

Pilot of Downed Bomber Praised

SAIGON — (AP) — A U.S. B52 commander was credited by the Air Force today with saving top-secret electronic equipment from falling into North Vietnamese hands by guiding his crippled bomber into Thailand before it crashed.

"It was a masterful job," said one senior Air Force official, speaking about Capt. Norbert J. Ostrozny, 30, of Lackawanna, N.Y., the aircraft commander. "He did it with sheer skill and bravery."

Earlier, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird sent congratulations to Ostrozny.

"He went beyond and above the call of service in order to bring that aircraft into Thailand after it had been hit and damaged," Laird said in Washington.

Details

Laird's comments were in a special communique issued by U.S. Command in Saigon giving additional details on the crash and disclosing the names of all six crewmen who were rescued near a U.S. base in northeast Thailand.

It was the first B52 reported lost as the result of enemy fire in 7½ years of operations in Indochina.

U.S. officials said three surface-to-air missiles were fired at a flight of three B52s near the North Vietnamese port of Vinh.

Fragments from a SAM

set two of the outboard engines on Ostrozny's B52 afire and they eventually fell off. The two inboard engines on the same wing then failed.

Ostrozny managed to fly the plane with only four engines before the entire crew finally had to bail out 100 miles south of Vinh and within 16 miles of the U.S. base at Nakhon Phanom Thailand.

Counter-Measure

The top-secret electronic counter-measure equipment B52s carry to help them throw off surface-to-air missiles "is something North Vietnam would want to get," said one official. "It could help them in the long run."

The official said North Vietnamese radar was unable to lock onto the flight of the B52s and the enemy simply began firing surface-to-air missiles in the general direction of the flight.

"They just fired at where they thought the B52s were," said the official, "and they were lucky."

Ostrozny was not injured. But his navigator, Capt. Robert L. Estes, 32, of Abilene, Tex., was wounded by shell fragments that penetrated the aircraft; and the copilot, Cap. Philip Foley, 26, of Fair Haven, Vt., suffered a fracture of his right ankle when he landed in the dark.