

# Air Force Proud of B-52 Role

## Washington

Air Force officials believe that the aging B-52 in the last few days has redeemed its role as a strategic bomber capable of penetrating the Soviet Union.

That judgment was reached on the performance of the B-52 in its first sustained encounter with a Soviet missile specifically designed to knock down the bomber that long has been the U.S. Strategic Air Command.

While the headlines have focused on the number of B-52s shot down, Air Force and Defense Department officials are concentrating on the number of bombers that are getting through to their targets. By that standard, which is the meaningful one to Air Force officials in judging the performance of the B-52, the bomber has been highly successful.

## DEFENSE

The B-52s for the first time have been flying into what the Defense Department describes as "the most heavily defended area in the world." More than 850 missile launchers and anti-aircraft guns protect the Hanoi-Haiphong area, an air defense system built largely with Soviet help.

During the first four days of the American bombing, the North Vietnamese defenders fired more than 100 anti-aircraft missiles daily — a heavy rate that raises the question of how long it can be sustained now that Hanoi is dependent upon overland supply routes.

Despite this concerted defense, undoubtedly heavier and more advanced than any encountered by American bombers in World War II, Air Force officials claim that about 97 or 98 per cent of the B-52 bombers have been getting through to their targets.

That reported loss rate of 2 or 3 per cent compares favorably with that of World War II, when it was 1.6 per cent in all theaters. But on some raids against heavily defended targets, such as Berlin, Regensburg, Schweinfurt and Ploesti, the losses ran as high as 10 to 20 per cent.

## MISSION

To Air Force officials, however, the overriding significance of the current loss rate — disturbing as it may be in terms of personnel — is that it provides confirmation that the B-52 can accomplish its primary but sometimes questioned mission of striking at Soviet targets.

"The people who might be most alarmed are those in the Soviet Union whose air defenses certainly are not better than those around Hanoi," commented a high-ranking Air Force general. "If 97 per cent of our B-52s are getting through to Hanoi, I would be concerned if I were in the Soviet air defenses."

In recent years, particularly as the Soviet Union developed missile defenses, there have been increased questions in defense circles as to whether the B-52 could get through to its targets and whether it had not been outmoded by intercontinental and submarine-launched missiles.

It took the conversion of the B-52 to a role for which it was never designed and some combat experiences and losses over Hanoi to vindicate its role as a strategic bomber.

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