

# Thai Base for Pilots Who Bomb Vietnam Is

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Special to The New York Times

UTAPAO AIRFIELD, Thailand, Aug. 29—This is not just a base but a small American city, built for the more than 50 B-52 bombers that fly from it every day to drop 30 tons of bombs apiece on targets in North and South Vietnam.

Eight thousand American airmen here fly what amounts to a small air force of the eight-engine bombers and scores of KC-135 tankers to refuel them. But until today American authorities in Thailand have refused to allow news correspondents to visit the base because it is under Thai sovereignty.

The B-52's, which have a 185-foot wingspan—so long the tips of the wings droop—have been flying from the two-mile-long American-built runway at Utapao since 1967. Other American fighter-bombers, tankers, gunships, and spy planes have been using bases at Udon, Ubon, Nakhon Phanom and Korat since the late nineteen-sixties.

## 46,000 Troops in Thailand

This year, because of the North Vietnamese spring offensive, American planes are also flying from bases at Ta Khli and Nam Phong, and the American military presence in Thailand has grown to about 46,000, according to American officials, but today was the first time since the offensive began that correspondents have been able to visit any of them.

Most of the American air war in South Vietnam and all of it in North Vietnam is run

from the Thai bases and from aircraft carriers at sea; only one fighter-bomber base is left at Bienhoa in South Vietnam.

The information about the air war that reaches the American public, therefore, originates almost exclusively with the United States Government, which releases sketchy information about some but not all air strikes at the military headquarters in Saigon.

The visit today, made under the auspices of the Thai Government, permitted 40 journalists—including representatives of all the local newspapers and press services in Bangkok—to see a tightly controlled and limited part of the total American Air Force war effort here, at the bases of Ta khli and Utapao.

## Reason for Timing Unclear

Neither the representative of the American Government nor that of the Thai Government on the tour could say why the visit was being permitted now. The American said it was because the embassy had told the Thais it would be a good idea. The Thai said it was because his Government had persuaded the Americans it would be a good idea. For years before this, at any rate, both Governments seemed to be convinced it would be a bad idea.

At Utapao, the bigger of the two bases, the only visible Thai presence was that of the royal navy, which owns the base and flies a handful of small observation planes from it in between B-52 and KC-135 flights by the Americans.

The senior American officer,

Brig. Gen. Gleen Sullivan, said he could not reveal how many B-52's were here, but the tall, blacks tails of about 45 could be counted parked in revetments on both sides of the runway. There were too many KC-135's (the military version of the Boeing 707) to count—at least as many as the number of bombers.

## Tactics Described

General Sullivan, a burly man, described the tactics and techniques used by B-52 crews dropping their strings of 750 and 500-pound bombs in Vietnam as "not much different from dropping nuclear ordnance," which is what B-52's were designed to do.

One of the B-52 crews who come for four months at a time into Utapao and the other base from which bombing is conducted, Andersen Air Force Base in Guam, was produced for the English-speaking press meet.

The aircraft commander was Maj. Steve Levine of Brooklyn. He declined to give his exact address, as do many pilots who as their families at home may be harassed by antiwar activists.

Major Levine's day consists of about eight hours of work, and three and one half hours flying time. At the end of a 133 day tour of duty, the crew would normally go back to their home base, Westover Field in Massachusetts.

Major Levine was asked how he felt about charges that American pilots were bombing North Vietnam's system of dikes. "We know that we

haven't hit any dikes," he said. His B-52 had been shot at so frequently by surface to air missiles, he said, that the crew acquired a nickname indicating that they drew SAM's like magnets. "I've found the aircraft a lot more maneuverable than I thought it would be," he said.

The visiting press was not permitted to interview crews on the flight line because, American officers explained, the Thais controlled the visit and insisted that only designated representatives of the American commanders should speak to the reporters.

The crowd of newsmen reached Utapao from Ta Khli, in a valley of central Thailand, by a C-123 transport plane of the Thai Air Force.

## 4 U. S. Instructors

The Thais have a fighter wing of F-66's and A-37 planes based at Ta Khli, but on the other bases used by the Americans the Thai presence tends to be limited to the base commander and his staff.

At Ta Khli, the wing commander, Group Capt. Prayad Didyasarin, explained that "we also have our friends in the United States Air Force located here," and said that four American officers were attached to his wing as instructors while it shifts from F-86's to A-37's.

Ta Khli was used by American planes in the nineteen-sixties but, as United States forces were pulled out of Vietnam, the Air Force closed down its operations there in April of last year.

It re-opened them in May

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## Like a Small U.S. City

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this year, after the North Vietnamese offensive, with the move if the entire 49th tactical fighter wing from Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico. Another wing, the 366th, was moved in June from Danang in South Vietnam. Now, according to Group Captain Prayad, the Americans outnumber the Thais on the base, 5,000 to 2,000.

The 366th wing commander, Col. George Rutter, said that the move of his wing's F-4 Phantom fighter-bombers meant that they now have to fly longer hours and burn up more fuel to do the same jobs they did before in Quangtri Province and North Vietnam.

### Complaints by Pilots

The pilots of the 366th complained when they were about to move from Danang to Ta Khli that they would have to fly longer hours and refuel in the air and that they saw no reason why they should have to move.

Three two-man American crews were on static display beside their Phantoms and said that while it did take longer, life in Ta Khli was more pleasant than it had been in Danang, which frequently comes under rocket attack.

Both Ta Khli and Utapao are spacious, tree-shaded bases, and American soldiers are free to go off base to the bars in the town. The base newspaper, Gunfighter Gazette, even has tips about how to check bar-girls for venereal disease. There are post exchanges and restau-

rants on base. The movie theater where Colonel Rutter gave his briefing was showing The Godfather and The French Connection.

Whether the Thai Government and the Americans here will lift further the restrictions on press coverage of the bases is unknown, but Nissai Vejajiva, spokesman of the Thai Foreign Ministry, said there would be more controlled visits like this one.

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