

MEMORANDUM

eTS-HK-D26063

DIA, USAF
review
completed.

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger

SUBJECT: Air Activity in Southeast Asia

OSD and JCS reviews
completed

Several months ago, you asked for an assessment of the effectiveness of our interdiction campaign in Laos.

ON-FILE NSC RELEASE
INSTRUCTIONS APPLYOur Bombing Campaign in South Laos

Since its inception in 1964, the principal focus of our bombing campaign in South Laos has been on destroying supplies available for shipment to South Vietnam.

To do this we attack moving trucks, truck parks, and storage sites with half or more of our average of 7,500 sorties monthly. The remainder of our effort is aimed at reducing the capacity of the Laotian road-net by attacking the roads themselves and the crews that attempt to repair them.

The strengths and weaknesses of the U.S. interdiction effort in Laos, particularly against moving trucks, largely result from the operational characteristics of our aircraft:

-- Target Acquisition. Our tactical aircraft, except for the gunships, are unable to locate their own targets. Instead, targets are located by FACs (aided by the sensor system) which then illuminate or mark the area with flares and lead the fighter pilot to the target. The noise, delay, and illumination involved in locating a target give the enemy warning of attack and time to take countermeasures.

-- Bombing Accuracy. Our tactical aircraft generally bomb from at least 2,000 feet during the night and higher during daytime. With regular ordnance, the expected error during daytime when most bombing is done is about 300 feet for a slow-moving plane (A-1) and 500 feet for a fast-moving aircraft (F-4). During night-

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time when there is bad weather the expected errors for both aircraft types are 1000 feet or more. These bombing errors are very large given the target size presented by a moving truck or the small storage dumps typical of Laos.

-- Bomb Lethality. Our standard 500-pound bomb has a lethal area of about 75 square feet against a truck. With this lethal area and the average nighttime bombing accuracy, it usually takes 10 500-pound bombs -- two full loads of a slow-moving A-1 -- to ensure the destruction of a single truck. For the fast moving F-4, four sorties and up to twenty 500-pound bombs are required to accomplish this same result.

The enemy knows these characteristics of the U.S. aircraft and the tactics used in our bombing effort. He has put great effort and ingenuity into countermeasures that reduce the effectiveness of our bombing:

-- Weather. The enemy operates almost entirely at night or in bad weather when U.S. aircraft are unable to acquire targets visually without warning the enemy and when bombing accuracies are greatly reduced.

-- Dispersal. The enemy has dispersed his truck convoys and storage areas so as to reduce target size. Convoyed trucks are often spaced about 200 yards apart so that no more than one can be destroyed by a single aircraft. Small storage areas containing five to ten tons of supplies are sprinkled throughout the countryside.

-- Bomb Countermeasures. The enemy has learned to locate and disarm the mines and delayed-fuse bombs we use. While some delay and inconvenience is caused, the enemy does not suffer substantial losses.

-- Road Repair. The enemy has scattered road repair crews and materials along all the principal routes through Laos. While we forestall some repairs by the use of anti-personnel mines and delayed-fuse bombs, the enemy has been able to repair any damage to its roads in less than two days with only a few hours usually required.

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Because of these effective enemy countermeasures and our technical limitations, the air interdiction effort has always been relatively inefficient though not without effect.

Truck Destruction

Because of these difficulties, U.S. pilots in Laos report that only one out of every five enemy trucks sighted in Laos is destroyed even though they report destroying more than 5,000 trucks per year in 1968 and 1969 and more than 5,000 in the current dry season.

While these pilot reports represent the best information available, they may seriously overstate our actual destruction of trucks for the following reasons:

-- Pilot Error. Rewarded on the basis of reported destruction, U.S. pilots have an obvious incentive to inflate the damage reported. While the pilots' reports can be checked against the reports of FACs, there is little doubt that both probably seriously overstate the damage suffered by the enemy.

-- Other Evidence. Post-strike photography has never revealed the large numbers of disabled trucks in Laos expected from pilot reports. Our best intelligence is that the enemy's total inventory of trucks in Laos is substantially less than the number reported destroyed in some periods as short as a month.

For these reasons, I believe it is likely that our estimates of enemy truck losses are probably substantially overstated.

Secondary Fires and Explosions

Besides attacking moving trucks, our bombing effort also hits enemy storage areas and truck parks. During the current dry season, our pilots have reported about 20,000 secondary fires and explosions compared to 13,000 in the same period last year. In general, these secondary fires account for about two-thirds of the total supplies that the enemy has lost through our air

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campaign.

However, there is no reliable means of checking these reported results or determining their significance in terms of enemy personnel and supply losses. We assign an estimate of the supply tonnage lost in each secondary explosion but these estimates represent little more than arbitrary assumptions.

Enemy Supply Flows

Based on the uncertainties of the reported destruction, the intelligence community has been at odds over the extent to which the enemy has enough supplies available to meet his requirements in South Vietnam and maintain his stockpiles in Laos.

The two principal views are:

-- The Air Force and DIA officially accept the pilot's reports of trucks destroyed and secondary explosions at face value. They conclude, therefore, that the enemy has only maintained the flow of supplies into South Vietnam by depleting stockpiles previously built up in Laos.

-- The CIA believes that the actual supplies lost to the enemy are substantially less than reported by our pilots. They believe that the enemy loses about 25% of his supply flow in Laos and has more supplies available in Laos than he needs to both supply South Vietnam and build substantial stockpiles in Laos.

Thus, there is a basic disagreement about the enemy's supply situation in Laos. Our information on actual enemy supply flows from Laos shows that the enemy is able to vary his supply flows greatly, increasing them to levels far beyond his current requirements even during periods of intense bombing.

Despite this disagreement about the real results of interdiction, there are, however, numerous improvements in our present campaign that would achieve the same results at a decreased cost or increase our effectiveness at current expenditure levels. With DOD plans to reduce our overall air effort in Southeast Asia, it is critical that we develop as efficient an air effort in Laos as possible.

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In this regard, it is also very important to insure that our overall air effort in all operational areas - Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam - is strong enough to support our military and diplomatic strategy.

I have prepared a directive to the Vietnam Special Studies Group telling them to take a hard look at their problems over the next month. I have discussed this problem with Secretary Laird and he agrees with this approach.

RECOMMENDATION

That you approve a VSSG study of our FY 71 air effort in Southeast Asia.

Approve _____

Disapprove _____

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