

# B-52 Downed; U.S. Suspects 1st SAM Kill

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The United States yesterday lost a B-52 bomber, apparently to North Vietnamese groundfire—the first such combat loss in the Vietnam War.

While neither the U.S. command in Saigon nor officials in Washington would unequivocally credit the loss to Communist gunners, Pentagon sources said it is

“highly probable” a surface-to-air missile hit the eight-engine bomber.

The six crew members, all of whom bailed out safely before the crippled plane crashed in Thailand on its way home from North Vietnam, believe they were hit, according to military sources.

The U.S. command in Saigon said: “A U.S. Air Force B-52 crashed shortly before midnight last night [Wednesday night Saigon time] approximately 12 miles west of Nakhorn Phanom, Thailand. The aircraft was returning from a mission over North Vietnam. A search and rescue is completed. All six crew members were recovered. Initial reports indicated no serious injuries. The cause of the loss has not been determined.”

The eight-engine bomber presumably was trying to make it back to the B-12 base at Utopao, some 400 miles southwest of the site of the crash.

The crash followed what the command said was the war's heaviest bombing of North Vietnam by B-52s. The announced targets were supply chokepoints, with Vinh believed the area where the B-52 was hit.

Fifteen missions (usually three B-52s each) were flown south of North Vietnam's 20th Parallel in the 24-hour period ending noon Wednesday.

The Soviet-supplied SA-2 Guideline anti-aircraft missile is the prime suspect because it is the only weapon that can reach the seven-mile-high bombing altitude of the B-52.

The radio-commanded SA-2 is the same missile which knocked Gary Power's U-2 out of the sky over Russia on May 1, 1960. But, since then, the United States has developed

electronic counter measures (ECM) to foil the SA-2. Each B-52 flying over the North has its own system for foiling ground defenses.

Given this ECM equipment, one question posed by yesterday's hit—if it was by an SA-2—would be whether it was a lucky shot or indicates offset-

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ting advances in the missile given to the North Vietnamese by the Russians.

The lucky shot possibility seems more likely since Air Force officials told the Associated Press yesterday that they plan no change in tactics.

The downing of the \$8 million B-52D was followed by the loss of another \$15 million F-111, the fourth of the swing-wing fighter-bombers based in Thailand to go down since Sept. 28.

The advantage of the F-111 is that it can bomb at night, its two crewmen relying on terrain avoidance radar to bring them over the target safely. The latest crash occurred shortly before dawn on Tuesday north of the Demilitarized Zone, according to the U.S. command in Saigon. The two crewmen were listed as missing.

In 1968, when three F-111s were lost on flights to North Vietnam mechanical problems rather than Communist gunners turned out to be the cause. Former Air Force Secretary Harold Brown conceded to friends after those losses in 1968 that it probably had been a mistake to rush the F-111 into combat in Vietnam.

The same complaint about rush deployment of the F-111

is being made again this time by airmen in Thailand. Also, mechanical problems are suspect again—with the terrain avoidance radar signal possibly distorted by the softening effect of jungle foliage as the plane flies “blind” through the night toward North Vietnam.