

Even With Computers, Bomb Errors Happen

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SAIGON—Despite billions spent on sophisticated weaponry and on computers to help control it, American bombs fell on the French mission in Hanoi on Oct. 11, just after a crucial but secret breakthrough in efforts to end the war.

Despite severe restrictions on U.S. pilots designed to avoid hitting civilian areas, they do get hit.

How do these accidents happen?

Interviews with scores of airmen and ground advisers and personal observation indicates that the blame lies in poor judgment, the instinct to survive, or an irreducible minimum of technical error.

In the opinions of some high-ranking officers here, the inadvertent bombing of

the French embassy is an example of the poorest kind of judgment.

In this view, the raid against the rail yards just two to three miles across the Red River should not have been carried out at all, with the target so close to Hanoi and with secret peace talks at a critical stage.

But if the target had to be struck, it should have been with laser-guided "smart-bombs," they said.

The rail yards are in an area that is normally covered by Air Force planes, which use these guided weapons. But this attack was carried out by Navy planes using conventional bombs. The Navy actually flies more missions over the north than the Air Force, but has lagged in getting the laser-type bombs into service.

With conventional bombs, the rail yards had to be

struck longitudinally, in an attack that would have to come either straight over Hanoi from the south or straight toward it from the north. Because of the heavy defenses in Hanoi as officers here tell it, the approach from the north was chosen. One bomb failed to come off one of the Navy jets as it passed over the yards. It did come off as the plane pulled out of its bomb raid dive, lofting the bomb some three miles into Hanoi and hitting the embassy.

F-14 pilots flying out of Thailand say a source of unavoidable error comes when bomb-laden attack planes are attacked by Migs and most jettison their bombs in order to outmaneuver their attackers, to increase their chances of reaching the coast to bail out for rescue. "It's my ass out there," says one pilot, "and if I take bat-

tle damage I'm going to jettison and that's all there is to it."

On the other hand, U.S. pilots reportedly have fought off attempts by higher commanders to put bombs on escort planes. Some officers say there has been a tacit duel between Air Force and Navy for various periods during the war to see who flies more missions and drops more bombs. "The pilots don't really care about the extra (flight) hours because it helps your career and transition into new planes," one officer said.

Pilots say that at one point they were asked to carry bombs on escorts as well as attacking aircraft to increase the tonnage dropped, but the pilots warned their superiors that they would have to take the responsibility for civilian

casualties when the escorts jettisoned their bombs in a dogfight. The decision to put bombs on the escorts was rescinded.

The F-4, which earned a good reputation as a MIG-killer and as a smart-bomb carrier, was "the worst plane we had" in South Vietnam when used in close support of ground troops, according to many U.S. forward air controllers.

Whereas slower, lighter planes would often deliver their bombs within 165 feet of friendly troops, forward air controllers say they would never get an F-4 closer than 200 yards, and many said 500 yards, because of their accuracy.

The plane was described as usually short of fuel, having little time to spend over the target and therefore let-

ting go of all its bombs generally on the first pass over the target, which is usually the least accurate one.

While B-52 bombing in the south is precisely directed by ground radar, in the north, it is less accurately guided by the radar in each aircraft, producing another source of errant bombs. From seven miles up, a delay of one second in planned bomb release time means an error of 560 feet on the target.

Most B-52 bombing in the north however, has been in the sparsely populated lower panhandle. Despite some highly publicized raids deep into the north, the big bombers have ventured into the Haiphong area only once and have been above the 20th parallel only about a half-dozen times.