

# B-52 Pilots Talk About Their Rough, New War

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"There I was," said a tall young pilot with a mustache. "There were

SAMS to the left of me, SAMS to the right of me, SAMS in front of me . . ." His voice trailed off, and he shrugged.

"Our flight crews are different now," said a young

Air Force sergeant, a ground crewman.

"Before, when they came back, they were always clowning around. Now they are shaken. They just get out of the plane and into the bus and go to the debriefing."

Since 1965, when the United States began bombing in Vietnam, the crews of the B-52 bombers have flown what some fliers call a "milk run" and others a "bus ride" over South Vietnam, where they faced little opposition from air defense.

The crewmen flew for about six hours from here to Vietnam, used radar to find

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targets they couldn't see, pressed a button to drop their bombs into a rectangle 3000 by 9000 feet, turned around and flew six hours back to their huge base on this tropical island.

Their only enemy was boredom.

On December 18, all that changed. For the first time the B-52s were ordered to bomb North Vietnam steadily, including the Hanoi-Haiphong area, where they face what an Air Force spokesman here called "the greatest air-defense system in history."

"It's like flying through a Fourth of July celebration," a pilot said in describing a night raid to a friend here. "The sky is lit up all around you."

Another young pilot said: "I was about two miles back and there was this flight in front of me and they got hit with a salvo of those new SAMS. No. 1 dove forward and No. 3 veered off to the right in evasive action." He motioned with his hands as flyers have since the days of the Wright brothers.

"But No. 2 stayed right on course and got it right in the

belly and they got blown right out of the sky," he said, holding his left hand palm down and jabbing a finger up into it.

In the 12 days since President Nixon ordered the resumption of the bombing, Washington has officially conceded losing 15 of the B-52s to enemy fire, the first losses in combat they have suffered. Hanoi says it has shot down 33.

A sampling of the crews here indicates that many believe neither figure. By their count, the number lost is somewhere in between. Of the 150 bombers based here, six or seven are believed to have gone down, the rest of the losses being sustained among the 50 bombers based in Thailand.

A further sampling indicated one constant and several variables in the reactions of the flight crews to the sudden increase in the danger they face. It has risen abruptly from practically nothing to danger greater than that faced by bomber crews over Germany during World War II.

The constant is fear.

"They're scared to death," said an islander who

knows many pilots. "They all know each other because they went to flight school together and because they've been mixing the crews each time they come here on a tour. It's their friends who are getting shot down."

#### VARIATION

Beyond that, the reactions vary.

Some of the flyers are "gung ho" and said the heavy bombing of Hanoi should have started earlier. "We'd be out of this mess," one said, "if we'd done before what we are doing now."

Others doubt that the effort is worth the risks and the losses. Some are bitter because they believed the Nixon administration's judgment in October that peace was at hand — and now they are being shot at for the first time.

Some wonder what the administration's objectives are.

Still others took a coolly professional attitude. "They have a job to do," said an officer here, "and they are going to do that job."

Whether anyone questioned the morality of the bombing could not be determined.

#### REPORTS

But a few flyers have reportedly declined to go up. An Air Force spokesman denied that anyone had quit but several islanders say they have friends among the crews who have found ways to get out of the dangerous missions. They say the Air Force prefers to send them home quietly rather than make a public issue of it.

There also are reports here that members of flight crews have deliberately caused some of the complicated electronic machinery aboard a bomber to break down and thus cancel a mission. Some reportedly have neglected to arm the bombs so that they would not explode after they were dropped.

An Air Force spokesman said, however, that that had "absolutely not happened." He said that the B-52s here had a 96 per cent rate of effectiveness — of 100 bombers readied for a mission, 96 had flown to the targets and unloaded their bombs.

#### LOSSES

No officer here, or in Saigon or Washington, has publicly discussed the reasons for the sudden losses among the B-52s where there were none before. But listening to flyers, young and veteran, gives a reasonably clear picture.

Most obvious has been the change in targets.

The North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in South Vietnam don't have the elaborate air-defense weapons that the Russians have supplied for the defense of Hanoi and Haiphong.

Then there is the pace and magnitude of this operation, which an officer here called "the largest operation in the history of air power, the greatest massing of air power in terms of strike capability ever."

#### TACTICS

Tactics may also have accounted for the losses. B-52 crews are basically trained to carry nuclear weapons and each plane is considered a weapons system in itself. The fundamental tactic is to send one plane, or a cell of three, against a specific target.

That tactic was used, for the most part, over South Vietnam.

Thus, when the B-52 bombing of North Vietnam began on December 18, the same tactics were used. Flights of three took off from here every 30 or 40 minutes, in staggered patterns, on round-the-clock missions so that about 72 planes were in the air every 24 hours.

But that stream of bombers allowed the North Vietnamese to concentrate their air defenses on each three-plane flight.

#### SWITCH

After the 36-hour pause in the bombing over Christmas, the Air Force partly switched tactics. The first raid that left here Tuesday afternoon was a World War II-style armada of 77 bombers, of which 76 returned. A group of about 24 bombers left here Wednesday morning and another of 21 bombers Wednesday night. Thurs-

day night, group of 27 hit North Vietnam.

The massing of the B-52s appears to have forced the North Vietnamese to diffuse their air defenses and to have cut the rate of loss. Ten bombers were shot down before Christmas, five since, according to the official figures.

There is also a fatigue factor, which slows crew reactions. Each crew of five officers and an enlisted gunner flies three times a week. Each mission takes 17 hours or more from the time the crew reports for its briefing, flies at least 12 hours to and from Vietnam, including one or two tricky inflight refuelings, and is debriefed on return.

A veteran pilot said: "I reach my level of fatigue in four hours. It doesn't make any difference after that how long we fly. I'm as tired as I'm going to get."

He added: "Then you ought to see the paperwork after each flight. We have to fill out form after form when we get back. I don't know what they do with it all."