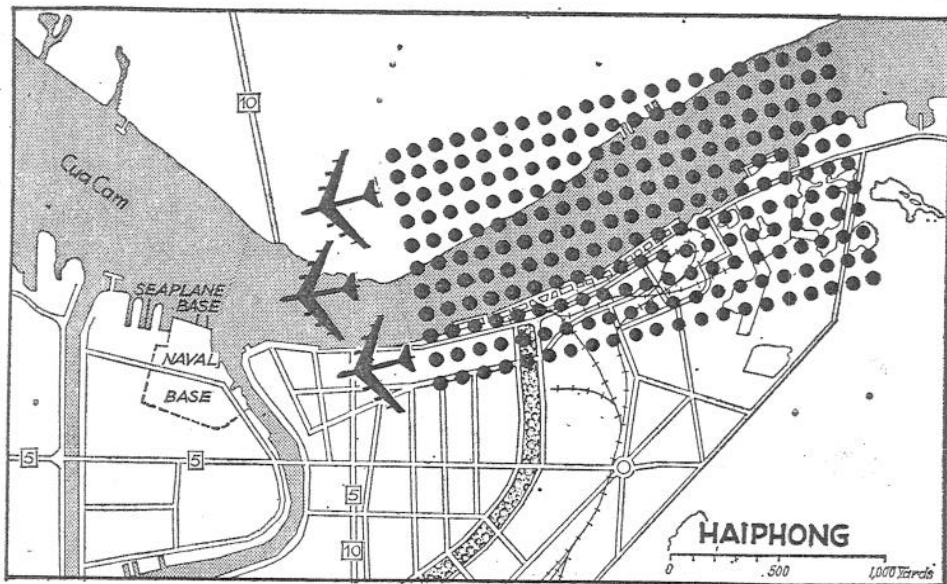


B-52 Relied Upon More Than Troops To Blunt Foe's Offensive in Vietnam



The New York Times/May 19, 1972

B-52's and diagram of bomb bursts are superimposed on map of Haiphong to indicate area covered by typical rectangular pattern of bombs dropped by three-plane mission. B-52 missions are usually flown by three planes. Bomb pattern is more than mile long.

By CRAIG R. WHITNEY

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, May 18 — Despite four years of Vietnamization, American and South Vietnamese military commanders here have relied less on the Government's ground troops to stem the current North Vietnamese offensive than on an instrument of massive bombing that only the Americans have — the B-52.

B-52's have been credited in recent weeks with helping to hold off determined enemy attacks not only on Anloc, where about 30 B-52 missions were flown on May 11 to repel a North Vietnamese push sixty miles north of Saigon, but in Kontum Province in the Highlands and near Hue as well — on all three fronts.

Last month, they flew on two raids near Haiphong harbor and near Thanhhoa in North Vietnam, the deepest inside the North they have ever gone.

A B-52 strike just this last Tuesday near Anloc killed 300 North Vietnamese soldiers, destroyed a tank, two artillery pieces and two antiaircraft guns, the United States command reported today.

B-52 in Unplanned Role

Well over half the enemy casualties reported since the offensive began at the end of March have been credited to American and South Vietnamese air power, and the B-52 has accounted for a major share of these, according to senior officers here.

The B-52 has been saved from obsolescence by a tactical assignment for which it was not designed.

It was built in the early nineteen-fifties as a strategic bomber, to fly at high altitudes over enemy air defense systems that were then primitive, and it was to be used as a nuclear bomber.

First used in South Vietnam in the tactical nonnuclear role on June 18, 1965, and in North Vietnam on April 12, 1966, the B-52's have been used as heavy-saturation bombing weapons in tactical as well as strategic roles. None has ever been reported shot down by North Vietnamese antiaircraft defenses, although at least two have been damaged by fragments from exploding surface-to-air missiles in the last month.

Between noon yesterday and noon today, according to the United States command, the

Air Force flew 24 B-52 missions in South Vietnam, on all three major fronts and against enemy positions in Chuongthien Province in the Mekong Delta.

This means that there were 50 to 75 of the eight-engine bombers flying in South Vietnam—a mission normally includes three planes, sometimes two and less frequently one. Each of the planes now carries 24 tons of bombs, conventional high-explosive 500-pounders and 750-pounders.

Smaller fighter bombers use those bombs, too, but each of the smaller planes can carry only six or eight bombs, and usually drops one at a time. The B-52 drops them all at once, in a rectangle-shaped pattern about half a mile long. When the B-52's fly in groups of three, a typical rectangle is said to be about one and quarter miles long and six-tenths of a mile wide.

The air crews and officers on the ground call these patterns "boxes," because when a ground commander requests a B-52 raid he plots it on his tactical map as a box, in roughly the same shape the bombs fall in.

Though the missions are flown at the request of Vietnamese ground commanders and their American advisers, all the B-52's flying to Southeast Asia are under the control of the Air Force's Strategic Air Command, not under that of Gen. Creighton W. Abrams or his subordinates here. No B-52's are based in South Vietnam. About 50 are based in Thailand. Others come from Guam.

Since the B-52's are large, slow-flying and unmaneuverable, they were never used over the most heavily defended parts of North Vietnam at the height of the sustained bombing campaign — called Rolling Thunder — in 1967 and 1968.

Since then, and especially this year, the North Vietnamese have dramatically increased the size and extent of their air defense system, particularly with the Soviet-built surface-to-air missiles. Thus it came as a surprise to many observers here when, on April 16, the United States Command announced that B-52's were among the planes that bombed Haiphong harbor that day.

B-52's were also used in later raids near Thanhhoa on April 24, but there have been no announced raids by the bombers over the North since then.

How could they get through? "We got to the point where we felt that the defensive sys-

tem that we could provide for the B-52's would negate the threat of the SAM's," a senior American officer said in a recent interview.

The B-52's use a complicated system involving radar guidance to bring themselves in on their targets. In the South, where they are being used every day, the on-board navigational equipment is augmented by land stations that are used as cross references to make the bomb patterns precise. In the North, that is not possible.

"The probability of error up there is a little higher, than using them down here," a senior commander conceded in discussing the bombing of the North. "But the photography from the strikes shows they did very well."

He described the targets in Haiphong as "all logistical in nature—oil storage areas, some transshipment points, railroad marshaling yards, all large targets and far away from populated areas."

The blast pressure from the B-52 raids, however, is enough to blow down flimsy houses hundreds of yards away from the B-52 targets.

"There are some targets that B-52's will do better with than tactical air," the officer continued, referring to fighter-bombers. "It would take a tremendous amount of tactical air to get the same results, and at greater risk to planes and pilots."

A senior officer said a few days ago, "You haven't seen the last of those raids up there."

But in the last few weeks, the B-52's have been more heavily used in the South, particularly in Kontum and near Anloc.

"We're using the B-52's now to prevent massing of troops," another senior officer said. "We try to break up the enemy's attacks before they can get started."

To be effective, of course, the B-52 strikes, however heavy, have to hit something. Most of the B-52 missions in Anloc, Kontum and in western Quang-tri and Thuathien Provinces north of Hue consist of dropping bombs on the jungle. Not always is there assurance that North Vietnamese troop concentrations are where the "boxes" are.

Only if there are no more determined enemy assaults will it become clear how well the B-52 will have succeeded in helping Saigon's beleaguered forces on the ground.