

# Aboard a B-52 Bomber High over Vietnam A Crew Takes Part in an 'Impersonal War'

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ANDERSEN AIR FORCE BASE, Guam, Oct. 4—Six hours and 14 minutes after taking off from this Pacific island base, Capt. Terry Jennings' B-52 shuddered and 32,500 pounds of high-explosive bombs plummeted toward South Vietnam.

A few seconds later a ground controller radioed, "good job,"—the bombs were right on target.

There was not a flicker of reaction from any of the six crewmen, no sign of satisfaction or any trace of excitement.—an attitude, of course, that has been common in bomber crews for years.

For the crewmen, sitting in their air-conditioned compartments more than five miles above the steamy jungle of South Vietnam, the bomb run had been merely another familiar technical exercise. The crew knew virtually nothing about their target and they showed no curiosity.

Only the radar-navigator, who in earlier wars would have been called the bombardier, saw the bombs exploding, and those distant flashes gave no hint of the awesome eruption of flames and steel on the ground. No one in the plane, including this correspondent, heard the deafening blast.

## 200 B-52's in Theater

In many ways, Captain Jennings and his men are typical of the scores of crews that have been sent to Guam since February in a build-up that has brought the number of B-52's bombing Indochina to about 200—four times more than were in the theater at the close of last year. Some of the big bombers are based at Utapao, Thailand.

They are intelligent, steady, family men doing a job they've been told to do. Because they are professionals, they take pride in doing their work well. But neither Captain Jennings' crew nor any of the numerous other pilots and crewmen interviewed displayed the kind of enthusiasm for their assignment that bubbles through conversations with fighter pilots. "It's a job," the bomber men often say.

The huge, eight-engine planes that they fly are dropping more bombs in South Vietnam than any other kind of aircraft and they have been credited with having played a major role in blunting the North Vietnamese offensive.

On the ground a B-52 strike—or "arflight," as they are commonly called—is a chillingly spectacular event, sometimes electric with excitement. Tremendous clouds of smoke and dust boil up and a thunder of

kettle drums splits the ears. People in the "impact" area are killed or sent reeling in shock. Allied troops sometimes cheer or just sigh in amazement.

But none of this feeling reaches the B-52 crews. "We're so far away," said Capt. Gordon Crook, the 34-year-old electronic-warfare officer on Captain Jennings's bomber. "It's an impersonal war for us."

The crewmen are highly skilled technicians trained primarily for missions with nuclear weapons. What they are doing in Vietnam demands precision, but only a fraction of their skill. The routine seldom varies and they say they are bored.

## No Threat from Flak

On most raids, clouds or darkness make it impossible for anyone in the plane to see South Vietnam. At best the country looks like a neatly painted relief map, mostly mottled green ridges and valleys streaked with winding streams and red laterite trails and airstrips, set-off from the sea by a thin strip of white beach. The people are always invisible.

There is no antiaircraft fire in South Vietnam that threatens the high-flying B-52's and so far none of the bombers have been reported lost to surface-to-air missiles or enemy fighter planes in the North.

"Essentially I feel like I'm a nonparticipant in the war," Captain Jennings said after the flight. "I'm intelligent and I know I'm in it, but I don't feel it."

"To me," continued Captain Jennings, who is 29 years old and comes from Aurora, Ill., "flying this kind of mission—actually flying the mission and dropping the bombs and anything that leads up to it—is very similar to a training run in the United States."

The United States Military Assistance Command in Vietnam selects B-52 targets, takes responsibility for insuring that they are clear of civilians and decides how many planes are needed and what combination of bombs they should carry. So the big bombers, their crews and commanders on the ground here are all part of a highly specialized delivery system.

One pilot said that he often thought of himself as a long-distance truck driver. A crewman said that bombing South Vietnam from a B-52 was like "delivering the mail."

The maps used by the crews show almost no place names. One general said that kept the maps uncluttered. It also keeps them impersonal. The targets are given code numbers and are marked by intersecting map coordinates.

"For all you know," one

pilot said, "you could be bombing New York City."

The pilot was joking. But he and his colleagues are disciplined men who have taken an oath of service in the Air Force and they regard themselves foremost as professionals. Several crewmen were asked what they would do if they were ordered to "take out Hanoi—not just the military installations, but the whole city." All answered that they would "jump in our planes and go." Their only concern, they said, would be for personal safety.

Whether the war is right or wrong is not an issue with the crews, they say. They do not make policy, but are instruments of policy. They have been trained to operate the machinery of the B-52 and that is what they do. Where they put the bombs is someone else's decision and someone else's responsibility, they feel.

"As far as losing any sleep over what we're doing, how many people we kill . . . we never get to see the damage," said Captain Crook, whose home is in Memphis.

At another point he said, "if we were killing anybody down there with our bombs I have to think we were bombing the enemy and not civilians. I feel quite sure about our targeting."

A pilot in another crew put it this way: "You don't consider that you're going out and killing somebody. You say, 'we've got a job to do and let's go out and do it.' The other part isn't considered."

The B-52's in Southeast Asia usually carry 20,000 to 43,500 pounds of bombs, compared to 6,000 pounds for the most common fighter-bomber.

#### A Carpet of Bombs

They usually fly in formations of three and lay down a carpet of bombs roughly a half mile wide and a mile and a half long. The bombers are at their best against large supply dumps and troop concentrations.

So the North Vietnamese created an ideal situation for the B-52's when they launched their current offensive on March 30th and shifted into full-scale conventional war, massing thousands of troops for frontal assaults with dozens of tanks and heavy artillery.

Increasingly, the B-52's are being used to provide close air support for the South Vietnamese. In the battle to retake the Citadel in Quangtri, for example, South Vietnamese paratroops, who were having difficulty clearing an area, backed-off several hundred yards, called in the B-52's, then moved ahead without opposition.

The missions themselves are

exhausting. Captain Jennings and his crew began studying their mission plans at 7:35 A.M. and dragged through their final debriefing nearly 17 hours later at 12:30 A.M. the next day.

The tour of duty for B-52 crewmen is four to six months. It is shorter than the standard one year in Vietnam. But crews can be reassigned in the area as often as the Air Force feels is necessary and some have already had five or six tours. Staff officers say the crews here now are scheduled to have a month at home in the United States after they finish their current stint, then return immediately for more arclight duty.

Many men say they see no end to the cycle and this is hard on morale. For almost all of the crewmen the worst part of the assignment is the separation from their families and not knowing when it will all end.

#### The B-52—Last Choice

They laugh when you ask if they volunteered to fly B-52's. No one seems to like the plane. It is an unmaneuverable monster and the last choice of flight-school graduates. B-52's are uncomfortable to ride in and some crewmen say they are afraid of serious mechanical or structural failure in the complicated and nearly 20-year-old planes.

Some of the men wonder if they're accomplishing anything. They've heard the praise from Saigon. But some still say: "It must not be too effective. We keep bombing the same targets."

The pilots say the most difficult part of a mission to South Vietnam is the mid-air refueling that usually takes place over the Philippines. Most of the planes here can make the round trip without taking on gas, though, so that leaves take-off and landing to challenge the fliers.

Ten minutes after take-off, Captain Jennings put the plane on automatic pilot and relaxed as it continued to climb, then leveled-off, cruising at 450 knots. He was number two in the flight of three.

In the next two and a half hours he drank two cups of coffee, flipped through the Pacific Stars and Stripes newspaper, cat-napped and mechanically ran through a number of check lists with the other crew members.

Capt. Mark Wiley, the 26-year-old co-pilot from Concord, N. H., filled out some reports, went through some more check lists and asked Capt. Jim Shima, the navigator, who is also 26, and from Cleveland, whether he had any Oreos in his box lunch. "No," said Cap-

tain Shima, "I got orange slice."

Maj. Orbert Marrs, the radar-navigator or bombardier, who is 42 years old and has a family in Welch, W. Va., was busy checking his equipment. Captain Crook, the electronic warfare officer whose job is to block enemy radar so that it cannot direct antiaircraft fire or surface-to-air missiles at the plane, had opened a paperback. In a bubble on the end of the aircraft, M. Sgt. Clyde [Ed] Edwin Going, 39, of Shreveport, La., was keeping his vigil as tail-gunner.

As the big plane neared the Philippines the crew began to prepare for refueling. The three aircraft had slowed to about 400 knots. They were side by side now, well apart, and each was coming up under the tail of a KC-135 tanker.

The pilots were trying to put their bombers about 20 feet below the tankers so that a sergeant riding in the belly of the higher plane could slip a fuel nozzle into a receptacle on top of their aircraft.

Captain Jennings tensed in his seat as the refueling boom grew larger in his windshield, then passed overhead. His left hand rode the black steering yoke, the fingers of his right were twined around the eight throttles, delicately feeding the engines. With a clank, the boom slid into place.

But the system that helps the pilot guide the plane seemed to be running a bit ragged and in the next 22 minutes the bomber and the tanker drifted apart seven times. Finally, with 90 per cent of

the designated fuel in his tanks, Captain Jennings pulled away from the tanker. Beads of sweat were rolling down his face. He let out a deep breath, lit a cigarette and turned over the controls to Captain Wiley.

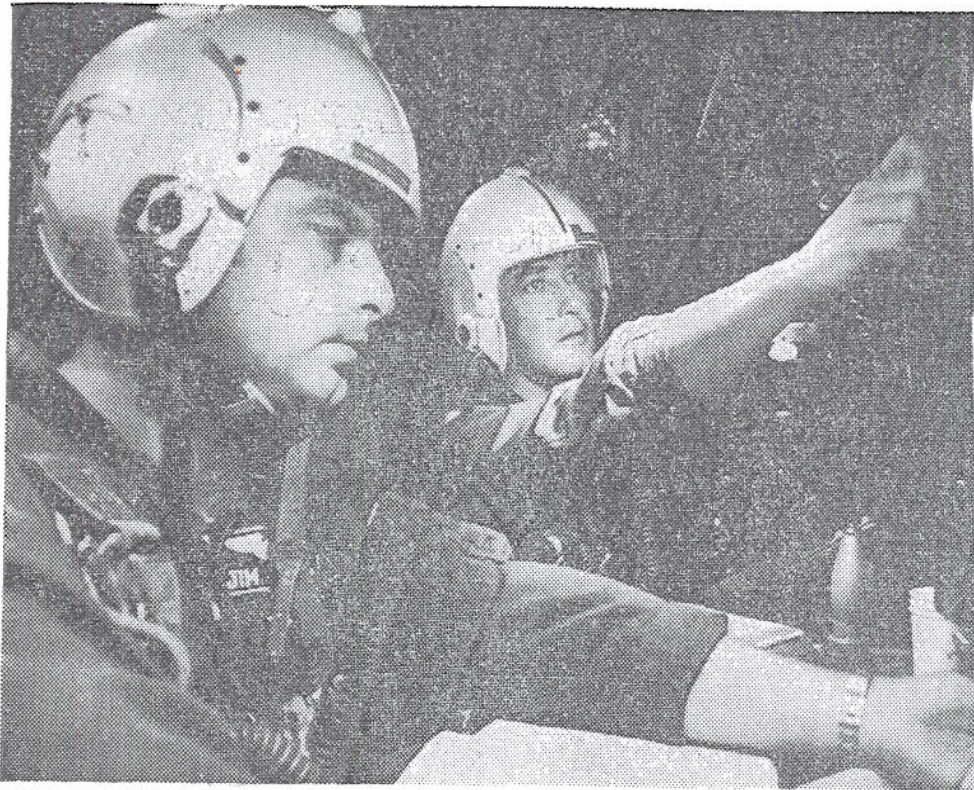
Less than an hour later, Captain Shima, the navigator, began reviewing bomb procedures over the interphone.

A ground controller picked up the three bombers on radar as they neared South Vietnam and began guiding them toward the target—a "suspected enemy troop concentration south of Danang." No one on the plane knew that the specific location was the embattled lower tip of Quangngai Province and the men had to think a minute when they were asked what they were supposed to be hitting.

Sixty seconds out, Major Marrs, the radar-navigator or bombardier, opened the bomb-bay doors and armed the bombs.

The ground controller started a count-down. He spoke to the lead aircraft and the two other crews monitored. At the precise moment that the bombs had to leave the first plane in order to hit the target, the controller gave the signal to release, one crisp word: "hack."

With that, Major Marrs and Captain Shima squeezed stop watches and the navigator started his own count-down. The two had calculated their drop time at 15 seconds after lead. Captain Shima's voice rose with the only detectable excitement of the entire flight as he cried out, "hack."



Capt. Jim Shima, left, navigator, and Maj. Orbert Marrs, radar-navigator, or bombardier, are seen in the cockpit of their B-52 as it flew toward South Vietnam on a bombing mission.

Major Marrs pressed a small button and the plane trembled. A lighted sign on the dashboard in front of the pilot and copilot flashed "bomb released," "bomb released," "bomb released" as the bomb-

bay and the wing racks emptied.

The plane swung north up the coast of South Vietnam for a practice run without bombs. The crew settled in for an uneventful six-hour flight home.