

# Using 500 M.P.H. Jets Against Jungle-Guerrillas

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SAIGON.

American jet aircraft are being effectively used to block the Communist Viet Cong's thrust into the crucial third and final phase of the war.

"Nobody thought that 500-mile-an-hour jets could be used against guerrillas—until they were first tried," one American jet pilot explained. "But on our first strike, there was a thunder of secondary explosions from the target. We had hit a Viet Cong ammo depot in their jungled stronghold area."

Reliable military sources say the American jets have cut in half the reaction time of flying from base to an outpost or town under attack, compared to the slower prop-driven aircraft. The stability of the aircraft, and not its speed, is a major factor in determining the accuracy of the bombing raids; and these sources say that jets are more stable firing platforms than are slower prop-driven aircraft.

Since the jets are considered to fly too fast for spotting Viet Cong guerrilla targets, they are usually directed onto the target by slow-moving spotter aircraft, piloted by forward air controllers.

American jet aircraft were first used within South Viet Nam on Feb. 19th—when Vietnamese airplanes were grounded or diverted by the "false coup d'etat" which led to the dismissal of Lt. Gen. Nguyen Khanh as commander-in-chief of the Vietnamese armed forces. Since then, the most spectacular success of the jets has been—ironically—assisting Vietnamese ground forces by pounding Viet Cong units during the heat of battle.

## TURNED THE TIDE

These missions, called close tactical support, have turned the tide of nip-and-tuck battles in favor of the government; American generals, speaking in private, admit that the Communist offensive in the northern mountains was broken in February and March by the introduction of American jets into the war. The question now is how seriously low-hanging cloud covers during the rainy monsoon season will hamper the air support missions for Vietnamese ground forces—and perhaps for American combat troops.

The use of American jets to bomb Viet Cong hard-core base areas has been less visibly effective; the difficulty is in locating the areas that should be bombed. Thousands of tons of bombs have been dropped on these base areas, but only occasionally do ground forces push through the area to assess the results. Ground observers who swept through bits of the first area hit by B-52 Strategic Air Command jets from Guam, for example, were not impressed with the results.

Some American military officials believe the total number of Viet Cong casualties caused by airstrikes has jumped from 30 per cent to 50 per cent during recent months. Other military experts believe the American jet strikes within South Viet Nam have been much more important, in terms of increasing government morale, than have the air raids in North Viet Nam.

"The Vietnamese Army would have been finished long ago without American airpower," one Western military expert explained. "It's the American and Vietnamese aircraft coming to rescue the ground troops that keeps them going."

An example of a spectacularly successful close air

support mission occurred the fifth day the American jets were used within South Viet Nam. For the first time in the history of the war, Viet Cong Units, mostly newly infiltrated units from North Viet Nam, established a 30-mile front line along route 19, leading from the mountain plateau city of Pleiku eastward to the South China Sea. After a series of devastating ambushes, the Viet Cong had succeeded in totally encircling a Vietnamese ranger battalion and a smaller unit of government irregulars, which had set up a defensive perimeter along a half-mile-long corridor on the national highway.

The Saigon command ordered the American jets to salvage the situation. For one hour, eight American-pilot B-57 Canberras flew in a continuous "racetrack pattern" on the southern side of the road, blazing out sizzling suppressive fire "to keep the heads of the Viet Cong down." "Meanwhile, eight F-100 Super Sabres repeated the same mission on the northern side of the road. Down the middle of the road came B-22 unarmed "Huey" helicopters, supported by 14 rocket-laden helicopters, which successfully landed time and again to heli-lift out the encircled troops. Within an hour, more than 300 Vietnamese troops had been flown to safety.

"These troops would have been chewed up and destroyed during the French Indochina war," one high-ranking American ground adviser explained. "But the jets saved them. The troops were so happy to be extracted they were in tears; the primitive Montagnard natives, who had never seen jets before, were jumping up and down clapping their hands they were so excited."

In another case, a crack Vietnamese Marine battalion was encircled on three sides by Viet Cong regulars and were about to be over-run.

"The American jets swooped in so close that some of their bombs wounded five or six Vietnamese Marines," one reliable observer said. "But the Marines didn't care about the handful that were wounded—they thought this was real close tactical support which saved them from getting overrun."

A number of the close tactical missions by American jets are made at night; American pilots jokingly complain they are becoming so expert at night flying they can now land on runways without turning on their airplane lights.

"It's much safer to land without your lights on," one American jet pilot explained. "We know there are two battalions of Viet Cong that always fire at us as we make our approaches to the Saigon runway; by keeping your lights off you don't give them such a good target."

Many of the jet flights are also accompanied by "mother ships" which contain a lot of highly classified electronic equipment designed to spot the enemy and to make jet flights more effective against the enemy. None of the electronic gadgetry has been overwhelmingly successful, according to reliable sources. One of the electric devices, generally contained in the "mother ship" which directs accompanying jet fighters and bombers, operates on the infra-red principle which measures varying differences of temperatures. Hence, cooking fires and squad size units of men can be detected though they are visibly hidden under the jungle canopy.

"But the device doesn't tell us whether the people are a Viet Cong unit or some of the nomadic Montagnard tribes," one reliable source explained. "We still don't know whether we should bomb them or not."

The total number of American jets in South Viet Nam is classified, but their numbers are known to include the U. S. Air Force F-100 Series—F-100s, 101s, 102s, 104s and 105s—as well as the B-57 Canberras. Many of the B-57s which had been based in Viet Nam were destroyed or damaged at the Bien Hoa airbase, 18 miles north of Saigon, first during the Viet Cong mortar attack on Nov. 1 last year and later at a devastating accidental explosion on the base in mid-May. In addition to the American jets, Both the Vietnamese Air Force and the U. S. air commands operate a number of prop-driven Skyraider fighter-bombers.