

B-52 Pilot Tells

SF Examiner

JAN 11 1973

Why He Balked

By George Esper

SAIGON — (AP) — The B-52 commander who balked at bombing North Vietnam after his 175th mission said today he refused because "the goals do not justify the mass destruction and killing."

"It was not specifically the bombing of the north," said Capt. Michael J. Heck, 30, of Chula Vista, Calif., in an interview. "There is enough suffering just in South Vietnam to warrant a discontinuation of the war. But the massive bombing of the north might have been the last straw and I think the step that specifically pushed me over the brink."

"After the cease-fire for Christmas, the massive bombardments resumed and I decided I had to take the step. I reached the decision Dec. 26 and I went to see my wing commander and informed him of my decision. He advised me to seek legal assistance."

2 Years in Prison

Heck, a 1964 alumnus of President Nixon's alma

mater, Whittier College, could get two years in a military prison if a court-martial convicts him of failure to obey a general order.

"I can live with that easier than I can with taking part in the war," he said.

The much-decorated flier said he began thinking about non-participation in the war as far back as last September, when he returned for his third B52 tour in Vietnam. He flew his last mission on Christmas Eve,

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against the Hanoi-Haiphong area.

"I came to the decision," he said, "that any war creates an evil far greater than anything it is trying to prevent, whatever the reasons, even for the self-determination of South Vietnam. The goals do not justify the mass destruction and killing. It's torn our own country apart."

Heck said he has applied for non-combat status as a conscientious objector. Meanwhile, he is assigned to administrative duties at his base in southern Thailand while undergoing investigation to determine whether he will be brought to trial.

The flier was asked about the controversy over when civilian areas were hit in the Hanoi and Haiphong regions.

"Anytime you bomb on the massive scale we did up there," he replied, "there's bound to be bombs off target, no question about it. I don't think we intentionally targeted civilian targets, but they inevitably become unintentional targets that are going to be hit."

"One possibility of going off target is maneuvering to avoid surface-to-air missiles. There are also certain inherent errors in any bombing equipment. You can't be exactly accurate. There are any number of human errors and the more planes the greater the possibility. There is no doubt that non-military targets were hit, but I don't think it was intentional."

Some Like It

Heck said he was disturbed by some pilots—"only a few"—who want to bomb civilians in North Vietnam.

"One man made the statement that he wanted to hit civilian targets in the north because it made him feel good to hurt them," Heck said. "That's the quote. But this is not typical. Most people here don't like what they are doing, but they follow orders."

A spokesman for the Strategic Air Command in Omaha, Neb., said Heck is "the first and only" B52 crew member to face a charge of "alleged failure to obey an order to fly a combat mission in Southeast Asia."

Sympathetic

Asked if other pilots had called him "chicken" or shunned him, Heck said:

"It's very surprising, how sympathetic most people are. A lot don't agree with me. A lot do, but for various reasons they can't do what I did. I don't have any family (outside of his parents) and I'm not making the Air Force a career. I have a lot less to lose."

"A lot of people don't agree with the bombing, but they honestly feel it is their duty, and they are following orders even though they may disagree. Even I did it for some time."

Heck said the heavy loss of B52s — 16 acknowledged by the U.S. Command with more than 100 airmen killed, captured or missing — "made a lot of people think whether it was worthwhile." Prior to the start of the blitz against Hanoi and Haiphong Dec. 18, only one B52 had

been shot down in seven and one-half years.

Flying over the less well defended areas prior to the shift in targets last month, there was not much feeling about what they were doing, Heck went on.

"No matter how you felt then, pro- or antiwar, there was a numbness about it. You'd go through the motions of a mission. There was no emotional involvement, no feeling on the part of anyone when the bombs were released. It was like training missions."

Emotions

"You walk by the trailers now and you see them putting the personal effects into a box. Almost everyone had somebody they knew missing. Nobody wants to go up there. There may be a very few who do, but I don't know them."

"I can't really say it caused a morale problem, but it made people think more. It brought a sense of emotion into the mission."

Asked if he had become afraid of flying, Heck replied, "Not really." He said that if he had, he could have applied to be grounded under "fear of flying" provisions and thus avoided facing a court-martial.

Disputes Letter

Heck said also he could not agree with a B52 navigator who wrote Sen. Charles Mathias (R-Md.), charging the Strategic Air Command with "stupidity and laxity" in planning the Hanoi-Haiphong raids.

The navigator said his B52 flight bombed the same target on the first and third nights of the raids and the same exit route was used on the return raid even though it was known that new surface-to-air missile sites had been built along the route. Because of the failure to change the route on the second flight, the navigator said, "the aircraft directly in front of us was shot down."

"I can't agree," Heck commented. "It was very hazardous, but after the first few missions safety precautions were taken. I have no gripes with the planners. My bone to pick is not with the executors but simply the idea we're doing it."

Wrote Family

Heck said he has written his parents, Mr. and Mrs. John W. Heck of Chula Vista, and his brother, Tim, a high school teacher in Maxwell, (Colusa county) about the step he had taken.