

Crewmen Bitter Over B-52 Losses



Also New Orleans States-Item, filed POWs.

Jack Anderson

WE HAVE TALKED by overseas phone to B-52 crewmen who are bitter over their losses during the controversial Hanoi raids last December. Some B-52s were shot down, they charge, because of poor planning.

We have also had access to records which tell what really happened over Hanoi. The records confirm the complaints of crewmen that failure to change the flight patterns for three nights endangered lives.

A pilot of many combat missions over Vietnam wrote to President Nixon on Christmas day. "The number of B-52s shot down," he complained, "were not necessarily due to enemy marksmanship but rather due to inept, unimaginative and indifferent planning."

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THE SAME PILOT sent an even more poignant letter to Senator George McGovern. "I am an academy graduate that has become frustrated with and ashamed of the career I have chosen," wrote the embittered crewman, "for I have seen the ideals that I learned at the academy become a sham in the working Air Force. Dignity is more important than integrity, and 'cover-your-ass' has replaced honor."

The pilot spelled out some of his specific complaints: "If the military planners had done everything possible to avoid the losses and they occurred anyway, then assuming the raids were necessary, the vast number of aircraft and men shot down would be acceptable.

But to have so poorly planned the mission and then for the military to state that the losses were expected, is to us tragic.

"It is not true that the planners were limited as to the flight paths required to get the B-52s in and out of North Vietnam. After the crews complained of the flight planning, the next days of raiding saw drastic changes to the ways that the B-52s entered and departed the Hanoi-Haiphong area."

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A TOP Air Force general acknowledged to us, "in retrospect," that the flight tactics should have been changed earlier. On December 18, the first day of the saturation bombing, a salvo of 100 SAM missiles brought down two B-52s. On the second day, approximately 150 missiles were tracked, but they bagged only one bomber.

The third day was the worst. When the B-52s arrived following the same heading, the sky suddenly was filled with missiles. In shotgun bursts, more than 400 streaked up at the B-52s. It was a miracle, the shaken crewmen told us, that only three bombers were knocked down.

Their complaints finally moved the Eighth Air Force Command to change the flight pattern.

Footnote: The pilot who wrote to President Nixon and McGovern signed his name. When we reached him in Guam, he acknowledged writing the letters but refused to discuss them. Afterward, his family appealed to us not to use his name.