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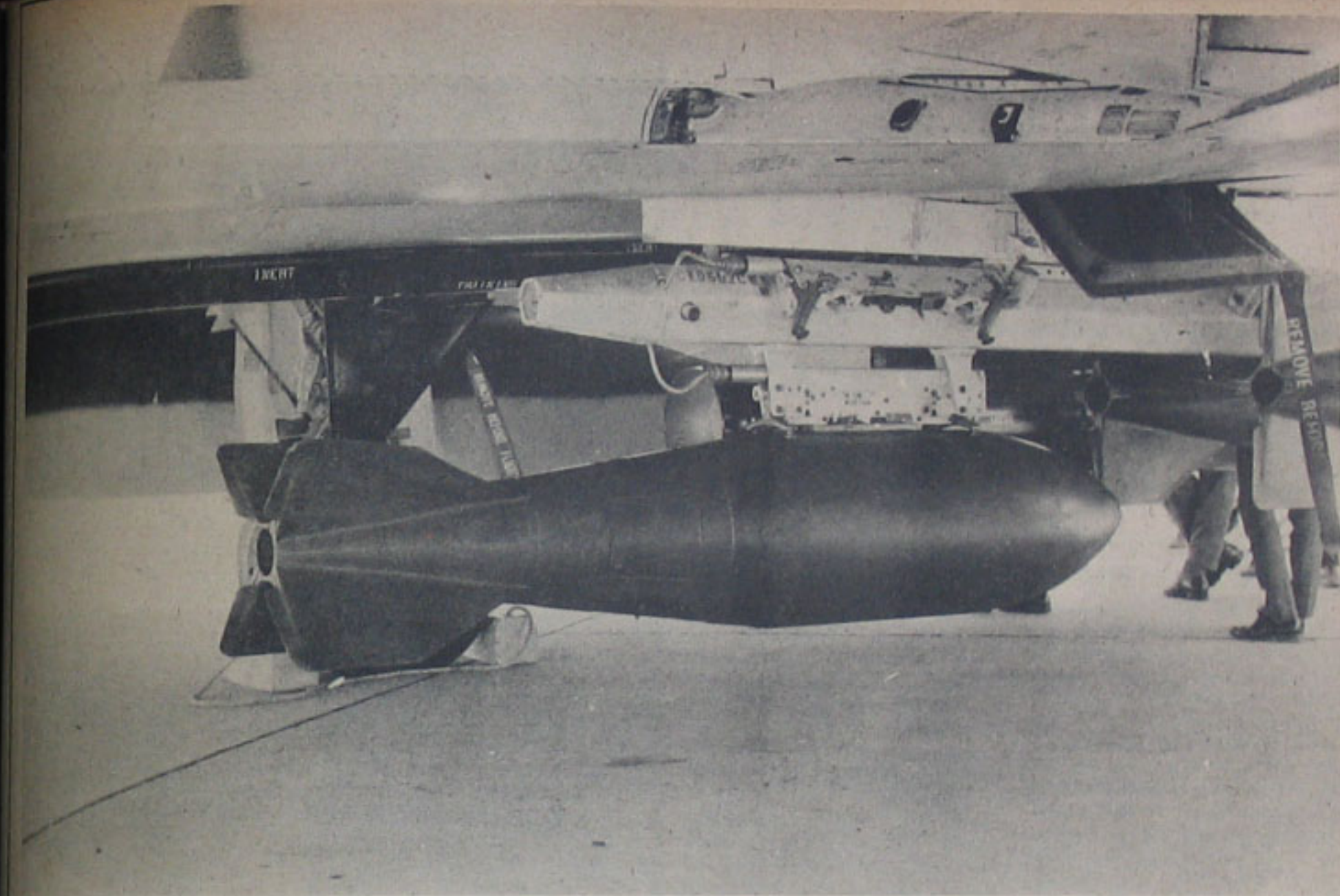
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HO CHI MINH TRAIL

TWELVE HOURS ON THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL

By John Boyd-Weibel



THE trucks roar along Highway 19 in North Vietnam past Dien Bien Phu, heading for Laos.

The driver of the big, 10 wheeled truck shifts gears and nudges his relief man sitting up front in the cab next to him.

Dien Bien Phu.

In the words of Bernard Fall, French author-expert who wrote "Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu," "At 0153 local time, on May 8, 1954, the last guns fell silent at Dien Bien Phu after a desperate bayonet charge of the Algerian and Foreign Legion garrison of strongpoint 'Isabelle' had been smothered by the sheer numbers of the victorious Viet Minh, and the war that had lasted eight years was almost over."

Less than three months after their stunning defeat here at Dien Bien Phu by the brilliant strategist Vo Nguyen Giap, the French surrendered to the Vietnamese and the First Indochina war ended.

In the back of the truck, three soldiers of the NVA 312th division hitching a ride to Laos share a cigarette and stare out at the familiar mountains.

It is still daylight, late in the afternoon, with 30 kilometers to go

before they reach Phong Saly and the Laotian border.

The 15 truck convoy is not searching the sky for planes. Since the American bombing halt over North Vietnam in 1968 the trip along the North Vietnamese section of Highway 19 is almost pleasant. But the Americans might start again any day.

No one wants to think about the night ahead. The trucks will enter Laos and the bombs will start to drop.

The driver of the lead truck sticks his head out the window. The evening breeze cools his face.

The same evening, 200 kilometers southeast of Dien Bien Phu, another convoy is approaching the Laotian border.

40 trucks, loaded with rockets, grenades, and thousands of rounds of 50 caliber ammunition, grind through the village of Mouang Sen on their way to Xieng Khouang province in Laos.

The ammunition is destined for the Plain des Jarres where a combined Pathet Lao-North Vietnamese army is bent on revenging their defeat at the hands of General Vang Pao's CIA supported and directed Armee Clandestine.

Three months earlier the Armee

Clandestine with close air support from Royal Laotian and United States Air Force bombers drove them off the Plain.

Now they're going to take it back.

The two convoys, one at Dien Bien Phu, the other at Mouang Sen, cross the unmarked border into Northern Laos as the sun sinks in the west.

Even further south, at the Mua Gia pass, defended with radar-controlled 57mm anti-aircraft guns, hundreds of Chinese and Russian built trucks are snaking along Highways 111 and 112 towards Tchepone.

Before they start the run through southern Laos down to Cambodia and South Vietnam they check equipment.

Each truck carries, besides supplies, a complete set of tools for the trip: axes for felling trees, wrenches for fixing flats, and shovels for filling in bomb craters.

A night on the Ho Chi Minh Trail begins.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail is no longer a "trail." "Trail" implies a muddy footpath wandering through the Laotian jungle. Today it's a complete highway system.

30 years ago, during World War II, it was a trail. Nothing but animal tracks winding along the Annamite Mountain chain that

divides the two Vietnams from Laos and Cambodia.

By 1954 sections of the mountain trail had become somewhat sophisticated. In the war with the French the Viet Minh had to rely on supplying their troops in the mountains by road. The French relied on air-drops for supplies.

At Dien Bien Phu the Vietnamese were able to supply four Viet Minh divisions by truck. The French High Command didn't believe the Viet Minh could build the roads needed to supply such a siege.

They were wrong. They greatly underestimated the determination of their enemy.

Between the defeat of the French and the coming of the Americans the Ho Chi Minh Trail was little improved.

Elections leading to the reunification of both Vietnams were scheduled for 1956. The North Vietnamese fully expected to win. There would be no need for a Ho Chi Minh Trail because there would be no war. They would control a united Vietnam.

Election Day never came. And instead of one Vietnam there remained two Vietnams, mutually hostile regimes.

In the South Ngo Dinh Diem took

control, backed by an alarmed United States whose Secretary of States John Foster Dulles, chief architect of American foreign policy during the Eisenhower years, had nightmares of "falling dominoes."

A civil war turned into an international showdown between the "Free World" and International Communism.

The Second Indochina War began.

By 1960 the North Vietnamese realized that the United States, even under newly-elected President Kennedy, was going to prevent the unification of Vietnam -- with military force if necessary.

South Vietnam, with American aid and "advisers," turned to the job of crushing the Viet Cong, southerners sympathetic to the North.

Diem closed the border to stop North Vietnamese supplies from reaching the rebels.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail became the key to victory, the all important supply line to Viet Cong troops fighting the Diem regime deep in the Mekong delta.

The North Vietnamese broadened the Ho Chi Minh Trail, improved the existing roads, widened them to 25-30 feet, surfaced them with something more permanent than mud and gravel to take the weight of heavy trucks and jeeps.

The United States, with intelligence reports from Green Beret forces roaming the trail area, watched the transformation of the Ho Chi Minh Trail into a highway.

Meanwhile, covering their flank in the north, the North Vietnamese improved the old French colonial road system linking North Vietnam and northern Laos.

Major improvements were made on Route Coloniale 7. A reminder of the days when Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam were one unified territory of French Indochina, Highway 7 runs from the city of Vinh on the coast of North Vietnam, crosses the mountains into the Laotian province of Xiang Khouang, passes through the town of Phong Savan, and links up with Laotian Route 13 below the ancient capital of Luang Prabang.

The road system on the Plain des Jarres, a major battlefield in central Laos, comprising Routes 4, 5, and 6, were improved too.

By 1962 the unfortunate nation of Laos had become a pawn of the bigger Vietnam war.

It was split into three warring factions -- the rightists, backed by

the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency; the neutralists, backed by the U.S. Department of State; and the leftists, supported by North Vietnam.

The Pathet Lao, led by Prince Souphanouvong, continued to control the two northern Laotian provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua.

On paper, both the United States and the North Vietnamese agreed to stay out of a neutral Laos.

Neither one did.

The North Vietnamese continued to use the Ho Chi Minh Trail to supply the Viet Cong rebels in South Vietnam and the Pathet Lao troops of Prince Souphanouvong.

Because the North Vietnamese continued to deny they were using the Trail the Americans denied they were bombing it.

However, in return for massive military and financial aid to Laos the Vientiane government had permitted the United States to bomb the Trail.

Shortly after the Geneva Agreement of 1962 was signed the United States began "armed reconnaissance" missions over the Ho Chi Minh Trail -- a euphemism for "bombing strikes."

In 1964, after the "Gulf of Tonkin" incident, the United States started bombing North Vietnam.

The highway system in North Vietnam, which runs along coastal lowland rice fields, was an easy target for American jets.

Out in the open, truck convoys heading for South Vietnam were an easy mark. There was no place to hide.

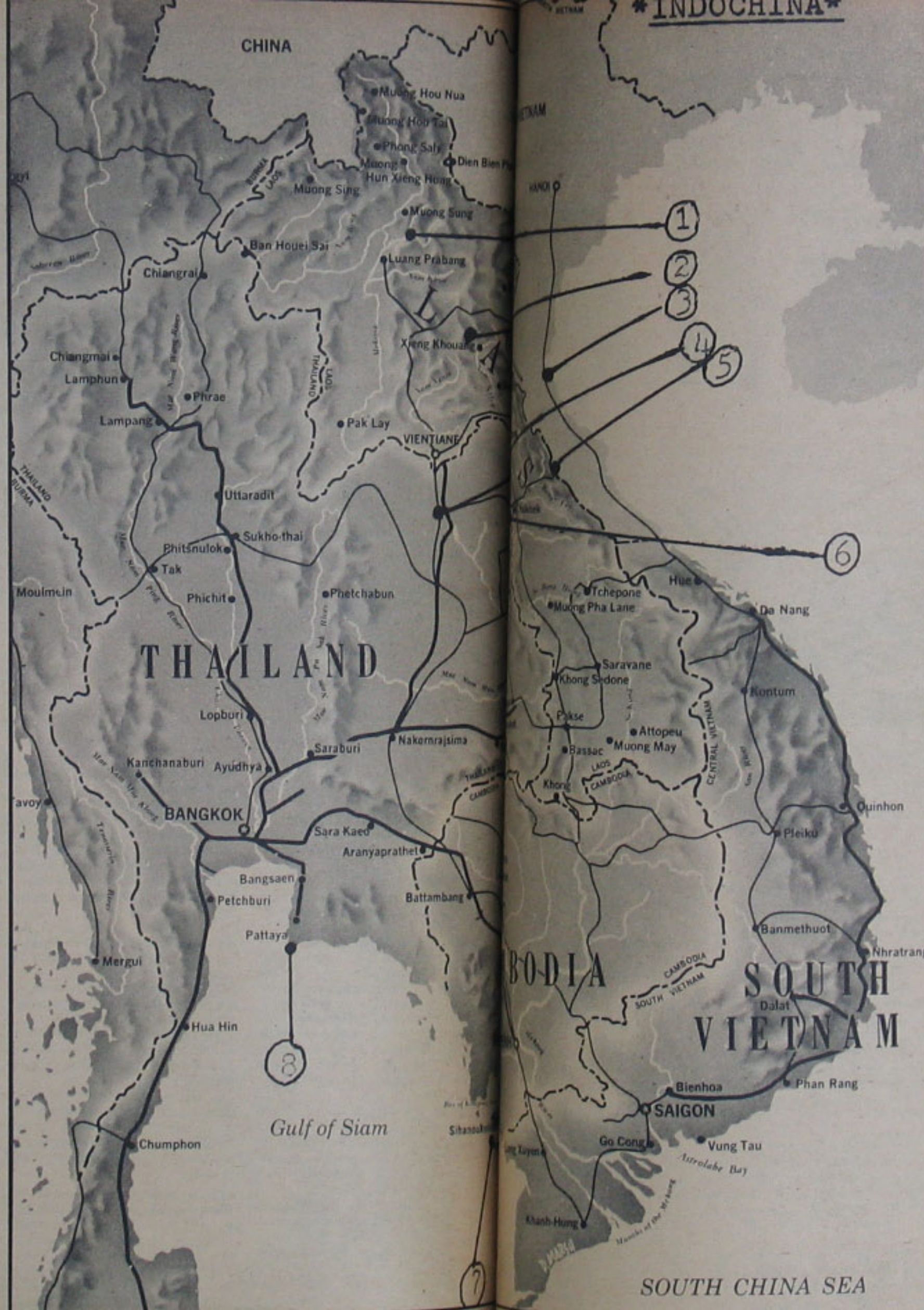
But the Ho Chi Minh Trail, winding through forested mountains under a dense cover of jungle offered the Vietnamese a camouflaged route where trucks and soldiers are hard to see, easy to hide, and even harder to hit.

In one of the most determined and remarkable efforts of the Vietnam war, the Ho Chi Minh Trail came from nothing but footpaths and trails to a complete highway network in four years.

From 1964 - 1968 the Vietnamese built roads at the rate of 1 mile a day -- under heavy American bombing.

As the Ho Chi Minh Trail spread west through Northern Laos and south down the spine of the Annamite Chain, so did the North Vietnamese troops.

In northern Laos, despite American air strikes, the Vietnamese spent three years slowly, methodically



cally pushing Highway 19 through the mountains and down the Nam Ou river towards the town of Nam Bac, 60 kilometers north of Luang Prabang.

Nam Bac, the northernmost post of the Royal Laotian Army in 1968, was defended by 5,000 troops, equipped with two batteries of 105 mm howitzers, and supplied by air by American C-123 and C-130 cargo planes.

Using highway 19, the Vietnamese laid siege to Nam Bac the same way they did Dien Bien Phu 14 years before.

In the early months of 1968 the Vietnamese had a stranglehold on the base and took it with the first wave of attackers.

Nam Bac fell, the worst defeat in Royal Laotian history. The 5000 defenders fled into the jungle. Two months later stragglers were still showing up at various government outposts.

The fleeing Laotian troops left behind all their American radio equipment, ammunition, weapons -- everything, including the howitzers.

The Vietnamese loaded all the material into trucks and shipped it back to the rear lines on the same highway 19.

Without the highway there would have been no siege, but negligence on the part of the Laotian officers in charge of Nam Bac insured the disaster.

At the time of the attack, according to most reports, there was only one officer on duty at Nam Bac -- a second lieutenant. The rest of the officers were in Luang Prabang drinking and partying when the garrison fell.

In true Laotian fashion, they were later promoted instead of court-martialed and shot.

While they constructed highway 19 in northern Laos, the North Vietnamese didn't neglect the southern half of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The major roadbuilding effort went on in the south.

Highways 111 and 112, which come out of North Vietnam at the Mua Gia pass, were changed from mud and gravel to laterite. These two sections of the Trail feed into the south-central Laotian town of Tchepone, which once boasted the longest single span bridge in Laos -- 350 feet long, made of concrete and steel -- before it was destroyed by bombs.

At Tchepone they are joined by routes 123 and 116; then branch out again into a secondary net of roads leading into South Vietnam.

At the time of the Tet offensive in 1968 the whole southern section of the Trail has been expanded and improved.

Highway 96, which runs to the Cambodian border, was broadened out and the North Vietnamese built several additional routes -- 23, 23A and 112A to handle the growing truck traffic. All of these roads ran south, linking up with highway 110.

At its peak, the Ho Chi Minh Trail was supplying an estimated 400,000 troops.

Even alternate bypasses were constructed. As soon as the USAF planes blew up one section of the Trail the trucks switched to alternate bypasses while labor battalions worked around the clock to fill the holes. The next day bombers would hit the alternate bypass. By then the first road was repaired.

When President Johnson halted the bombing over North Vietnam in 1968 the number of strikes on the southern section of the Trail jumped from 40-50 strikes a day to 200, 300, 400.

The North Vietnamese shifted their 37mm and 57mm anti-aircraft batteries to Laos and doubled the flak. But no "Sam" missiles were brought in.

The war raged over the Ho Chi Minh Trail, up and down the length of Laos. The United States spent a billion and a half dollars on the air strikes against the Trail in 1969.

For every truck they destroyed on the Ho Chi Minh Trail it cost them around \$100,000.

Parts of this enormous cost is due to the use of the \$8,000,000 eight engine B-52 bomber, which makes daytime raids on the Trail.

Like the Phantom F4, it is designed for a nuclear war. Though it can carry 30-40 tons of bombs per sortie each flight costs \$50,000 dollars -- not including the cost of bombs.

In May 1966 the Strategic Air Command moved into Laos with the B-52. Their first target was the Mua Gia pass. One dose of the B-52, according to SAC generals, would obliterate the Trail and stop the trucks.

That was four years ago.

At one point, they were running thirty to fifty B-52 strikes a day against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They saturated the jungle with bombs, knocked down millions of coconuts and killed hundreds of monkeys.

They didn't stop the trucks.

Towards the end of 1967, the Americans tried using defoliant chemicals against the canopy of jungle that hid the trail and the trucks.

That didn't work either. The jungle was too thick; it grew back faster than they could destroy it.

Pham Dong -- just one of 4,000 drivers who regularly run the Ho Chi Minh Trail -- peers into the night, his eye on the truck just ahead of him.

Their convoy moves along highway 111, lights off. In the sky a quarter-moon throws a dim light on the road. It is rough and bumpy. Thick jungle runs up to the road on either side. The top of the road is camouflaged with a trellis of vines and leaves but uncovered patches remain.

In the back of his truck is a load of medicine destined for soldiers fighting the Americans near Pleiku, South Vietnam. The convoy is moving along at 20 mph but he is still worried about the glass in the back of the truck.

During the day a labor battalion has relaid sections of the road hit by bombs the night before. The holes have been filled with dirt and gravel then "corderouyed" -- surfaced with logs. During the operation reconnaissance jets flew overhead twice but each time the 150 man battalion simply picked up their tools and melted into the jungle. Still, the holes are a bad sign. The Americans might hit it again tonight.

The anti-aircraft defenses of Tchepone and Mua Gia are behind them now. They are on their own.

The three trucks right behind him also carry medicine, splints, soap, and doctor's supplies. The lead trucks are loaded with rice and food which they will offload in Cambodia. Other trucks, smaller and lighter, will take the rice the rest of the way. The empty trucks will then be loaded with wounded soldiers returning to North Vietnam or used weapons in need of repair.

The convoy passes a platoon of North Vietnamese soldiers, trail guards, eating supper on the edge of the road. Each soldier has built his own small fire to cook the food.

One big fire could possibly be picked up by the Americans using infra-red radar. But each small fire is hardly bigger than a match. Pham watches the lights disappear in his rear mirror.

As the trucks rumble on in the dark the North Vietnamese lieuten-

nant, a Red Thai who was born on the Trail, begins to brief the platoon.

They will be broken into two squads of 15 men apiece. Ten soldiers will remain behind to guard the gasoline dump--a sandbagged, camouflaged bunker off the side of the road loaded with petrol, oil, and lubricants.

The two squads will be looking for something important--an enemy special guerrilla unit (SGU) which was dropped into the area by helicopter yesterday.

The lieutenant knows that the SGU unit is in his area. He also knows that they will be carrying either mines to blow up trucks or a "counter", a little black box with buttons, hooked up to a radio.

The first squad begins to sweep the road for mines. The second moves into the jungle to find the SGU--and the little black box.

Three miles down the Trail, sitting on a small hill above the road, the three man guerrilla team has just finished setting up the radio

transmitter. The leader, a Black Thai tribesman hired by the CIA, cradles the foot long box in his lap and orders the other two into flanking positions. Each button on the box has a picture on it--a truck, a jeep, a bicycle, a soldier.

The night is chilly. Soon Pham Dong's convoy appears.

As the North Vietnamese close in on him, the man with the box begins to count the trucks. 1-2-3-4.

All along the 250 miles of the Ho Chi Minh Trail other SGU teams are counting trucks tonight too. 1-2-3-4...

Through SGU reports the Americans know that the North Vietnamese are sending 10,000 - 12,000 trucks a month down the Trail in the dry season. But it's easier to count them than destroy them.

Night has also come to Thailand, from whence 80% of the raids against the Ho Chi Minh Trail come.

Up in the Northeast, at Nakhon Phanom, American propeller driven

T-28's and A-26's, loaded with 250 and 500 lb. bombs, take off into the night.

In Udon, a flight on Phantom F4's are also being armed for night strikes against the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Four million dollars of the most sophisticated technology brains can create and money can buy, the F4 is still not a valuable as an A-26 for striking the Trail. It's too sophisticated, too fast, too delicate.

It was built to fly 1500 mph and carries the most advanced bombing and navigational radars in the world but like most other technological breakthroughs it has had limited success in Laos.

Like the B-52 it was designed for another kind of war than a guerrilla war; another kind of country than mountainous, monsoonswept Laos; and another job than finding and hitting trucks and soldiers hiding in the jungle.

To locate and destroy the unending stream of trucks and soldiers flowing down the Ho Chi Minh Trail each night the U.S. is spending billions of dollars trying to adapt a variety of ultra-sophisticated radar and photo reconnaissance devices--infra-red, forward-looking, side-looking--to the Laotian war.

But in the end the moonsoon rain hides the target, the jungle heat distorts the results on the film, and the humidity and dust of Southeast Asia eats away at the delicate, precision parts of the sophisticated equipment.

Soon they reach the point where it's not worth the effort to maintain them or the cost to run them for the results received.

Even the bombs are expensive. Even 500, 750 lb. bomb costs about \$1,000 after figuring in the cost of transportation, etc.

As one American officer in Thailand said, "A guerrilla war is a matter of lasting longer, and making the enemy expend at a faster rate than you expend. And to be able to continually come back, and although you could say that the United States has unlimited resources, it's fairly well proven that we don't. And they know that. Pretty soon the dollars are going to mount."

He stopped, then said, "Even if the U.S. had unlimited physical resources, which it doesn't, it still doesn't have unlimited political resources."

According to Bernard Fall, an expert on Indochina, that was precisely the greatest contribution to the art of revolutionary war discovered, and practiced with consummate skill, by General Giap of North Vietnam--his estimate of the political and psychological shortcomings of a democratic system when faced with an inconclusive military operation.

The American failure to stop the trucks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail is perhaps the single, most important reason why the Vietnam war for America is one of those "inconclusive military operations."

Unless the American can choke off the Ho Chi Minh Trail they can never end the war in Vietnam by military victory.

The American invasion of Cambodia in May cut off the sea supply route to the Viet Cong which once passed through Kompong Som harbor, south of Phnom Penh.

Now the Ho Chi Minh Trail is more important than ever.

But time is on the side of the Vietnamese.

Pham looks at his watch. It's almost midnight. In another hour he can turn the wheel over to Chu who is asleep beside him, head leaning against the door.

He is tired of dodging holes and his eyes are strained from trying to see in the dark.

Suddenly, a brilliant white flare bursts above the convoy, lighting up the night. The trucks switch on their lights and the lead truck roars out.

In the back seat of an OIE 3,000 feet above running trucks, an American watches the convoy spread out along the road through a Starlight scope.

The dim light of the moon is magnified by the scope so that the observer sees night like day. The C-130 flareship moves out of the way while the pilot of the OIE contacts the Airborne Control Command Center at 30,000 feet.

Below him are jets at 20,000 feet, props at 12,000 feet. Rescue helicopters at 5,000 feet are ready to pick up any pilots shot down.

There's around 100,000,000 dollars worth of airplanes within striking distance of Pham's convoy.

Control directs 6 T-28's and 2 A1E's to move over the convoy of trucks.

The brilliant white parachute flare is 8,000 feet over the trucks now, floating down towards the road.

Chu is wide awake now, clutching the seat. Before the attack all the trucks drove with their lights off but now it doesn't matter. They've been spotted. Now it is a matter of moving as fast as you can because you'll be that much harder to hit. The lights help you see the big holes, to swerve around them.

Pham slams the truck into high gear and stomps on the throttle. Off to the right of the truck there is a flash of light and an explosion rips the jungle apart. A T-28 exits from the light of the flare and vanishes into the darkness.

Suddenly, two A1E's appear in the harsh light heading straight down the line of trucks. Through the windshield Pham watches them as they drop to 1000 feet and release their bombs.

The truck behind Pham explodes with a roar and crashes into a tree, flames licking out the doors.

The concussion shatters the glass in the back of Pham's truck and splinters of glass fly through the air. He clings to the wheel, fighting to keep the careening truck under control as shrapnel rips through the gas tank and a second later the truck is a giant ball of fire.

Pham and Chu were unlucky. Of the 10,000 - 12,000 trucks a month that move down the Ho Chi Minh trail during the dry season, only 1 in 10 is destroyed.

60 miles beyond the blackened hulk of Pham's truck, the rest of the convoy is hidden in a camouflaged truck park. The drivers are asleep--till night falls again on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Already, a labor battalion is sweating in the morning sun, filling in the holes.

