THE WAR IN VIETNAM

The 'Enemy': 20,000 Missions Later

The Damage to North Vietnam Has Been Huge, but the Economy Survives

John's coming, John's coming," yell the bare-legged little North Vietnamese children as they scurry through country lanes and village streets. "John" to them stands for "Johnson," and it is their way of announcing to their neighbors that the United States Air Force is coming over again with its shrieking silver jets and deadly bombs.

Since February, in fact, U.S. aircraft have flown nearly 20,000 missions over Communist North Vietnam, blasting away with bombs and napalm at military targets from the 17th parallel to the very border of Communist China. And yet, most Americans have but the haziest notions about their "enemy"—for obvious reasons. Suspicious to the point of paranoia, the government in Hanoi has let relatively few Westerners so much as visit the country in the past ten years. One recent exception, however, was Christopher Koch, the program director of New York's controversial WBAI, who returned from North Vietnam last month. Some of his impressions:

"I stayed at what used to be the Hotel Metropole in the days of French rule. No Vietnamese were allowed in then except by express invitation of the French. Now it's called Hotel Unity, a quiet place with a few Czech, Polish and Cuban technicians. There are elevators but they are used to carry the baggage up. The guests walk. The rooms are elegant and always have a bowl of fruit on the table. The plumbing is fine—except there is no hot water.

"French influence is still visible all over the city: the wide tree-lined sidewalks, the cafés, the nineteenth-century mansions—now mainly used as embassies. The old Vietnamese section of the city has houses made of adobe or brick. There are few private autos. If I saw 200 or 300, I saw a lot. Most of the cars are French Peugeots, but the Chinese Embassy, so the story goes, has a Plymouth, a Ford and a Chevy because they refuse to buy from the Russian 'imperialists'."

Newest and Best: "In the street, the trucks are mostly Soviet, but machines in the factories are all from China and the Chinese built the newly completed 'March 18th Textile Factory of Hanoi' which I visited. The North Vietnamese probably took us to see it because it is their newest and best. Three-quarters of their production is still handicraft; only about a quarter is done by modern industrial methods.

"So far, Hanoi has been spared the bombing. But it is a city waiting to be attacked. Sidewalks are being torn up and there are bomb shelters all over. They're built with dirt walls and stove pipes coming out of the back. Where they don't have shelters they have foxholes or trenches. I would wake up at 5:30 a.m. and hear the young militia groups coming back from the country. They would study models of U.S. aircraft and aim at simulated targets."

Other recent travelers—French and Japanese journalists and an occasional European businessman—confirm Koch's account of Hanoi's state of readiness. Perhaps 50,000 children and old people have been evacuated from Hanoi, they say. On the rim of town, Russian-built guns point their gray muzzles toward the sky, waiting, and everywhere loudspeakers blare out the latest official accounts on the number of U.S. planes knocked down (over 600, Hanoi claims; 99 says the U.S.). UNITY, UNITY, GREATER UNITY, SUCCESS, SUCCESS, GREATER SUCCESS, the favorite motto of President Ho Chi Minh, is splashed everywhere. EVERYONE WORK AS TWO, demand the street banners. Hanoi is a Spartan city, possibly the grimmest capital in the Communist world, but in one respect, at least, the authorities have relaxed their grip. Kissing in public is no longer frowned upon, and young Vietnamese lovers once again sit holding hands on the wooden benches facing the romantic Petit Lac.

Associated Press

Ho Chi Minh: Losing his grip?

Everything outside the capital is called "the front," and not many miles south of Hanoi, where the October rice crop is beginning to ripen in the rain-soaked Red River Delta, the impact of the U.S. air war is strikingly apparent. Super Sabres and Phantoms have cratered mile after mile of roads with their bombs. They have smashed the single-track railway and crippled its engines. The city of Thanh Hoa, with its star-shaped citadel, has been bombed nearly every week and its rail yards and power plant almost totally devastated.

The big oil depot of the industrial city of Nam Dinh (North Vietnam's third largest) is no more after eight successive air attacks, and a nearby pagoda, hospital and school were severely damaged. Still farther south, the four coastal provinces just north of the demarcation line with South Vietnam have been punished badly. The city of Vinh, capital of Ho Chi Minh's native province of Nghe An, has been almost leveled. Highway 1, hugging the eastern coast, is now so badly battered that the local peasants call it the "Road of Bygone Days."

Brick by Brick: To escape the devastation from the sky, thousands of Vietnamese have moved their homes, mud brick by mud brick, away from likely targets. Factories not yet hit by the bombers are taken apart and their equipment scattered in villages where workers try to resume production. To protect small bridges, young trees growing on either side of the road are lashed over them during the daylight hours. Cars and buses traveling in the daytime have branches on their roofs as camouflage and their drivers keep their car radios tuned in for air-raid signals.

With the railroads destroyed, special transportation companies have been organized to keep military supplies and industrial products moving. At night, ammunition trucks push along the battered roads with their headlights turned off. And as they did years ago during the Indochina War, the North Vietnamese are increasingly turning to nonautomotive transport. In the province of Phu Tho, north of Hanoi, a team of 1,000 men on bicycles carried 100 tons of rock salt to the countryside on a single trip. And in nearby Viet Tri, 36 oxcart teams move industrial goods from one plant to another.

Rebuilding also goes on at a feverish pace. As soon as an all-clear is sounded, road workers and draft laborers scramble into action, filling the craters, repairing bridges, patching up ferries. (In one area, working with hand tools by the light of hurricane lamps, 3,000 peasants put a bridge back in service in a few hours.) When bombs fail to explode then it is up to the Youth Shock Brigade

Rec Versace, Humbert R
Rec Roraback, Kenneth
VIETNAM
Soc 2 VIETNAM
I+S 7-05 VIETNAM