

Missile Down 1st B52 Bomber

Examiner News Services

SAIGON — A B52 returning from record bombing raids over North Vietnam was shot down by the North Vietnamese today, the first to be lost in combat in the war, the U.S. command announced.

The command also reported the loss of five other planes, including a \$15 million F111 swing-wing fighter-bomber.

Pentagon sources said the B52 apparently was hit by a surface-to-air (SAM) missile near Vinh, a port city 140 miles above the Demilitarized Zone but made it back to Thailand where it crashed 12 miles from the big U.S. air base at Nakhon Phanom. All six crewmen ejected and were rescued.

Eight of the \$8 million bombers have been lost previously. Four crashed because of mechanical failure and four others were lost in collisions in flight. The North Vietnamese have reported many times they shot down B52s but the reports were denied. The Communists used SAMs and sometimes laid MIG ambushes in which the fighter-

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bombers tried to hit the B52s with missiles, but were never successful.

The U.S. command reported B52 strikes yesterday and today against North Vietnam in which about 1350 tons of bombs were dropped against Communist targets in the southern panhandle. The area has been hard hit for days in an effort to prevent the Communists from rushing more war material into South Vietnam before a cease-fire halts the flow.

The command said there were 15 B52 attacks in the 24 hours ending at noon today, with 45 bombers taking part in the raids, six more than the previous highs in Aug. 12, Oct. 31 and Nov. 4. The B52 lost today was on a raid in addition to those already announced.

Others Lost

The other planes lost in addition to the B52 and the more costly F111 were three F4 Phantom jets in Laos, North Vietnam and Cambodia and a C47 propeller-driven plane which crashed in Thailand.

The B52 apparently was brought down by a missile fired in North Vietnam although the bomber crashed 12 miles northeast of Nakhon Phanom, in the northeast corner of Thailand near the Laotian border.

There were not believed to be any Soviet-built MIGs in the area when the B-52 crashed and weather apparently was not a factor.

Use Curtailed

B52s began flying in the Indochina war on June 18, 1965 but their use over North Vietnam was curtailed because of the danger from SAM missiles.

None of the B52s were lost before the air war over the north was halted by President Lyndon Johnson in 1968. Advances in technology which reduced the danger from SAMs enabled the Air Force to increase the use of B52s when the bombing was resumed last April 6.

The U.S. command announcement on the loss of the Stratofort said, "A U.S.

Air Force B52 crashed shortly before midnight last night approximately 12 miles northeast of Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. The aircraft was returning from a mission over North Vietnam. Search and rescue operations have been completed. All six crew members have been rescued. Initial reports indicate there were no serious injuries."

"Probably a SAM"

"It was most probably a SAM rather than a MIG that got it," a Defense Department spokesman said. "That is the best information we have."

North Vietnam has claimed many times in the past to have shot down B52s but the Pentagon said this was the first time they actually had done so.

U.S. military sources said the B52 attacks were unusually heavy to make up for the curtailment in fighter-bomber strikes due to the monsoon weather. The U.S. command reported only 60 such strikes yesterday, the fifth successive day the total has been 60 or fewer.

The B52s are unaffected by the weather since they can fly as high as 35,000 feet and drop their bombs by radar.

The U.S. Command said their targets were supply caches awaiting shipment into northern Laos and to North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam just below the demilitarized zone.

Meanwhile, heavy North Vietnamese resistance torrential rains and Vietnamese