

Thai Base Is Tense as Missiles Seek Raiding B-52's

NYTimes APR 19 1972

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Special to The New York Times

UTAPAO, Thailand, April 16 —At this huge B-52 base sprawling against the Gulf of Siam there is a new and evident tension among the bomber crews, who for the first time are coming under close fire from North Vietnamese surface-to-air missiles.

"Our guys had been flying these bombing runs like milk runs for years now," said a nonflying Air Force officer. "Now they're being shot at for the first time. They're reporting SAM's missing them by only 500 feet—and that's close."

B-52 Is Struck

Another officer added: "A lot of them are scared now. But they're not so scared that they're running and hiding. In fact, there's a new spirit, too. Guys are saying, 'We're finally really hitting them, so let's get up there and fly and get it done.'"

One B-52 was hit several days ago by missile fragments and had to make an emergency landing for repairs at Danang air base in South Vietnam. No one in the crew was injured

and the plane is back at this base 80 miles southeast of Bangkok. It was reported to be the first B-52 struck by enemy fire in the Vietnam war.

The Stratofortresses, which carry up to 30 tons of bombs, fly at about 30,000 feet; this is too high for antiaircraft fire but not for the Soviet-made SAM missiles.

There are two reasons why the missiles are now a threat. One is that the B-52's are flying deeper into North Vietnam into risky areas they had avoided before. The other is a heavy build-up in enemy missile sites in areas that had been relatively safe.

The B-52 crews do not talk openly about their new fears, but their tension is never far from the surface.

Some Are Bitter

"If we'd clobbered them back in 1965 instead of giving them time to build up their defenses, the war would have been over by now," said one airman over a beer at the Durango Bar, a few miles from the base.

"It's easy for civilians in Washington to take risks with military lives," said another bitterly.

None of the men wanted to be identified. They said they had been told not to talk to newsmen and that some of their acquaintances had been misquoted in the past.

Newsmen are generally barred from the five air bases in Thailand, which provide the bulk of the air support for allied operations in Indochina. American pilots also operate out of Danang, Okinawa and Guam.

Guam and the Utapao airfield here are the only two bases for the B-52 bombers. They have been flying out of Utapao since 1967.

Technically the bases in Thailand are operated by the Government, but this is little more than a polite fiction.

At Utapao for example, there are 7,000 Americans and only 2,000 Thais. The air activity is virtually all American.

One can stand for hours on the road that fringes the base—separated from the runway by only 200 yards and a cyclone fence—and watch nothing but the camouflaged B-52's and silvery KC-135's taking off and landing, with an occasional C-130 transport bringing in supplies.

The KC-135's, a fuel tanker adaptation of the Boeing 707, do the refueling of the F-4's and other fighter-bombers that fly out of three other bases in Thailand — Udorn, Ubon and Korat. They carry out the refueling either over Thailand or friendly neighboring territory and for that reason they are not camouflaged.

Air Traffic Heavy

It is difficult to tell how much the bombing has been stepped up since the enemy offensive in South Vietnam, but to the layman's eye, the traffic at the base seems extremely heavy.

In preparation for the anticipated offensive, extra B-52's were brought here and others were added on Guam later. More than 30 could be counted from the road outside the Utapao base.

According to American airmen here, there are plenty of planes but not enough crews, which explains the heavy schedules for the fliers.

The crews—all of them here on short tours of only two or three months—are flying for stretches of 11 days before they get a day off.