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Boredom Replaces Tension for B-52 Pilots in Thailand

By JAMES F. CLARITY

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U TAPHAO AIRFIELD, Thailand, March 1—Boredom has apparently replaced wartime tension among the nearly 7,000 American airmen here who still fly and service the B-52 bombers that were once the awesome tools of United States policy in Southeast Asia.

The enormous camouflaged bombers and the tanker planes that fuel them in the air still fly dozens of training missions every week from this Thai Navy base on the Gulf of Thailand, where the Americans are officially guests of the Thai Government. About 50 of the bombers remain based here, as they were when U Taphao was used for air attacks on North Vietnam in December, 1972, and for assaults on Cambodia, halted by an act of Congress, last August.

But now the planes do not carry bombs; no fliers are shot down and the working day on the base has been reduced from a wartime round-the-clock pace to seven or eight hours. The mission of the planes and the men is described officially as "to be prepared to resume combat operations, as directed." But at U Taphao the result of the virtual end of the air war in Indochina, according to American officers, has been listlessness.

Officers Speak Freely

In a recent tour arranged for Western correspondents, the first such tour since the end of the bombing of Cambodia, the officers spoke freely about the seemingly new quality of life around the base. The tour was at least partly a result of a recent Congressional mandate that American newsmen be given regular access to tax-supported United States military operations on foreign soil. Generally, the officers said,



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U Taphao base was used for air attacks on North Vietnam and Cambodia.

the boredom has been a mixed curse, or blessing. The number of fights involving American servicemen in local bars at nearby Sattahip has reportedly declined, and there is much more time to use the base's 12-lane bowling alley and two movie theaters and the beaches on the gulf. The tour of duty for plane crews has been cut in half to about three months, and more men are able, at their own expense, to bring their wives here for visits of a few weeks.

Other officially described aspects of life at U Taphao seem open to various interpretations. The venereal disease rate is steady, with 500 individual infection cases being treated a month. Heroin use is said not to be a significant problem, with only one user detected since August. Two or three times a month, however, the

Air Force, with the help of trained sniffing dogs, detects vials of heroin being mailed from the base.

Marijuana Smoking

There is marijuana smoking, the officers said, which is against regulations and is suppressed, but is not considered a serious problem on the base. There are hair-length restrictions: sideburns must not be lower than the ear opening, locks must be shorn before they reach the eyebrows and beards are forbidden except for men with skin disorders. And the men are still quartered in dormitories while they would prefer rooms.

But, the officers say, there are no restrictions on leaving the base during off hours, despite public protests in many parts of Thailand that the American military presence should be curtailed or eliminated. There is an average of one marriage a day between an American airman and a Thai woman.

On the flight line, the B-52's sit with their wings drooping almost to the ground, their tails looking from a distance like giant shark fins. The bombs — 100,000 of them weighing either 750 or 500

pounds each — are stored in open-air nests surrounded by gravel banks to deaden an accidental explosion.

The crews, mostly men in their twenties and early thirties, say they work as hard on training missions as they did during the air war.

With information officers watching and listening, but not coaching, crewmen said in interviews that the B-52's, most of them 18 or 20 years old, were ready to fly in combat again. Capt. Thomas Walsh, a 31-year-old pilot who has been on 140 combat missions, was asked if he had been disturbed by antiwar protests in the United States during the American bombing raids.

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