

Red Guns Zero in on Spectres

By KIM WILLENSON

SAIGON (UPI) — The downing of two AC130 "Spectre" gunships over Laos in the past two days is a serious setback for the U.S. Air Force campaign to stop Communist supplies flowing down the Ho Chi Minh Trail — and possibly for Vietnamization as well — military sources say.

Unless the Air Force can come up quickly with a way to defend the lumbering 350-mile-an-hour gunships from the surface-to-air missiles and the deadly 57mm ack-ack that shot down the two planes Wednesday and Thursday, the heart may be cut out of the interdiction program code-named "Igloo White." There aren't enough Spectres available to risk sustained losses.

The trouble is that the Spectres — and smaller AC119 "Stinger" companion gunships — have been operating in what Air Force sources like to call a "permissive environment" — military jargon meaning they weren't shot at very accurately.

Suddenly the trail environment has become much less "permissive." One AC130 was hit by a SAM fired from near Tchepone in south central Laos early Wednesday morning, and went down with 14 aboard.

That could have been a lucky shot. It also could have been caused by some modifications in the SAM2 to make it more effective against low and slow aircraft, military sources say.

A second Spectre was hit by 57mm fire well south of Tchepone late Thursday night. Its 13 crewmen parachuted and were rescued, but the \$7 million plane was lost.

Although the command says the AC130s still were flying "normal" missions as of Friday, a few more days like Wednesday and Thursday and it is dead certain they won't be — there just aren't that many available.

And if the Spectres have to quit attacking the trail, the threat of significant Communist action all over South Vietnam and Cambodia will be vastly increased.