

The War Is Sudden, Grim for the B-52 Fliers on Guam

NYTimes BY RICHARD HALLORAN DEC 3 0 1972

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ANDERSEN AIR FORCE For the first time the B-52's BASE, Guam, Dec. 29 — "The were ordered to bomb North flight crews are different now," Vietnam steadily, including the said the young Air Force ser- Hanoi-Haiphong area, where geant, a ground crewman. "Be- they face what an Air Force fore, when they came back, spokesman here called "the they were always clowning greatest air-defense system in around. Now they're shaken. history." They just get out of the plane and into the bus and go to the debriefing."

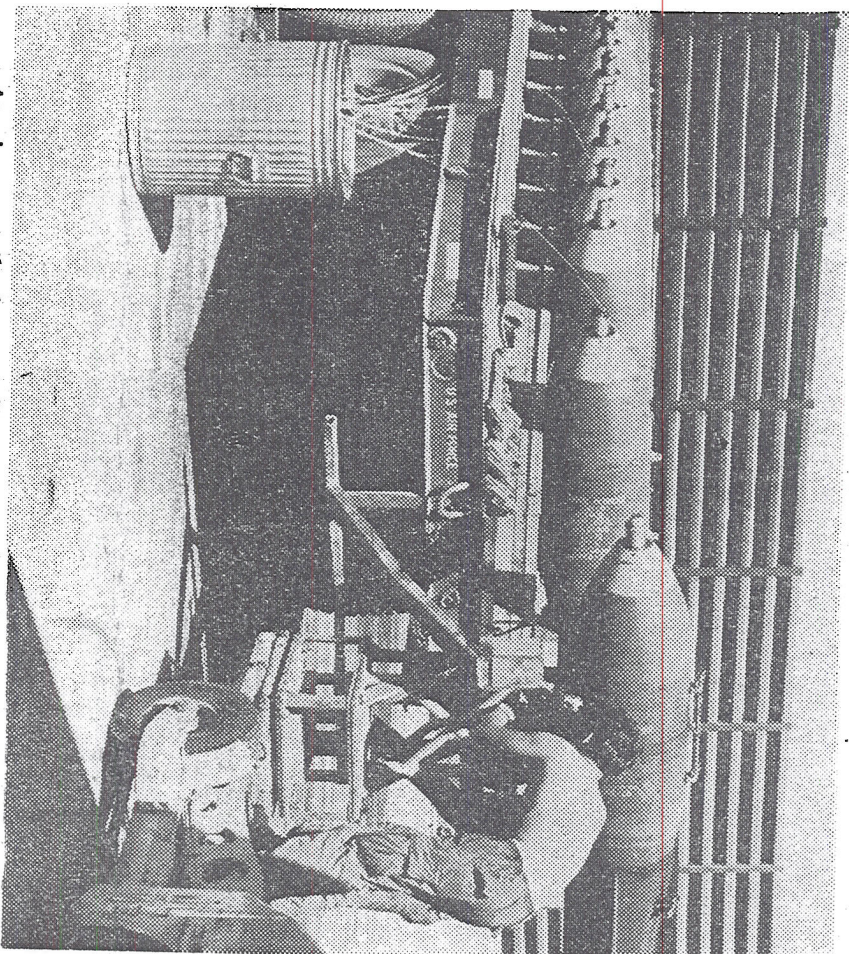
Since 1965, when the United States began bombing in Vietnam, the crews of the B-52 bombers had flow what some call a "milk run" and others a "bus ride" over South Vietnam, where they faced the opposition from air defense. The crewmen flew for about six hours from here to Vietnam, used radar to find targets they couldn't see, pressed a button to drop their bombs into a rectangle 3,000 by 9,000 feet, turned around and flew six hours back to their huge base on this tropical island. Their only enemy was boredom.

On Dec. 18 all that changed.

Today the flight crews are the targets for concentrated salvos of surface-to-air missiles, or SAMs. There is evidence that the North Vietnamese gunners have new, more accurate, and more explosive SAM's supplied by the Soviet Union. In addition, Soviet-built MIG fighter-interceptors appear to have been more active in the defense of Hanoi.

One result, clearly apparent at the air base here, is a partial change of tactics by the Air Force. Before the Christmas pause in bombing, missions were flown by single B-52's or cells of three. Now, to prevent Hanoi from concentrating its

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An airman at the base arming bombs before loading them on a B-52

Continued From Page 1, Col. 4 from practically nothing to danger greater than that faced by bomber crews over Germany during World War II. The constant is fear. "They're scared to death," said an islander who knows many pilots. "They all know each other because they went to flight school together and because they've been mixing the crews each time they come here on a tour. It's their friends, who are getting shot down."

Beyond that, the reactions vary. Some of the fliers are "gung ho" and said that the heavy bombing of Hanoi should have started earlier. "We'd be out of this mess," one said, "if we'd done before what we are doing now."

Some Fliers Are Bitter
Others doubt that the effort is worth the risks and the losses. They argue that seven years of bombing hasn't made the North Vietnamese quit and they don't think it will now. Some are bitter because they believed the Nixon Administration's judgment in October that peace was at hand—and now they are being shot at for the first time.

Some wonder what the Administration's objectives are. Two officers hitching a ride turned the question to a correspondent. "If you find out anything in your channels of information, I'd like to know about it," said one, an electronics-warfare officer. "I have a whole list of whys."

"Such as," he was asked. "Such as," the other, a navigator, interrupted, "why are we bombing North Vietnam?" Still others took a coolly professional attitude. "They have a job to do," said an officer here, "and they are going to do that job." Whether anyone questioned the morality of the bombing could not be determined.

But a few fliers have reportedly declined to go up. An Air Force spokesman denied that anyone had quit but several

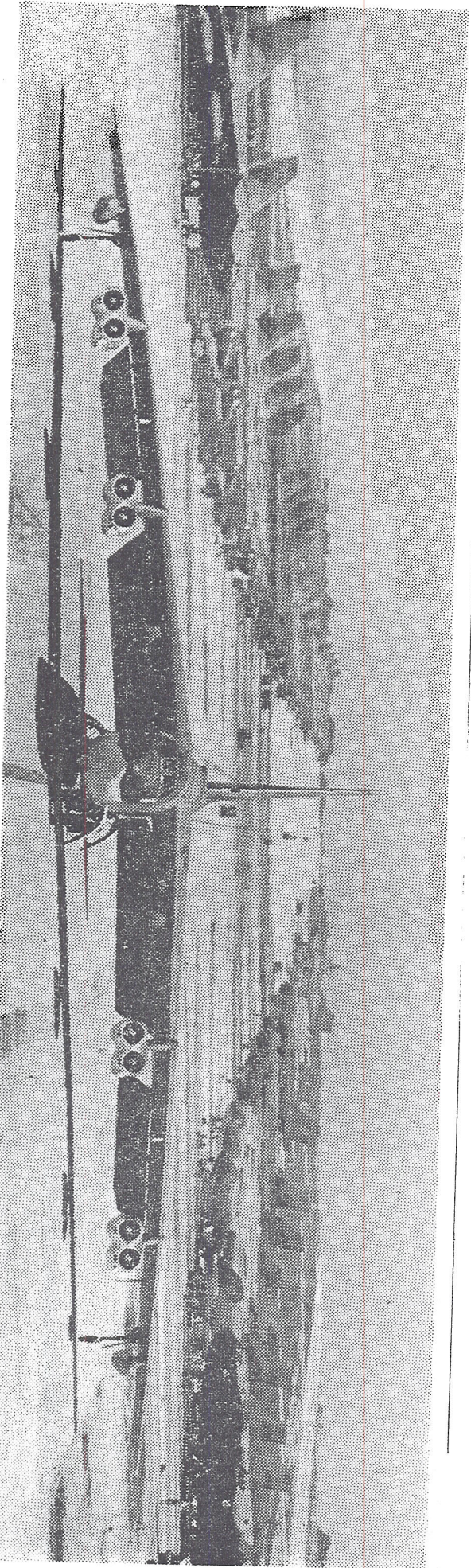
fire on such inviting targets, the plans often swarm out in much larger numbers. "It's like flying through a Fourth of July celebration," a pilot said in describing a night raid to a friend here. "The sky is lit up all around you."

"There I was," said a tall young pilot with a mustache. "There were SAM's to the left of me, SAM's to the right of me, SAM's in front of me. . . ." His voice trailed off, and he shrugged.

Another young pilot said: "I was about two miles back and there was this flight in front of me and they got hit with a salvo of those new SAM's. No. 1 dove forward and No. 3 veered off to the right in evasive action. He motioned with his hands as fliers have since the days of the Wright brothers. "But No. 2 stayed right on course and got it right in the belly and they got blown right out of the sky," he said, holding his left hand palm down and jabbing a finger up into it.

First Combat Losses
In the 12 days since President Nixon ordered the resumption of the bombing, Washington has officially conceded losing 15 of the B-52's to enemy fire, the first losses in combat they have suffered. Hanoi says it has shot down 33.

A sampling of the crews here indicates that many believe neither figure. By their count, the number lost is somewhere in between. Of the 150 bombers based here, six or seven are believed to have gone down, the rest of the losses being sustained among the 50 bombers based in Thailand.



U.S. bombers at Andersen Air Force Base on Guam, from which the planes take off for missions against North Vietnamese areas

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islanders say they have friends among the crews who have found ways to get out of the dangerous missions. They say the Air Force prefers to send them home quietly rather than make a public issue of it.

Sabotage Is Reported

There are also reports here that members of flight crews have deliberately caused some of the complicated electronic machinery aboard a bomber to break down and thus cancel a mission. Some have reportedly neglected to arm the bombs so that they would not explode after they were dropped.

An Air Force spokesman said, however, that that had "absolutely not happened." He said that the B-52's here had a 96 per cent rate of effectiveness — of 100 bombers readied for a mission, 96 had flown to the targets and unloaded their bombs.

Perhaps the best place to hear what the fliers think is in the bars of the officers' club here. In one room, a group of young lieutenants and captains were like the fliers of old—boisterous, swaggering, and loud in their talk of danger and death.

"You know what the most dangerous positions are?" asked a blond pilot rhetorically. "No. 1, No. 2, and No. 3," he said, referring to the three planes in a flight, or "cell."

"Naw, you're safer than on the highways back in the U. S.," argued a tall dark-haired flier.

"Listen, that's crazy," said a third. "Figure the percentages."

No officer here, or in Saigon or in Washington, has publicly discussed the reasons for the sudden losses among the B-52's where there were none before. But listening to the fliers, young and veteran, gives a reasonably clear picture.

Most obvious has been the change in targets. The North Vietnamese and Vietcong in South Vietnam don't have the elaborate air-defense weapons that the Russians have supplied

for the defense of Hanoi and Haiphong.

Then there is the pace and magnitude of this operation, which an officer here called "the largest operation in the history of air power, the greatest massing of air power in terms of strike capability ever."

"The laws of statistics have just caught up with us," he said.

Tactics may also have accounted for the losses. B-52 crews are basically trained to carry nuclear weapons and each plane is considered a weapons system in itself. The fundamental tactic is to send one plane, or a cell of three, against a specific target.

That tactic was used, for the most part, over South Vietnam. "The big formations of World War II are a thing of the past," said an officer last spring.

Thus, when the B-52 bombing of North Vietnam began on Dec. 10, the same tactics were used. Flights of three took off from here every 30 or 40 minutes, in staggered patterns, on round-the-clock missions so that about 72 planes were in the air every 24 hours.

A Change of Tactics

But that stream of bombers allowed the North Vietnamese to concentrate their air defenses on each three-plane flight. The Air Force appears to have violated a basic principle of warfare—never to send forces into battle piecemeal because they can be chewed up by the enemy.

After the 36-hour pause in the bombing over Christmas, the Air Force partly switched tactics. The first raid that left here Tuesday afternoon was a World War II-style armada of 77 bombers, of which 76 returned. A group of about 24 bombers left here Wednesday morning and another of 21 bombers Wednesday night. Thursday night, a group of 27 hit North Vietnam.

In between, there have been

flights of three and six bombers but at much wider intervals than before. They may have been sent on missions over South Vietnam, where they face little opposition, but that could not be determined.

In any event, the massing of the B-52's appears to have forced the North Vietnamese to diffuse their air defenses and to have cut the rate of loss. Ten bombers were shot down before Christmas, five since, according to the official figures.

Another reason for the B-52 losses, said veteran fliers, is technology. The B-52 is a 20-year-old airplane that is being pitted against SAM's and MIG's of much more recent vintage. A 13-page secret Pentagon report seen here warned that the North Vietnamese have a new SAM from the Soviet Union.

The MIG's appear to have been more active than before. "I know a couple of tail gunners who are very happy," said an Air Force man, indicating that they had shot down MIG's. But that also indicated that the MIG's were getting close enough to the B-52's to hit them.

There is also a fatigue factor, which slows crew reactions. Each crew of five officers and an enlisted gunner flies three times a week. Each mission takes 17 hours or more from the time the crew reports for its briefing, flies at least 12 hours to and from Vietnam, including one or two tricky in-flight refuelings, and is debriefed on return.

A veteran pilot said: "I reach my level of fatigue in four hours. It doesn't make any difference after that how long we fly. I'm as tired as I'm going to get."

He added: "Then you ought to see the paperwork after each flight. We have to fill out form after form when we get back. I don't know what they do with it all."

Some fliers said that the B-52, which is called "BUFF"

for "big, ugly fat fellow," is an uncomfortable and cumbersome airplane to fly. The cockpit for the two pilots is hardly bigger than an oversized Volkswagen crammed with instruments. The places for the electronics-warfare officer and the gunner, and, on the lower flight deck, for the navigator and bombardier, are equally cramped. There is barely room anywhere to stand up straight and stretch. Crewmen can urinate into a relief tube during the flight but bowel movements have to wait.

Shop Talk at the Club

Most of the plane is a bomb bay capable of holding, in the G model, close to 30,000 pounds of bombs of 500, 750 or 1,000 pounds, including those carried externally. The D model can carry 60,000 pounds.

In a room next to the officers' club bar, four majors in their thirties talked quietly but not glumly about their day's work as men who have seen death and lost friends before. Those were men with families to think about back home. The fliers come here for six months but leave their families in the United States, except for a few who pay their own way to Guam.

The fliers don't agree on whether having families here is good or not. A pilot said: "Two of my crew are bringing their wives out next week but I'm not sure that's a good idea. Can you imagine what they will go through because they'll know every minute we're out there? Back in the States, they don't know. I wouldn't bring my wife out here for anything."

"Can you imagine," he went on, "what must have gone through the minds of the wives in the neighborhood here last week when the staff car drove down the street with the man who told John's wife that he was missing? Every one of those wives must have been watching to see where it would stop. I won't put my wife through that."