

BOOK REVIEW:

Vietnam's final air campaign: Operation Linebacker I & II, May – December 1972

by Stephen Emerson

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Vietnam's Final Air Campaign describes a two-part air campaign conducted by the United States in North Vietnam in 1972 to bring the Vietnam War peace talks to a satisfactory conclusion.

The author, Stephen Emerson, has worked as an intelligence analyst covering political-military affairs in Africa and the Middle East. He has served as chair of security studies at the National Defence University's Africa Centre for Strategic Studies and as an associate professor at the United States Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. He holds a PhD in international relations/comparative politics from the University of Florida.

In 1972, America was faced with a massive anti-war movement that was tearing apart the fabric of American society. The war in Vietnam dragged on with a continuing high cost in lives and economic power. The Paris Peace Talks had stagnated. President Nixon was facing an election at the end of the year. To placate the American populace, Nixon had implemented a process requiring South Vietnamese forces to carry the ground war – known as Vietnamisation – while withdrawing United States forces from South Vietnam and extricating America from a war that was unpopular and appeared unwinnable.

Sensing Nixon's quandary, the North Vietnamese Politburo believed the time right to deliver a final blow and win the war. The Easter Offensive in March launched attacks along the length of South Vietnam aimed at overthrowing American and South Vietnamese forces while capturing territory and extending the reach and influence of the North Vietnamese Government. In the initial phases of the offensive, it looked like a winning punch. The Politburo was also seeking to improve its bargaining position for the peace talks.

The only tool available to the United States to effectively counter the offensive was air power. Stung by the offensive, which was launched while peace talks were in progress, Nixon retaliated with an air campaign against North Vietnam to bring the peace talks to a favourable conclusion and win America an honourable peace.

The United States employed air power to neutralise, and then destroy, the attacking North Vietnamese forces – but it would take several months. The campaign was codenamed Linebacker I and it targeted installations in and around Hanoi and its port of Haiphong, both areas defended by a strong fighter force and an intensive surface-to-air missile and anti-aircraft artillery capability.

Linebacker I was conducted primarily by United States Air Force tactical fighter and strike aircraft launched from bases in South Vietnam and Thailand; and by United States Navy aircraft launched from a carrier force on

station off the North Vietnamese coast. It was halted when a favourable outcome from the Paris peace talks looked like being achieved. The South Vietnamese Government, however, refused to accept the conditions of the peace agreement, so the bombing halt had to be reconsidered.

With failure at the peace table, but success at the United States presidential elections in November 1972, Nixon launched Linebacker II on 18 December with the express objective of forcing Hanoi to return to the negotiating table. Linebacker II was conducted primarily with B-52 strategic bombers. It was planned and led by professional airmen, unencumbered by the limitations imposed by the White House on the way Linebacker I was fought. Linebacker II lasted until December 30. It forced Hanoi reluctantly back to the negotiating table and a peace agreement was signed on 27 January 1973.

Linebacker II was decisive and had a devastating effect on Hanoi, Haiphong and the North Vietnamese military forces. The cost to the United States was 107 aircraft, including 15 B-52 strategic bombers, and the lives of 93 pilots and crew. The Vietnamese Peoples Air Force lost 68 fighter aircraft.

The blockade of Haiphong by United States Navy ships and air-delivered sea mines, along with the interdiction of the Chinese supply routes to Hanoi, not only reduced the ability of the North Vietnam to counter the attacks by American aircraft, it reduced its ability to supply its forces on the battlefields in South Vietnam.

Emerson provides context for the air campaign by describing the political landscape of the time clearly, and, with the advantage of hindsight, enables sense to be drawn from what was a challenging period – confused with antiwar movement proclamations and disorder, enemy propaganda and ambiguous reports flowing from the Paris peace talks.

The book provides a glossary of terminology, weapons, aircraft and military technology. It is well-illustrated with diagrams, maps, and an excellent collection of colour plates; and it has a bibliography and an index.

This well-researched, cogent and easy-to-read history of the air campaign includes excellent descriptions of fighter and bomber missions flown during Linebacker I and II that enable the reader to glimpse the complexity and lethality of fighter tactics and defensive counter-air defence measures. It is a most suitable book for the student of the application of air power. As an informative, interesting and a thoroughly engaging read, it is also suited to the general reader.

Bob Treloar