list of 203,925 potential evacuees. On the 22nd, Secretary Kissinger made the evacuation plan official, provided for greatly accelerating it, and named Guam as the primary refugee haven. The Philippines having effectively closed their country to refugees by imposing a 200-person limit at each U.S. base, Guam, instead of Clark, now became the initial staging point for evacuees departing in U.S. government-controlled aircraft.⁹⁷

Fixed-Wing Airlift Evacuation

(U) Although many U.S. citizens had been reluctant to leave in early April, subsequent developments persuaded more of them to do so. The failure of the RVNAF to maintain its stand at Xuan Loc (it was abandoned on the 21st) particularly convinced people there would be an evacuation. Also, the red tape had begun to loosen and by April 22 the State Department was authorizing parole documents for up to 50,000 Vietnamese who would be most subject to communist reprisals, even though they had no legal claim to immigration.⁹⁸

(U) There was a special effort to evacuate undocumented Vietnamese (and their families) who had held sensitive intelligence or operations jobs. After the embassy clandestinely evacuated 140 such employees in an embassy-sponsored C-130, the DAO began similar flights to evacuate its own employees of this category. The defense attache authorized two C-141s for April 18 and set aside one EC-141 per day for the duration of the evacuation. Such "black" flights evacuated some 300 people a day through April 28, and

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carried out an additional 1,100 in seven special missions. Secret evacuees also filled over 250 "space available" seats on flights scheduled for U.S. citizens and fully documented Vietnamese. Using these methods, along with bribing of officials, stolen immigration forms, and other stratagems, the DAO managed to move more than 4,500 endangered Vietnamese out of Saigon.⁹⁹ One special evacuation flight occurred on April 25, when a C-118 landed at the restricted Air America ramp to pick up passengers, who turned out to be ex-President Thieu and other Vietnamese en route to exile in Taiwan.¹⁰⁰

(U) The man in charge of supervising all U.S. airlift into and out of Saigon through Tan Son Nhut Airport was Maj. Robert S. Delligatti, the Seventh Air Force's Supervisor of Airlift. In addition to his regular duties, he had been charged by Colonel McCurdy, the air attache, with serving as contact point for evacuation of "special" groups of local nationals such as U.S. mission employees, news media representatives, the intelligence community, and senior GVN officials. When necessary, he was also responsible for bribing local immigration authorities, the National Police, and the military police, to insure cooperation. For example, working with the senior Columbia Broadcasting System official in Saigon, he helped evacuate about 700 South Vietnamese media people through the Air America area between April 16 and 21. On April 21 as the tempo of operations increased, Col. Earl E. Michler took over Delligatti's job, but the latter stayed on to help out.¹⁰¹

(U) With the step-up of evacuation activity in Saigon, the Military Airlift Command also got ready. On April 18, the vice commander of the Twenty-Second Air Force at Travis AFB, was directed to proceed to Clark AB to assume responsibilities as Pacific Theater Airline Manager, and the JCS meanwhile ordered the Twenty-Second Air Force to provide C-141 airlift from Saigon to Clark, beginning on April 20. When the first C-141s began arriving in Saigon, the evacuee processing machinery was still too slow to be able to fill them up. Part of the problem was that on April 19, without prior warning, the JCS had directed the flow of aircraft to be greatly increased, far beyond the number that could be

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TABLE 1

Fixed-Wing Evacuation Statistics, April 5-30, 1975

Day	Type of Aircraft	Daily Evacuees			Cumulative Evacuees		
		U.S.	Others	Total	U.S.	Others	Total
5	C-141	200 *		200	200		200
6	C-141	258		258	458		458
7	C-141	246		246	704		704
8	C-141	81		81	785		785
9	C-141	141	372	513	926	372	1,098
10	C-141	138	666	804	1,064	1,038	2,102
11	C-141	194	647	841	1,258	1,685	2,943
12	C-141	84	100	184	1,342	1,785	3,127
13	C-141	143	52	195	1,485	1,837	3,322
14	C-141	94	50	144	1,579	1,887	3,266
15	C-141	86	348	434	1,665	2,235	3,900
16	C-141	86	61	147	1,751	2,296	4,047
17	C-141	74	106	180	1,825	2,402	4,227
18	C-141	612	374	986	2,437	2,776	5,213
19	C-141	300	Unknown	300	2,737	2,776	5,513

"Big Push Week" Begins

20	C-141	147	43	190	2,884	2,819	5,703
21	C-141/C-130	249	334	583	3,133	3,153	6,286
22	C-141/C-130	550	2,781	3,331	3,683	5,934	9,617
23	C-141/C-130	488	3,824	4,312	4,171	9,758	13,729
24	C-141/C-130	190	5,574	5,764	4,361	15,332	19,693
25	C-141/C-130	501	4,354	4,855	4,862	19,686	24,548
26	C-141/C-130	381	6,376	6,757	5,243	26,062	31,305
27	C-141/C-130	219	7,359	7,578	5,462	33,421	38,883
28	C-130 **	128	6,109	6,237	5,590	39,530	45,120
29	C-130 ***	23	631	654	5,613	40,161	45,774

* Through Apr 5, according to CINCPAC estimates, approximately 200 U.S. citizens were evacuated.

** C-141 operations terminated on Apr 27 because of a bombing attack on Tan San Nhut Airport.

*** Data for Apr 29 is an approximation. It includes tentative loads aboard four C-130 flights made during the hours of darkness on Apr 28/29 before North Vietnamese shelling of the airport destroyed one C-130 and, combined with crowds on the runways, resulted in the cessation of fixed-wing evacuation.

Source: Office of PACAF History

~~TOP SECRET~~

filled. By April 22, however, the processing had become more streamlined, so that five times as many were evacuated as on the day before.¹⁰²

To permit the evacuation to continue during hours of darkness, C-130s had also been ordered into operation beginning on the 21st. About twenty C-141s were making the daily shuttle between Clark and Saigon, with an equal number of C-130s making the run at night. At first the C-141s averaged only about 90 to 100 passengers per flight, but during the last days they averaged 200 or more and the C-130s about 190 each, with some cases of severe overloading.¹⁰³

By April 22, the threat to aircraft operating out of Saigon was mounting and the JCS directed that C-141 flights be halted when and if Tan Son Nhut came under attack. The less expensive and less vulnerable C-130s would continue the evacuation. In view of this, CINCPAC asked for, and immediately got, an additional C-130 squadron sent to PACOM.¹⁰⁴ On April 27, with NVA artillery and rocket attacks staged intermittently against Saigon and Tan Son Nhut, CINCPAC ordered the C-141 flights to Saigon stopped.* The whole fixed-wing evacuation was now to be carried on by the C-130s. Only a day later, however, communist pilots flying captured A-37s bombed Tan Son Nhut and by 1815 JCS ordered temporary suspension of the C-130 airlift, with resumption scheduled for 2000. During the night of April 28-29, at least three C-130s landed at Tan Son Nhut, two of them bringing in 15,000 pound bombs for the RVNAF. All were scheduled to take evacuees out of Saigon and were a part of the regular resumption of C-130 flights, but not a part of the planned maximum effort lift scheduled for the 29th.¹⁰⁵

Realizing that Tan Son Nhut would not be usable much longer, CINCPAC had ordered a maximum C-130 airlift readied for the following day, April 29. It would be able to extract

*The C-141s continued, however, to ferry refugees from the Philippines to Guam and Wake, aided in this by a host of commercial aircraft chartered by MAC.

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9,000 people a day, and CINCPAC ordered its execution for 0200. But at 0400 the North Vietnamese initiated a heavy rocket attack on Tan Son Nhut, killing two U.S. Marine guards at the DAO compound and destroying an empty USAF C-130. Two other C-130s on the ground at the time took off immediately, and C-130s inbound as a part of the planned surge for April 29 were ordered to orbit off the coast of South Vietnam for the time being. Vietnamese aircraft were weaving all over the tarmac at Tan Son Nhut and jettisoned fuel tanks, live bombs, and other equipment were strewn everywhere. One F-5 jet, its engine still running, had been abandoned just in front of the loading ramp. After daybreak, VNAF pilots began evacuating themselves. Three C-47s, four C-119s, three F-5s, and one other aircraft, all VNAF, had been destroyed by the bombing.¹⁰⁶

(U) Communist shelling continued on and off till 1000, and prospects of resuming the fixed-wing airlift appeared dim. General Smith in Saigon and later the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Brown, at an emergency meeting at the White House, urged dispatching a fighter escort to accompany the C-130s, but Secretary Kissinger opposed this, fearing any show of force would be misinterpreted by Hanoi.¹⁰⁷ Ambassador Martin, even after coming to the airport and seeing the situation for himself, appeared to think the C-130 airlift could still go on. But when General Smith discussed the matter with Admiral Gayler, the latter said he would recommend to the JCS that Option IV (helicopter evacuation) be executed. Apprised of this, the ambassador finally agreed himself to call for the helicopters.¹⁰⁸ At 1050 the JCS ordered the orbiting C-130s to return to Clark, and the fixed-wing evacuation officially came to an end.

Option IV: Helicopter Operations

With the maximum C-130 effort planned for April 29 impossible before it even began, the forces on alert prepared to support the helicopter operation. Most of the helicopter

TOP SECRET

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evacuation force, the aircraft carriers Enterprise, Coral Sea, Midway, Okinawa and Hancock, had been in place for several days. The first two carried Navy and Marine F-4s, F-14s, A-6s and A-7s, and the latter two had been reconfigured to carry Air Force CH-53 and HH-53 helicopters and Marine Corps CH-53s and 46s. In addition, there were ships, numerous destroyers and destroyer escorts, supply ships, and a brigade of marines to provide security. In Thailand, USAF F-4s, A-7s, and AC-130s were on alert to provide tactical air support; ten of the F-4s were Wild Weasel-equipped. As the helicopter evacuation was being ordered the morning of the 29th, USAAG intelligence was reporting that the South Vietnamese command structure in Military Region 3 and the Saigon Military District was no longer functioning and that the Joint General Staff (JGS) had become totally ineffective. The communists "could enter and occupy Saigon within the next 24 hours."¹⁰⁹

(U) Already on the 28th, shortly after the A-37s had bombed Tan Son Nhut, all key personnel in the surface evacuation operation had been alerted and twenty-three buses, together with their U.S. citizen drivers and convoy escorts, were standing by to deliver personnel to the helicopters when the command came next day. The convoys encountered repeated difficulties in making their way to Tan Son Nhut, particularly from harassment by South Vietnamese police and soldiers, but by 1030 all were running their assigned routes. Loads for forty-passenger buses were increased to sixty or seventy by prohibiting large pieces of luggage.¹¹⁰

Air America Operations

(U) While not an official part of Option IV U.S. military helicopter evacuations, Air America helicopters played an important supporting role in these operations. Air America was not under his jurisdiction, but General Smith had asked early in April that it conduct the mop-up operation, i.e., providing in-country airlift for the DAO after U.S. military planes and crews left Vietnam. Air America had twenty-eight UH-1s, a maintenance capability,

TOP SECRET

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and thirty-four pilots, adequate to put twenty-four of the helicopters into the air at any given time.

(U) As it turned out, the Air America pilots (all but three of whom had elected to accept the assignment)¹¹¹ saw action sooner than anticipated, i.e., on the final, fateful 29th of April. The plans had called for bus convoys to transport almost everyone to the DAO compound with Air America picking up the stragglers, but Air America Hueys actually began picking up evacuees between 0800 and 0900 on the morning of the 29th, about the same time as the bus convoys began. During the ten and a half hours that they evacuated personnel from downtown Saigon, the pilots made routine passes over all the previously designated sites to see if evacuees were waiting, and some pickups were even made from unplanned sites when pilots spotted stranded U.S. citizens. At about five in the afternoon, they transferred control of their operation from the DAO compound to the USAF airborne command post until the last downtown Saigon rooftop extraction at about six thirty. By this time, Air America had flown more than 1000 evacuees to either the embassy, the DAO compound, or directly to the Navy ships at sea.¹¹²

Helicopter Evacuation of the DAO Compound

Due to communications difficulties and to delays in shuttling the security force marines from their ships to the carrier helicopter platforms, the first helicopters bringing the marines did not arrive in Saigon until shortly after 1500 the afternoon of April 29. But only six minutes later these same three helicopters took off for the fleet with 149 evacuees. After the second flight had taken off with 194 people aboard, the number of persons allowed in each helicopter was raised from 50 to 54--by leaving off some of the passengers' personal baggage. By 1625, the first cycle of helicopters had brought out 1,970 evacuees from the DAO compound in about ninety minutes. Nine of the ten USAF helicopters participated in this first cycle, extracting 438 of the evacuees.¹¹³ The second cycle was

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completed by 1830 and brought out a total of 2,108 evacuees. The third wave extracted 1,755 persons and took longer because of gathering darkness and deteriorating weather.

(U) During these three waves, Air Force helicopters took out a total of 1,375 evacuees, while two of the HH-53s flew protective cover missions. One of these retaliated against enemy twin 40-mm batteries firing from north and west of Tan Son Nhut, and the second released four ALE-20 flares and took evasive action in a successful effort to thwart an SA-7 missile launched against it.¹¹⁴ Starting at about 2100, the last helicopters of the fourth wave extracted the Marine security force, including General Carey, the U.S. Marine commander, and General Smith, the defense attache, at 2250.¹¹⁵ The very last evacuation from the DAO compound was at twelve minutes past midnight on the 30th when two CH-53s took off for the USS Okinawa with the marines who had remained behind to destroy communications facilities and the main DAO building, as well as almost four million dollars' worth of U.S. and Vietnamese currency.¹¹⁶

Helicopter Evacuations from the Embassy

(U) The Option IV helicopter evacuations went on concurrently from the embassy and the DAO, although they began at the latter. Initially it had been intended to conduct only a very limited evacuation from the embassy, but after the last scheduled pickup of passengers from there the embassy became a major gathering place for additional evacuees and a primary helicopter landing zone. Thus there were still 1,500 to be evacuated from the embassy when the tenth and last bus convoy entered the DAO compound at 1745 with nearly 800 passengers.¹¹⁷

(U) As more and more people began showing up at the embassy and the crowds outside became more unruly, 130 additional marines were ferried over from the DAO compound to help the 43 marines at the embassy to keep order. After they arrived, the evacuation of personnel from the embassy began almost immediately with the arrival of four USMC

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CH-46s on the embassy rooftop at six o'clock. Soon after, CH-53s joined in the embassy evacuation, utilizing an embassy parking lot for their landing zone, since the embassy rooftop would not support their weight. The parking lot made a very limited landing zone, however, and this, plus the many unexpected evacuees arriving at the embassy, caused the evacuation to be extended beyond the planned time.¹¹⁸

(U) After initially directing the CH-46s to continue with these additional embassy evacuations, RAdm. Donald B. Whitmire, the commander of Task Force 76, decided shortly after midnight that operations should stop until morning for maintenance and crew rest. VAdm. George P. Steele, commander of the Seventh Fleet, concurred, but Lt. Gen. John J. Burns, COMUSSAG, and Admiral Gayler felt that delay was risky and they should press on. So operations were started up again after a break of about two hours, and continued through the night. Earlier in the evening, Admiral Steele had cabled Ambassador Martin:

Can only continue evacuation from embassy through 2300 tonight. Unless you and other U.S. citizens come out before then, we will have to restart operations tomorrow, with all the grave risk to my personnel and to yours that entails. Urgently recommend you allow us to lift you and U.S. citizens out now. Known threat exists to your area for tomorrow.¹¹⁹

But the ambassador continued to hold out against leaving, endeavoring to try to get out a few more Vietnamese refugees. Secretary Kissinger asked how many people were still waiting to be evacuated and Martin told him roughly 726, whereupon the White House and the Pentagon told him a chopper flight sufficient to haul out 726 evacuees would be sent to Saigon, but after that, no more. The ambassador himself was to be on the next-to-last helicopter; Kissinger told him: "I want you heroes to come home."¹²⁰

(U) Shortly before three in the morning, Martin pleaded for at least six more big CH-53s, which he insisted would accommodate all the remaining civilians. Admiral Whitmire reluctantly agreed, and within the next forty minutes the six helicopters landed in quick succession.¹²¹ Finally, at 0458 the morning of the 30th, the ambassador got into a Marine CH-46 which took him and principal members of his staff to the USS Blue Ridge. After

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Martin's departure, most of the remaining 200 U.S. personnel including 170 marines, left the embassy at 0524. Two more CH-46s came in to get the remaining 30 or 35 marines, the last of them leaving at 0746. Some 420 foreign nationals who had been processed and scheduled to be evacuated were left behind at the embassy when the last CH-46 departed.¹²²

(U) In addition to actual evacuation flights, a wide variety of aircraft participated in supporting tasks. A USAF C-130 Airborne Command and Control Center was overhead during the entire evacuation and controlled all air operations over the land area. USAF and USN fighters and fighter-bombers covered the evacuation during daylight hours and were replaced by AC-130 gunships from Thailand at night. The helicopters worked in an environment of small arms fire, antiaircraft artillery, SA-7 missiles, and incoming artillery rounds during the entire operation.¹²³ But the evacuation aircraft were always well protected, with Wild Weasels and accompanying strike aircraft flying high above them, then the AC-130s, and finally close air support fighters flying just above them. Strategic Air Command KC-135 tankers and radio-relay aircraft were constantly overhead. USAF and USN electronic countermeasures, reconnaissance, and rescue aircraft were either in the area or immediately on call.¹²⁴

(U) There was some apprehension about how the Wild Weasels could operate effectively, given the current rules of engagement which specified they could only fire after being fired on first. The concern was that the cumbersome, unarmed, passenger-filled evacuation aircraft, unable to evade a SAM, would be very vulnerable. In response to General Burns' earnest request the JCS gave permission for Wild Weasels to prepare to engage a SAM site if a missile launch was imminent, but they still could not fire without specific permission from the airborne commander.¹²⁵

(U) The only tactical air expenditures of ordnance on target during the evacuation occurred as the first cycle of helicopters was returning to the fleet. A hunter-killer team, made up of an F-4C Wild Weasel and an F-4D of the 388th TFS, was patrolling between Tan Son Nhut

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and Bien Hoa about four in the afternoon when the Wild Weasel detected SAM radar emissions to the north. It immediately turned toward the threatening radar and fifteen to twenty antiaircraft weapons opened up on it and the F-4D. The four crew members estimated they received more than 500 rounds of 23-mm, 37-mm, and 57-mm fire in the space of one minute. After receiving permission from the airborne commander, the Wild Weasel marked the three 57-mm sites with a Shrike air-to-ground missile and took evasive action to escape the tracers coming in. Then the F-4D was cleared to destroy the 57 mm battery and did so with two CBU-71s and two CBU-58s, neutralizing the site, ten miles northeast of Saigon, without damage to either aircraft. Five more Wild Weasel flights, as well as many conventional F-4s, flew air cover during the following hours, but no further threats warranted the expenditure of munitions.¹²⁶

(U) In addition to SAC's participation in the evacuation, the SAC base at Andersen AFB, Guam, was a temporary processing center for those refugees on their way to a permanent home in the United States.

Aircraft Evacuation

█ Beside evacuation of personnel, there was also the matter of the large amounts of military equipment that should be removed from the country. A considerable amount of such equipment had already fallen to the enemy in the previous battles. Thus, while eighty operationally ready aircraft were flown out of Pleiku to Phan Rang AB, sixty-four had been left behind, six of them planes that had been put in storage, others that were out of commission.¹²⁷ Student pilots in A-37s destroyed much of what was left.¹²⁸

█ At Da Nang, the deputy commander of the VNAF had flown in on the night of March 27 and told the 1st Air Division to get all flyable aircraft out. With the airfield under continuous artillery fire on the 28th and 29th, they got 130 planes out, but 176, including an F-5E, 5 F-5As and 24 A-37s, were abandoned. This was partly because VNAF security

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TABLE 2

VNAF Aircraft Inventory, April 23, 1975

<u>Type</u>	<u>Total Number</u>
F-5A/B	56
F-5E	49
RF-5	3
A-37	82
A-1	34
C-130	24
C-7	35
C-119G	11
AC-119G/K	35
E/R/VC-47	51
U-6	9
U-17	53
O-1	114
O-2	2
T-41	18
UH-1	407
CH-47	<u>29</u>
Total	1,012

Source: Office of PACAF History

TABLE 3

VNAF Aircraft at U-Tapao, May 1, 1975

<u>Type</u>	<u>Number</u>
F-5E	22
F-5A/B	4
RF-5	1
A-37B	27
A-1E/G	11
C-130A	8
C-7A	6
VC-47D	3
EC-47D	8
C-47D	6
C-119G	1
AC-119G	2
Various Light Aircraft	<u>22</u>
Total	121

Source: Office of PACAF History

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forces at the airfield were overpowered by ARVN forces trying to leave Da Nang, but also because there were too many SA-7s to permit destructive action.¹²⁹ Colonel McCurdy also blamed the regional commander, General Truong, for not giving the evacuation order sooner. He added that the U.S. deputy defense attache, General Baughn, was instrumental in helping get out the planes that managed to do so.¹³⁰ When Phu Cat Air Base was finally overrun on March 31, only thirty out of some eighty planes were flown out to safety. On April 16 when Phan Rang Air Base was abandoned, fourteen A-37s, thirty-three UH-1 helicopters, and forty other aircraft were left behind, but planes were later sent to destroy materiel there.¹³¹

(U) Secretary of Defense Schlesinger, convinced that the end was only a few days off, sent Assistant Secretary of Defense von Marbod to Saigon on April 24 to try to prevent additional U.S.-made military equipment from falling into the enemy's hands. En route, during a stopover in Bangkok, he persuaded the Thai military to let him use several local bases as parking places for the planes and equipment he was hoping to spirit out. On the 28th, he started to withdraw equipment from Bien Hoa, but was thwarted by the NVA who had begun surrounding the base. That same day he suggested to the JCS that the VNAF prepare to fly some of its surplus aircraft at Tan Son Nhut to Can Tho or to Phu Quoc Island and also that they undertake some preemptive bombing at Bien Hoa. Shortly afterwards, meeting with Air Marshal Ky, von Marbod reportedly asked him to "use his influence" to assure the airstrikes at Bien Hoa and also to try to persuade the VNAF to fly all surplus planes, all except the F-5s, to Takhli Air Base in Thailand. Ky agreed to help. But instead he drove off to a nearby hangar and helped outfit several F-5 fighters for a retaliatory raid against Phan Rang, from where that day's A-37 enemy attack on Tan Son Nhut had originated.¹³² The VNAF did request and receive permission to evacuate or destroy materiel at Bien Hoa, although there is no confirmation this actually took place.¹³³

[REDACTED]

(U) At Tan Son Nhut, the enemy attacked with captured A-37s on the 29th and destroyed at least ten aircraft, including three AC-119s and several C-47s, and badly damaged the operations center. Artillery and shelling attacks beginning at four in the morning of the 29th made the airfield increasingly unusable and destroyed eleven South Vietnamese Air Force planes. At this point, the VNAF, in the words of Colonel McCurdy, "began to get quite restless and, in fact, sometime not long after daylight, they began scrambling their aircraft. We learned later that many flew to Thailand while others proceeded to Con Son Island, or to the U.S. fleet off Vung Tau."

(U) Most of the VNAF aircraft which were evacuated from Tan Son Nhut and made it to Thailand were fixed-wing transports and jet fighters, including twenty-two F-5Es, four F-5As, twenty-seven A-37s, eight C-130s, six C-7As, and several C-47s and C-119s.¹³⁴ A few helicopters also made it, but some ran out of fuel and had to land in Cambodia. Many of the helicopters flew out to the ships at sea, especially to the aircraft carrier Midway. According to later reports, some pilots only learned their final destinations on the radio after take-off. Some flew to U-Tapao without maps. But there had been some prepositioning of fuel on Phu Quoc for refueling light aircraft enroute to Thailand.¹³⁵

(U) Lost to the enemy at the time of the surrender were 975 aircraft, 529 fixed-wing and 446 helicopters, including 73 F-5s, 113 A-37s, 10 C-130s, and 36 A-1s.¹³⁶ By contrast a total of only some 307 aircraft escaped from Vietnam, and this figure includes some 67 helicopters which survived only long enough to deliver their passengers to the ships of the Seventh Fleet and then were ditched for lack of space aboard.¹³⁷

(U) Throughout, Ambassador Martin had opposed von Marbod's attempts to withdraw equipment because it would degrade the VNAF's capabilities and add to Saigon's demoralization. General Minh, the VNAF chief, later said that U.S. embassy officials talked daily to him about the possible fly-out of VNAF aircraft to destinations outside the country, but that nothing more than verbal agreements ever ensued. He himself had insisted

TABLE 4

Aircraft Recovered from Vietnam

VNAF

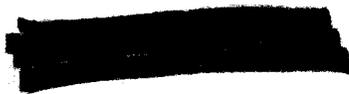
<u>Type</u>	<u>Total Number</u>
F-5A	2
F-5B	2
RF-5	1*
F-5E	22
A-37B	38
A-1E	6
A-1H	5
C-130A	15
C-7A	6
AC-119G	2
AC-119K	2
C-47	3
VC-47	3
RC-47	2
EC-47	11
O-1E	3
O-1G	10
U-6	1
U-17B	14
UH-1	77
CH-47	5
Total	219

Miscellaneous

UH-1	20	Air America
C-47	5	Air America
DC-3	1	Air Vietnam
DC-6	1	Air Vietnam
VC-47	1	Defense Intel Agency
U-108	1	Defense Intel Agency
Total	29	

* Does not include the F-5E dropped at sea during the Midway loading.

Source: Office of PACAF History


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there must first be a green light from the JGS. According to the defense attache, there was never, apparently, "a known concerted effort by the VNAF to destroy any aircraft, supplies, or facilities at any of the installations lost in the final weeks, with the exception of Bien Hoa, which in the final days they planned to destroy."¹³⁸

(U) This was partly due to the fact that the VNAF had to wait for orders for anything of this nature from the regional military commanders, or from the JGS, and such orders had not been forthcoming. There also was obviously a concern on the part of the authorities to avoid encouraging premature flight. And finally, as so often occurs in the course of the war, there was the high priority given by the military to saving their families. Thus, at Da Nang in March, DAO representatives had urged the VNAF staff to evacuate the nearly two hundred aircraft that were left on the ground, but aircrews could not be found to fly them because they were trying to evacuate their dependents.¹³⁹ According to Colonel McCurdy, this same concern for family was behind the exodus of VNAF aircraft that did escape from Tan Son Nhut in the last days--almost all consisted of squadron level personnel fleeing with their families. But for this urge for self-preservation through flight, the entire air fleet might well have fallen into the hands of the enemy.


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Epilogue

(U) In an account such as this of the 1973-75 events for the U.S. Air Force, there should be some final word on the role of the Vietnamese Air Force. The USAF itself could play only a very restricted role in this period, the role that had been planned for it having failed to materialize. But the VNAF was now on stage, out from under the shadow of the USAF "big brother." How did it do?

(U) Some reporters and analysts tend to disparage the VNAF and dismiss its efforts as ineffective. They charge it with always flying at about 10,000 feet and as a result, hitting South Vietnamese troops at times instead of the enemy. VNAF personnel, it is said, tended to fly their own dependents out of battle areas, and not to be around when they were needed. There was no real close air support. All these charges have to be considered in the light of two major factors: the VNAF's organizational dependence under the army corps commanders, and the kind of air force they were, as determined by United States policy planners over the years.

(U) Under the organizational system after U.S. forces left, command over all aircraft was in the hands of the four army corps commanders. Theoretically it was the JGS who controlled all military activities, but in actuality the JGS was weak and passive and real control resided in the corps commanders who were directly responsible to President Thieu. For political reasons, Thieu did not want the JGS to be too powerful.* As a result, what there was in the way of military strategy consisted of each of the four corps commanders protecting his own area. Because of this there was no such thing as centralized control of the use of air--which in itself, was also considered politically dangerous.¹

* Similarly, because Air Marshal Ky represented a political threat to him, there was extra reason for the VNAF to have no autonomy.

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(U) Under MACV, air power could be used very flexibly and very quickly in whatever area it was needed, and General Abrams referred to it as his greatest weapon. But after the Americans left, the VNAF lacked the authority to dispatch strike aircraft between military regions. Each corps commander was very conscious of the limitations and tended to hoard his air capabilities because of the cuts. Even though targets were available, the commanders were reluctant to dispatch all authorized sorties, holding them for possible needs in the future, especially for close-in defense of towns. In addition, the four corps commanders all had different sets of ideas about how they wanted to use their air assets, but all were afraid to waste them because they were not going to be replaced.

(U) The fragmentation of the air effort was probably one of the gravest drawbacks in USAF eyes. Opportunities were missed where air, if massed and applied, might have made a difference. At Da Nang, for example, sixteen strikes requested by FACs had to be labeled "training" in order to get around the need for JGS or corps approval. And, when the VNAF chief sent his deputy to the JGS to get approval for sending C-130s to Pleiku for the evacuation he ended up having to send the planes under the pretense of hauling spares in order to be able to bring people out on return flights.² Under the policy of parcelling out air assets, there was also not much opportunity to make interdiction strikes. If a FAC sighted trucks, it was necessary to go for approval to the corps commander, whose concern over the need for close air support was often paramount, especially if the interdiction strike would not benefit his own corps area. An example was the sighting of a convoy in the mountains southwest of Da Nang in early 1975, when I Corps' commander declined to strike since it was headed southward, beyond his area.³

(U) The situation was all the more frustrating because of the many lucrative targets in the final campaign. The communists were far more open in their use of trucks on roads. Pilots would report forty or fifty trucks, all out in the open, as never before seen in the war. It

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was easy to see the dust of the convoys in the dry season, and trucks kept moving by night with their lights on. Sorties were flown against some of these targets, but not enough to be truly effective. For example, in the last weeks of the offensive a convoy was detected moving slowly south of Duc Lap with SA-2, 122-mm, and 130-mm weaponry. RF-5s located it and strike aircraft were sent, but not enough--resources were simply not made available for this kind of interdiction. The most and best interdiction work was in Military Region 2, with MR 3 the next most active and MRs 1 and 4 the least.⁴

(U) The fact that air power in South Vietnam consisted in effect of four small independent air forces each responding to a different commander was obviously a hindrance to effectiveness, at least when compared with what had been achieved by U.S. air under a centralized control system. But the real drawback to effectiveness lay in the nature of the VNAF itself. Long before, in the days of McNamara and ever since, it was decided that the VNAF was not to have fast, powerful planes. The reason always given was that they might, with such aircraft, go north and carry the war to Hanoi, something which the U.S. at that time wanted to avoid. The other reason was that it was not considered necessary to equip South Vietnam with such aircraft because U.S. air would always be available for missions requiring fast, sophisticated aircraft. The VNAF, of course, had always wanted more powerful planes--Ky used to refer to the planes they had as "fit for old women to fly." Certain of the U.S. military had also favored giving the VNAF more sophisticated aircraft. The question came up at various times throughout the war about giving them such planes, but it was always ruled out.

The matter came up again in 1971 when the administration insisted that the interdiction mission must also be turned over to the South Vietnamese. Secretary of Defense Laird and his staff talked of accomplishing this by using "simple, straightforward solutions" of less sophistication and cost (than U.S. air) such as minigunships and "imaginative combinations of tactics, techniques and technology." The JCS always replied to notions of this kind with

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their own hawkish, hard facts. If the VNAF had to assume the responsibility for interdicting enemy lines of communication, it would have to be modernized with more sophisticated and less vulnerable aircraft, unless the enemy anti-aircraft threat along these lines of communication decreased significantly. The VNAF had not been trained or equipped to conduct air operations in high threat areas and they were hampered by the limited combat radius of their fighter aircraft, by their limited capability to carry out tactical air strikes at night, and by the probable reallocation of VNAF resources to support ground operations in MR 1.⁵ In this case the JCS was right. All these things still held true in 1975. The VNAF was still the same air force designed to fight as in the Tet offensive, i.e., in a permissive environment, without any account taken of whether the enemy meanwhile might be progressing along other lines requiring a different response. VNAF's chief operations officer put it this way in a subsequent interview:

The majority of the VNAF planes were built ten/fifteen, sometimes even thirty years ago--except for the A-37s and the F-5Es (which could only fly for an hour and fifteen minutes at a time). These old planes were very slow compared to the firing capabilities of enemy anti-aircraft, especially their SA-7 missiles and big caliber cannon capable of shooting down planes flying at over 18,000 feet. . . . In other words, our Air Force was a very easy target for the North Vietnamese during. . . 1973-1975. . . who had assembled too many anti-aircraft guns along with ground-to-air missiles on every battlefield.

(U) The threat presented by Hanoi's air defense weapons in 1975 was far more serious than the JCS had envisioned in 1971. For example, helicopters (which made up about sixty percent of the inventory) were no longer as useful as they were in 1968 or the early 1970s, because of their vulnerability to SA-7s and anti-aircraft artillery. This emphasis on helicopters over fixed-wing transport now cut down greatly on the VNAF's mobility, at a time when, ironically, the enemy was moving about openly by truck. The farther south the enemy moved his air defense weapons, the less capable the VNAF was of striking at his ground forces and supplies. Paradoxically, even though North Vietnam had no airplanes in South Vietnam, the VNAF did not have air superiority, not daring to attack the enemy

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concentrations because of the SAMs and antiaircraft artillery.⁷ These same weapons hampered the VNAF's intelligence because they forced out the EC- and RC-47s--if they flew in such areas at all, it had to be above 20,000 feet, immediately ruling out essential intelligence on enemy dispositions. Forward Air Controllers were likewise forced out of critical areas by air defense. They had always been a weak point for the VNAF, but by 1975 they could not operate where North Vietnamese troops were in contact, thus further weakening the intelligence capability as well as the ability to control strikes in close air support. Finally, because their aircraft were so vulnerable to the enemy's air defense weapons, the VNAF had an almost obsessional fear of losing them, for they knew there would be no replacements. As a result, they became more cautious and less aggressive, knowing that higher sortie rates meant higher attrition. They made many ineffective strikes from high up, using radar control, because they felt they could not stand losses to SA-7s.⁸

(U) Although the VNAF's organization and the enemy's air defense presented the greatest problem, there were others. A factor greatly hampering mobility was the poor operational readiness rate of the C-130s--normally only eight out of twenty-six were available. This was primarily due to fuel leaks and structural problems which were common to these aircraft even before their transfer to the VNAF under Project Enhance Plus. Nevertheless, there were too few C-130s to support any massive deployment of forces to change the relative concentration of troops as the U.S. did at Kontum in 1972. The VNAF chief operations officer, Col. Vu Van Uoc, also felt that lack of security of their air bases lowered the VNAF's activity--ARVN was unable to protect the airfields from enemy rockets, mortar, and artillery to permit effective VNAF operations. Every time a C-130 landed or took off the communists attacked the airbase with rockets.⁹

(U) The degree of disorientation and demoralization suffered as the result of the U.S. budget cuts would have to be counted as a factor. Going from sixty-six squadrons to fifty-five and from a wealth of aircraft and materiel down to cutting flying time almost in

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half and losing the additional F-5s that had been planned--all in the space of two years--was hard to adjust to, especially for an outfit that was just beginning to stabilize and make progress.

(U) Most important, however, was the withdrawal of U.S. air units. This meant not only adjusting to completely different operational procedures under the corps commanders, but also to the withdrawal of a framework of discipline and strength which they still needed. If nothing else, the withdrawal came too quickly, before they were ready to stand on their own. Aside from that, they (like the entire RVNAF) could not help feeling bereft and exposed by the departure of the powerful shield of strength that U.S. air power had been for them. This deprivation was felt in very practical ways: having to provide and above all, maintain their own airlift; no longer having the benefit of sophisticated U.S. reconnaissance and intelligence support; not even being allowed to go to U.S. advisers for advice or help; and having to see the enemy pouring in men and supplies with no U.S. air strikes along the Ho Chi Minh trail to keep them at a low level. It used to take a battalion of North-Vietnamese about seventy days to go by foot down through the trail, through Laos and sometimes Cambodia, taking a lot of casualties along the way. Now they got down in three weeks and rode most of the way along their new roads, with no significant losses since the cease-fire and the end of the bombing.¹⁰

(U) Another factor, the absence of the B-52s and U.S. tactical air, worked to the VNAF's disadvantage in a reverse sort of way. For they had complete faith that the United States would send U.S. air in again at the crucial moment to save them as it had in 1972. Many stories circulated which supported this belief: \$850 million had been earmarked by the Pentagon for a possible bombing of North Vietnam; there was an oral plan between the DAO and the JGS for procedures to request U.S. support; the U.S. President had a kind of sixty-day authority to use force. This faith in a last-minute U.S. rescue probably acted to keep some Vietnamese from doing more in their own defense. For example, when an officer

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proposed to a JGS commander that action be taken to establish a rear headquarters in the IV Corps area, he was told it was "not necessary. . .because we lose the war or win the war with the intervention of the U.S. Air Force."¹¹ Even the VNAF chief of staff, General Minh, believed that the United States would come back into the war if needed. Linebacker II had seemed to him to advertise Nixon's determination not to let South Vietnam fall, and when Nixon left office, Minh felt his successor would do the same. Not until Minh left in the final evacuation did he realize for certain that the United States was not going to intervene.¹² His deputy, Maj. Gen. Vo Xuan Lanh, summed up the reason for Saigon's failure in six words: the cuts and the USAF absence.¹³

(U) It is too simple, of course, to say that the reason South Vietnam lost the war or that the VNAF was ineffective was because U.S. air power was no longer there to help them. It is true that U.S. air had saved South Vietnam in the 1972 Easter invasion. But there were two new factors in 1975. North Vietnam's air defense weapons were infinitely more effective against the VNAF than they had been against the USAF. And in 1972, there had been a mere eight North Vietnamese divisions to be stopped. In 1975 there were eighteen.¹⁴

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ANNEX A

Eagle Pull

(C) The communist offensive in Cambodia that led to the evacuation of Phnom Penh and Eagle Pull started on January 1, 1975 with simultaneous attacks on the northwest, northeast, east, and southeast approaches to the capital as well as along the Mekong River south of the city. The communists aimed for the isolation of all lines of communication leading to Phnom Penh, with special emphasis on the Mekong, the city's main artery to the outside world. They methodically eliminated all government positions along the Mekong between the capital and the South Vietnamese border, eventually occupied both banks and, with the help of mines and barricades, closed the river. They moved to within rocket range of the capital and its airport to preempt the American airlift, and the daily shellings of both began. With the Mekong closed, the Pochentong airport remained the sole entry point for supplies. Although it was kept under continuous 107-mm rocket and 105-mm howitzer fire by the enemy, this supply line was kept open almost to the end by chartered DC-8s and civilian-manned C-130s.

(U) In late March the communists breached Phnom Penh's defense cordon, and by early April their successes freed an additional 10,000 troops for use against its southeastern perimeter. On April 12 the Americans left, and the final enemy offensive against the city began the next day. Its defensive perimeter soon disappeared, the airport was overrun on the 16th, and during the morning hours of the 17th the city surrendered.¹

(U) A plan had long existed for the evacuation of Americans from Cambodia, where the situation had been tense for years. With the U.S. congressional decision to reduce funding for the Cambodian government and army, the situation deteriorated drastically. Originally

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a MACV responsibility, evacuation planning for Cambodia was eventually delegated by CINCPAC to the commander of USSAG/7AF.

The plan had three basic options. Option I was evacuation as directed by the ambassador, using embassy aircraft resources, scheduled airlines, or charter flights from Pochentong airport; the commander of USSAG would be alerted to prepare for possible military assistance as required. Option II would be invoked by the ambassador but directed by CINCPAC; it involved an evacuation conducted by military forces under the operational control of USSAG/7AF, using fixed-wing aircraft (C-130s) from Pochentong airport to military airfields in Thailand. Option III meant helicopters would be used to evacuate personnel if hostile action denied use of Pochentong to fixed-wing aircraft.²

As early as March 20, CINCPAC had urged that previously granted authority to use USAF C-130s and Birdair contract airlift for administrative personnel movements be extended to include opportune evacuation of personnel as designated by the ambassador. On April 2 a joint State-Defense message provided for such evacuation, specifying a gradual drawdown at the discretion of the ambassador. That same day, Admiral Gayler, CINCPAC, advised the chairman of the JCS that Cambodia was "sliding fast," and that, "in any case, the prospect of soon being out of ammo will finish effective military resistance. . . Eagle Pull Option I should start now, for two reasons: the airport may go any time, and we may urgently need Eagle Pull areas in South Vietnam."³ The following day Admiral Gayler reiterated his recommendation that Option I be adopted immediately, saying delay could result in a "difficult and messy operation." The Secretary of State authorized the ambassador to reduce personnel to the minimum; those to be evacuated should begin departing. On the 4th, JCS authorized execution of Option I in coordination with the ambassador and also sanctioned Options II and III, including positioning of such military forces "as may be required," when requested by the ambassador. The latter was advised by the State Department to continue using fixed-wing aircraft as long as the airport was open,

and to begin low key evacuation of key indigenous personnel as soon as mission personnel had been reduced to the absolute minimum.⁴ On April 3, the Marine colonel and his staff of ten who were to direct the Marine ground security forces during the evacuation, arrived and reported to the ambassador. The latter also asked, and received approval for, doubling his own twelve-man Marine guard detachment.

On April 6 Admiral Gayler advised the JCS that he and his commanders agreed the evacuation should begin "now," and the following day he told COMUSSAG/7AF the USS Hancock with sixteen CH-53s and sixteen CH-46s would be available for support. USSAG desired this support, and the Hancock was ordered to leave Subic Bay as soon as possible. On the 10th, the ambassador announced that the evacuation would take place on April 12. Options I and II were no longer feasible because the ground security force was not large enough to secure the airfield and there were political hazards to having to use tactical air support. A commercial C-47 had been hit by enemy fire during takeoff on April 11, and the airfield might no longer be in friendly hands by the 12th. Moreover, pandemonium at Pochentong might make it impossible to move the evacuees and the ground security forces to the landing zone.⁵

Option III, evacuation by helicopter, began on the 12th under the command of Air Force Lt. Gen. John J. Burns, commander of USSAG/7AF, operating from his headquarters at Nakhon Phanom in Thailand. The Airborne Command and Control C-130 launched from U-Tapao at 0500 and an RF-4 from Udorn made one more weather check. An hour later another C-130 launched from Korat to provide helicopter control and search and rescue coordination should that become necessary. The amphibious assault ship Okinawa, to which all evacuees were to be flown in Marine helicopters, remained about eight miles off the Cambodian coast. Seven other Navy ships and the aircraft carrier Hancock were also in the task force.⁶

(U) Evacuees had been directed to arrive at the embassy at 0700 of the 12th and by 0900 were being taken out the rear to waiting trucks to the helicopter landing zone, a soccer field not far from the embassy. Shortly after 0900, helicopters of the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron brought a four-man Combat Control team to the field. The lead helicopter of the first wave from the Okinawa arrived a few minutes later, with the ground security force which took up positions on the landing zone. The marines were confronted by large crowds of people, mostly curiosity seekers, who posed no mob threat as was to occur later in Saigon. The evacuees were then loaded aboard the helicopters and returned to the waiting ships. The last evacuees included Ambassador John Gunther Dean and the Acting President of the Khmer Republic, Lt. Gen. Saukhan Khoy. As the ground security forces were being extracted, rocket and mortar fire began to hit near the landing zone. The last to leave was Marine Col. Sydney H. Batchelder, Jr., and the command element of the ground security force, who were evacuated at 1115 by Air Force CH-53s of the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron.

(U) Tactical air power, although visible and on station throughout the operation, was not required to expend any ordnance. The State Department had specified that the combat force including tactical air was to be used only to the extent necessary to protect U.S. personnel. Total USAF sorties flown in support of Eagle Pull were: eight F-4, four RF-4, twelve A-7, six AC-130, seven HH-53, nine CH-53, and ten KC-135 (eight refueling and two radio relay).⁷ The entire operation went like clockwork and was completed in two hours and twenty-three minutes. The number of evacuees had, however, been miscalculated; planning had envisioned 780 persons leaving, but the total was only 287. Of these 83 were U.S. citizens and one U.S. citizen dependent, 173 Cambodians, and 30 third-country nationals.⁸ The smaller than expected number of evacuees was attributed to the fact that many persons had recently left Phnom Penh aboard contract C-130s returning to Thailand after delivering supplies to Phnom Penh.

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ANNEX B

Capture and Release of the Mayaguez

(U) During the afternoon of May 12, 1975, the American merchant ship Mayaguez was fired on and seized by Khmer Rouge gunboats while traveling in international waters sixty miles off the coast of Cambodia. Ever since the Khmer Rouge had taken over in Cambodia the month before, they had had numerous border disputes with their neighbors as well as clashes over their claim to territorial waters. The unprovoked seizure of the ship and its crew immediately faced President Ford with deciding what to do to get it back. As military intervention was one possible alternative, USSAG/7AF staff members were tasked by CINCPAC to begin at once to develop plans to deal with this unforeseen incident.¹

(U) A Navy P-3 located the Mayaguez early the next morning, approximately thirty miles southwest of Koh Tang Island. In the early afternoon of the same day, the USSAG/7AF commander was directed to take whatever action was necessary, short of sinking the ship, to prevent the Mayaguez from entering a Cambodian port. Further reconnaissance flights confirmed the location of the ship and possibly its crew at Koh Tang, and other naval and air assets were positioned for a rescue. Two F-111s and, an hour later, F-4s and A-7s, were directed to the scene and fired rockets and 20-mm gunfire forward and aft of the Mayaguez to signal that it should remain at anchor. The JCS directed twenty-four-hour surveillance of the ship, and some eighteen tactical air sorties were flown during the day, followed by AC-130 and F-111 flights during the night. Spectre gunships were also used to warn and turn shipping that tried to leave the area.²

Originally, USSAG/7AF planning focused on boarding and seizure of the Mayaguez with a USAF security police helicopter landing directly onto the ship at first light on May 14. This was changed during the evening of the 13th, when CINCPAC directed USSAG/7AF to

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substitute U.S. Marine Corps Ground Security Force personnel for the USAF Security Police, and emphasized that command and control would be retained by CINCPAC. No execute order was issued and early the next day CINCPAC received new instructions from the JCS:

Higher authority has directed that all necessary preparations be made for potential execution early on the 15th to seize the Mayaguez, occupy Koh Tang Island, conduct B-52 strikes against the port of Kompong Som and Ream Airfield, and sink all Cambodian small craft in target areas.

3) CINCPAC immediately tasked USSAG/7AF with providing the detailed plans to carry out these operations, specifying that maximum emphasis in the planning should be on using the USS Coral Sea for close air support, with minimum reliance on the availability of Thai-based strategic and tactical air. As matters developed, this latter specification was not adhered to. The final operational concept, developed after extensive coordination, was as follows:

At sunrise 15 May, execute a combat assault on Koh Tang Island, using eight USAF CH/HH-53 helicopters, with 175 marines in the initial wave. Subsequent buildup to a total of 625 marines on the island, and rescue members of Mayaguez crew that may be found there.

At sunrise 15 May, using three USAF helicopters, insert 48 Marines, 12 USN/MSC personnel, and explosive ordnance team and a Cambodian linguist on the USS Holt, close with the Mayaguez and board and secure her.

Provide close air support and area coverage against all Cambodian small craft, using USAF and USN tactical air. Naval gunfire support would be available, and B-52 strikes or naval tactical air would be directed against possible reinforcing mainland Cambodian targets.

7) On the 14th, in line with JCS approval for direct attacks on all Cambodian naval craft in the area, three boats were spotted and sunk immediately. Later, three other gunboats were located and sunk, and the operation ended with a total of seven Cambodian naval craft destroyed. The rescue operation itself began shortly before six in the morning with the insertion of marines on Koh Tang and the helicopter landing of the boarding party on the USS Holt at the same time. The latter met no opposition on boarding the Mayaguez, but the

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marines and their transporting USAF helicopters met fierce opposition on Koh Tang Island from the beginning and for about fourteen hours thereafter. It is true the crew of the Mayaguez had been identified as safe on board the USS Wilson, a guided missile destroyer in the area, about four hours after the first marine landing. But the strong enemy opposition the marines encountered on the island made it necessary to bring in reinforcements to stabilize the situation and extract them all successfully. During the initial landing of the marines it was thought some of the Mayaguez crew might still be on the island, and for this reason there had been no landing zone preparation by air strikes or naval gunfire. In the very fluid battle situation, it was impossible for the A-7 Forward Air Controllers to pinpoint friendly positions and not until two OV-10 "Nail" slow Forward Air Controllers arrived could this be done and effective close air support provided. The extraction of the 231 marines inserted was completed by about eight-thirty in the evening.

Air strikes in support of the Mayaguez operation were also conducted against mainland Cambodian targets as directed by the JCS on orders from the White House. It was decided to substitute tactical air strikes from the carrier Coral Sea for the B-52 strikes originally specified. The first strikes were scheduled for about the same time that the Mayaguez was recovered. The White House then canceled the strikes but reinstated them almost immediately when information reports suggested some of the crew might still be on Koh Tang. The strikes attacked Ream airfield on the mainland and, after some debate with Washington, carried out one more strike. CINCPAC later observed that "the threat of bombing of the Cambodian mainland did, in fact, influence the Cambodians' decision to release the crew" as was verified by the captain of the Mayaguez.⁵

The rescue of the Mayaguez and its crew was not accomplished without cost. Fifteen servicemen were killed on the island or during landing operations (eleven marines, two Air Force, and two Navy). Three USAF helicopters were lost during the island operations, several others were damaged, and forty-nine persons were wounded. Three marines were

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147

listed as missing in action. In addition, a fourth helicopter crashed in Thailand during deployment operations, with the loss of twenty-three U.S. airmen, including eighteen security policemen.⁶

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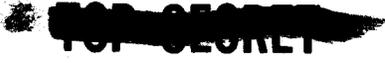
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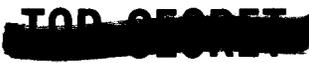
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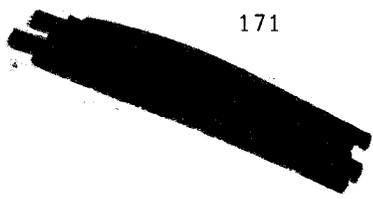
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GLOSSARY

AAA	Antiaircraft artillery
AID	Agency for International Development
Arc Light	B-52 operations in Southeast Asia
ARVN	Army of the Republic of South Vietnam
Barrel Roll	Strike area for sorties flown in northern Laos
Birdair	Thai contract airline
Buffalo Hunter	SAC-conducted drone photographic reconnaissance in SEA
CFST	Control Field Service Team
CHECO	Contemporary Historical Examination of Current Operations
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief, Pacific Command
CINCPACAF	Commander in Chief, Pacific Air Forces
Combat Apple	RC-135 aircraft for special reconnaissance support in Southeast Asia
Comfy Gator	Operational program with remote controlled equipment
Commando Scrimmage	Training exercise to test U.S. capability for air attack against North Vietnam
CONUS	Continental United States
COSVN	Central Office of South Vietnam (Viet Cong headquarters)
CSM	chief of staff memorandum
Daisy Cutter	Bombs with fuze extenders, to explode at surface level
DAO	Defense Attache Office
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
DOD	Department of Defense
Eagle Pull	Cambodian evacuation plan
ELINT	Electronic intelligence
Enhance, Enhance Plus	Supplementary military aid programs for South Vietnam
FAC	Forward Air Controller
FANK	Cambodian army [Forces Armees Nationales Khmeres]
FPJMC	Four-Party Joint Military Commission
Giant Scale	SAC-conducted aerial reconnaissance of Southeast Asia
GVN	Government of South Vietnam
Huey	Term used for U.S. Army helicopter UH-1
ICCS	International Commission of Control and Supervision
Iron Triangle	Dense jungle area northwest of Saigon, once a VC stronghold

~~TOP SECRET~~



JCS
JGS
Jolly Green

Joint Chiefs of Staff
Joint General Staff (Vietnamese High Command)
Call sign for HH-3 and HH-53 search and rescue helicopters

Linebacker
LOC
Loran
LST

Intensive bombing campaigns against North Vietnam
Line of communication
Long-range Airborne Navigation
Landing Ship, Tank

MAC
MACTHAI
MACV
Mail OV-10

Military Airlift Command
Military Assistance Command, Thailand
Military Assistance Command, Vietnam Region
Forward controller aircraft from the 56th Special Operations Wing, Nakhon Phanom, Thailand

MR

Military Region

Nimble Thrust

Program to provide military items and services to Cambodian army

NVA

North Vietnamese Army

Olympic Meet

Reconnaissance platform similar to Giant Scale

PACOM
Parrot's Beak
POL
POW
PRG
Prime Hit

Pacific Command
Tip of the Cambodian salient west of Saigon
Petroleum, oil, and lubricants
Prisoner of war
[Viet Cong] Provisional Revolutionary Government
Plan for air attacks against SAM sites and equipment at Khe Sanh

RLAF
RVN
RVNAF

Royal Laotian Air Force
Republic of South Vietnam
Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces

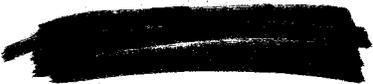
SA-2
SA-7
SAC
SAM
Sandy

Soviet Guideline surface-to-air missile used by NVN
Later version of SA-2
Strategic Air Command
Surface-to-air missile
Call sign of A-1 aircraft strategically located to provide fighter cover for search and rescue operations
Air-to-ground missile
7AF operating area in Southern Laos

Shrike
Steel Tiger

Tactical Air Command
Laos evacuation plan
Saigon evacuation plan, later changed to Frequent Wind
Contingency plan for air attacks against North Vietnam
Table of organization and equipment

TAC
Talon Blade
Talon Vise
Tennis Racket
TO&E


~~TOP SECRET~~

U-2
USAF
USSAG
USSAG/7AF

Strategic reconnaissance aircraft
United States Air Force
U.S. Special Activities Group
U.S. Special Activities Group/Seventh Air Force
Command

VNAF

South Vietnamese Air Force

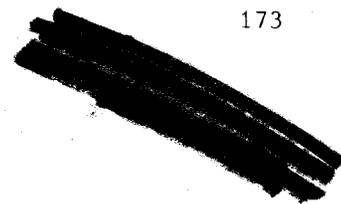
Wild Weasel

Specially configured multiplace fighter and specially
trained crews used to hunt and kill enemy
radar-controlled surface-to-air weapons

WSAG

Washington Special Action Group

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ABSTRACT

(U) This study is the seventeenth in a series of historical monographs entitled The Air Force in Southeast Asia. It treats USAF involvement from 1973 up to the defeat of South Vietnam at the end of April 1975. The only USAF combat role during this period was in Cambodia during the first half of 1973 as it provided active bombing support to government forces trying to stave off encirclement and defeat by communist troops. This action was eminently successful until August 15 when all U.S. combat activity ceased at the direction of Congress. After this the U.S. Air Force was permitted to continue airlift, reconnaissance, and intelligence support of the Cambodian and South Vietnamese armed forces, but as time went on this support was increasingly reduced. The USA also still maintained readiness to resume attacks against North Vietnam if required, by pursuing its B-52 training exercises in Thailand. Air Force personnel likewise continued to be responsible for monitoring aid and training programs for the Cambodian and South Vietnamese air forces. They were, however, prohibited from acting as military advisers and this injunction was adhered to throughout. It was only in the last desperate days of April 1975 that U.S. military personnel ventured to undertake some last minute steps to help stem the enemy onslaught on Saigon.

(U) After the January 1973 peace agreement, the transition for the South Vietnamese Air Force, from working in tandem with and being supported by the United States Air Force, was a difficult one. From working within a framework of centralized discipline and strength, they were thrown completely on their own and at the same time had to adjust to being reorganized and parcelled out under the authority of the four province chiefs. Simultaneously they were confronted with terrible inflation problems, the oil shortage, and above all, severe cuts in U.S. military aid which caused a thirty percent reduction in their aircraft inventory, elimination of ten squadrons, and a sixty-seven percent cut in flying time. That all this was happening at a time of tremendous strengthening of the enemy's position, made the cutbacks the more incomprehensible to them. Inevitably their combat effectiveness was impaired.

(U) This study brings to a close the long U.S., and USAF, "involvement" in Southeast Asia. And although for most of the period of this study the hands of the USAF were tied in terms of helping the South Vietnamese, the Air Force nonetheless remained involved, if somewhat intangibly, up to the end. For U.S. air power had come to the rescue of the South Vietnamese on so many seemingly hopeless occasions that the latter continued to hope that it would save them again. As indeed--if applied in time--it might have done, had not internal U.S. political developments ruled out the deterrent role which the Nixon administration had envisaged for the B-52s in Thailand. In view of the expansion of Soviet influence in Southeast Asia since then, that might have been a very important role for air power to have played.

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