SR UP FRONT

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A B-52 Slows Noticeably When the Bomb Bays Open

BY RICHARD R. WILLIAMS

There is a sudden, awesome roar that seems to shake the ground. Then the giant, eerie-looking, swept-wing engine of war begins to roll ever so slowly down the runway. It is one of the seventy-five or so B-52 heavy bombers stationed at Anderson Air Force Base here on the island of Guam that are now regularly employed in the demolition of South Vietnam and, when the President gives the word, North Vietnam. The plane's huge wings, filled with jet fuel and draped with 500-pound bombs, flap ponderously at first and then more rapidly as the 220-ton bomber gathers speed.

The eight jet engines blast deafeningly as the aircraft passes the 4,000-foot marker on the runway. Then the 6,000-foot marker is crossed. Will this monster, with its huge, black tail standing as tall as a five-story building, ever get itself into the air? The B-52 thunders past the 8,000-foot marker, still hugging the earth. Finally, at the 10,000-foot mark, its wings flapping wildly, the enormous airplane sails almost gracefully into the air. It is headed for a target in South Vietnam with a pay load of forty-two 750-pound bombs in its belly and twenty-four 500-pound bombs clinging to its wings.

At the controls is a thirty-year-old Texan named Robert E. Gill. A lean six-footer, Captain Gill has crew-cut hair and intense eyes that dart nervously as he speaks. He has been a bomber pilot for only a year but is already an old hand at this business. He settles down in his seat, from which he will not stir for more than twelve hours.

Gill appears relieved; the initial pressure is off. "I'm not surprised we got off the ground, but sometimes I wonder if we're going to make it," he remarks. "This airplane is about seventeen or eighteen years old, and there're all sorts of crazy squeaks, groans, grunts, and vibrations that express her age."

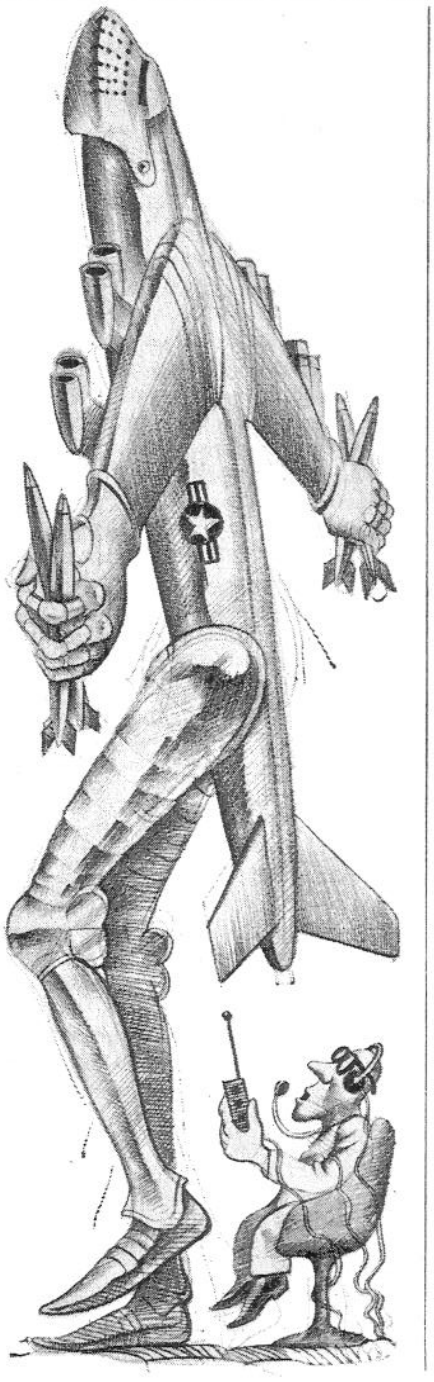
Gill is not exaggerating. The outside skin of his airplane is rippled almost like a washboard. "If *you* had the loads stuck in your belly and hanging from your arms that this old bird has, you would be marked with wrinkles, too," the pilot explains with a wry chuckle.

The feeling of relief among Gill and his four fellow crewmen is short-lived. It is time for the mid-air fueling operation. Fueling while in the air is necessary because these big bombers cannot take off efficiently with both a full load of bombs and a full load of fuel. Gill maneuvers his ship toward the swinging boom of an airborne KC-135 tanker.

As soon as the bomber separates from the tanker, Gill brings his plane into formation with two other B-52s, making up what is known as a "cell." Cells of various sizes, usually consisting of three or six B-52s, are composed and assigned to missions depending on the size of the target that has been selected for destruction.

This cell of bombers will not be over its target for another six hours. "I can't sleep on an airplane," Gill says. "There are just too damned many things to watch for and listen for." Throughout the flight Gill must keep a sharp eye on the turn-and-bank indicator, the air-speed gauge, and the altimeter as well as listen to and analyze weather reports from the navigator and other reports about the target and possible enemy activity from the radar operator.

Then, finally, after hours of tinkering with the controls of the aircraft, Gill hears the navigator sing out, "We are approaching assigned target area." Shortly, the navigator launches into a series of detailed instructions to guide the bomber directly over its target.



"Turn right ten degrees. Hold your present altitude and decrease air speed five knots."

"Roger."

"Radar navigator to pilot, hold her steady, Skipper."

"Okay."

Then the radar navigator presses a button to open the bomb-bay doors, and at that moment a computer takes charge of the mission. The crew feels a pronounced decrease in air speed when the bomb-bay doors open automatically but otherwise have no sensation of what is taking place. "There are no vibrations, no jumps or bounces of the airplane when the bombs leave," Gill explains. "It's not like in *12 O'Clock High,* when the old B-29s would jump up and down as the bombs left the plane. We can't even see into the bomb bays."

The B-52 carries its load of 750-pound bombs in a compartment sealed off from the cockpit. If the bomb bay *did* open into the cockpit, the crew would be sucked out of the plane as soon as the bomb-bay doors were opened, because the cabin is pressurized and the plane unloads its bombs from an altitude of 50,000 feet.

"Sometimes we see something below, and sometimes we don't," says Gill. "The only way we know the bombs are dropping is that the radar-nav tells us so. And he is told by an instrument. Sometimes, if I have the inclination to look, I might see some dropping off the left wing."

The cell of B-52s is flying in a tight formation as the bombs are released. The object, of course, is to shed them in a dense pattern. In a typical six-plane mission, for example, 150 tons of explosives are distributed over a one-and-a-half-square-mile rectangle. When the bombs explode, the blasts create a pressure exceeding three pounds per square inch throughout this entire area. And that is lethal. For comparison, the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima saturated six square miles—only four times the area covered by a B-52 bombing sortie—with three pounds per square inch of pressure.

The robotlike computer flying the aircraft during its bomb run signals with a light to the radar navigator that the pay load has been dropped, and the bay doors are automatically closed. Again suddenly, the crew feels the air speed pick up because the plane has become streamlined once more—and forty tons lighter.

"It's always a relief to know the mission is completed, and we're on our way back home," says Gill laconically. "But as far as emotions are concerned, frankly, I never have time to think. We never know what damage we have caused until maybe three or four days later. And even then we don't know if it's our crew that caused the damage. There are two other planes in the cell, and the report covers the entire mission, not any single airplane.

"Of course, we *hope* we hit something. After all, that's our job. We have put in more than twelve hours in the air, plus some tense moments on take-off and in refueling, and a couple of hours in briefings before the take-off. So, with that much time and effort put into something, you hope you did some good.

"But I don't get emotional or excited about it one way or the other," he continues dryly. "It's a job, one I have chosen for myself—and I work hard at it. I don't think of anything else. I don't think about the possibility of death. I don't think about the SAM missiles. I don't think about being captured. In fact, I don't even consider the possibility of being shot down.

"Five years ago I was a fighter pilot, flying against targets in North Vietnam. I was closer to the war then and, sure, I used to think. I used to think quite a bit. But my thoughts were about survival, staying alive, about doing my job.

"Do I miss my family? Hell, yes. I miss them more than I can describe to you. My son was born January fifth, and I left home on February twenty-first.

"Am I ever apprehensive? Sometimes, yes. But the only time I'm scared is on take-off. As I said before, it's an old bird we're flying. Sometimes I get the feeling that I can look back through the fuselage and see twenty thousand slaves pulling at the oars.

"Oh, she'll take off okay if you have enough runway. As long as the engines are roaring, she'll eventually climb into the air. But it's the 'enough runway' that worries me sometimes.

"And the night take-offs. Man, that's something else. It's like telling a ghost story. There are all kinds of sounds that are magnified. And ghostly colored lights inside and outside the airplane. A night take-off is like putting a black-painted fish bowl over your head.

"There's no real way of describing the take-off—my feelings, my thoughts, my emotions. We know that at the end of the 12,000-foot runway there are 650-foot cliffs that drop straight down into the Pacific.

"We know that either we're going to get off or we're not. It's that simple. There are only two things that can happen once we gain the ground speed where we can't stop this monster that's loaded with enough explosives to—well, enough, that's all, just enough. We either make it or we don't."

Two bombers have been lost at Anderson Air Force Base in the past three years when they failed to lift off the ground. There were no survivors from either crash. Five years ago two B-52s were lost when they collided in mid-air shortly after a refueling operation. There were no survivors that time either.

"On the return flight we are naturally a bit more relaxed," Gill goes on to say. "But there are still systems to monitor continuously. I'm not much of an eater on an airplane, but the crew has a chance to pop in the oven a TV dinner or a frozen blueberry pie that someone picked up at the base commissary.

"Even though the landing is always a critical stage of any flight, I have a great deal more confidence at that point than I have on take-off. For one thing, there are no deadly weapons hanging from my wings or nestled in my belly."

And what about after the mission is over? "We don't sit around the BOQ or the officers' club and rehash the missions or talk about the merits of the conflict," he says. "We don't talk shop. We usually don't have time, and we're usually too damned tired to talk about war." □

God Save the Queen—from the French Press

The popular French press has an altogether weird infatuation with Queen Bess of Great Britain. To drive home that point and perhaps shame his countrymen for their silliness as well, Jean Marcilly, the former editor-in-chief of *France Dimanche,* has made the following tabulation:

Since 1958 the French press has reported that the Queen's life has been threatened twenty-nine times. She's taken the pill eleven times and still wound up with ninety-two pregnancies and nine miscarriages. The poor thing has had 149 accidents, forty-three "unhappy nights," and twenty-seven nightmares, and on no fewer than thirty-two occasions has come close to a nervous breakdown. She's been "fed up" 112 times and has "outright abdicated" sixty-three times. She almost broke up with Prince Philip seventy-three times. She's been rude to Princess Grace of Monaco on six occasions and to the Queen of Persia on eleven. And she's ejected Lord Snowdon from court 151 times.

Considering all this, Americans will breathe a sigh of relief to learn that the French press takes almost no notice whatsoever of Richard M. Nixon. □