

B-52 Strike: 3 Seconds of Death

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SAIGON, Jan. 12 (AP)—Being caught by a B-52 bomb strike is "like being lead for three seconds," says Le Van Hieu. He lived through six of them.

Truong Van Thang, who has survived a dozen, reports: "Too many times and you lose your mind."

Strikes by the giant bombers are the most feared of American air attacks, but Hieu and Thang say ground soldiers, if brave, well trained and lucky, can live with them.

The war is over for these two men, ex-officers from North Vietnam. Both surrendered last year and are undergoing indoctrination in Saigon.

Hieu, in 22 years of Communist service, and Thang, in 13, saw scores of B-52 strikes, heard the whistle of bombs falling six miles through the air and the thunder when they hit. Each B-52 in a three-plane mission spreads more than 100 bombs—50,000 to 60,000 pounds of explosives—over a swath half a mile wide and a mile long and raises a curtain of black smoke that looks from afar like a forest fire.

"My first experience with the B-52s was in December 1965," said Thang, 32. "It was near Pleime, in the Central Highlands.

"When the spotter planes leave and the jungle goes quiet you know the B-52s are coming. But you don't know when until the first bomb explodes.

"One bomb hit about 10 yards from a cave where I was hiding. Blood poured out of my ears. I was deaf for a month."

Hieu, 41, recalled his last B-52 experience, in the Mekong Delta last November. "I was caught in the open when the first string of bombs hit. It was like a great wind. I was able to run to a bunker, but the second string hit closer, about 100 yards away.

"When a bomb hits further away the concussion is like swaying in a hammock, but when it is close it is like an electric shock.

"You hear nothing. You are deaf and blind. You have no thoughts, no sensations, no feelings.

"Afterwards you stand up, trembling. No one speaks for a long time. Those who can, try to dig out their companions who have been trapped in bunkers. Some just sit where they were."

Hieu cannot hear his watch tick at his right ear, but he considers himself lucky. Many who have lived have been deafened permanently, and some have been driven mad.

"To survive you must be calm. You must not care whether you live or die," Thang said. "If you cannot control your emotions it does something to your mind.

"We have a man like that here. He was under too many B-52 strikes. Every once in a while he will start jabbering wildly or break into song."

Hieu outlined his rules for physical survival in the battalion he commanded:

I never stationed my soldiers in a straight line, always in a zigzag, with each platoon 300 to 400 yards from the next. We stayed away from deep valleys and mountain tops and we made our camps at least 200 yards from the nearest water.

"We built A-shaped bunkers with strong legs, sunk in so that the point was flush with ground level. They had a zigzag floor plan, no more than four feet wide at the base. These could withstand a hit as close as five to seven yards away."

The Vietcong company of which Thang was deputy commander used A-shaped bunkers and U-shaped caves dug into mountainsides where even a direct hit would slide off.

"When a unit receives a direct hit, even though the bombs fall 100 to 200 yards apart, about 20 per cent are killed," said Hieu.

"Most are killed by pressure, which crushes the chest and batters the soft parts of the body. They might live one or two days, but on the third day they die.

"To protect ourselves, if there were two or three men, we would sit or squat side by side, linking arms very tightly and keeping our knees and arms tightly locked over our bellies and chests. If you are alone you half-kneel and half-lie on one side with one knee protecting your stomach and your arms locked across your chest. If in a cave, you place your palms against the roof to brace yourself.

"At first, before we had experience, we would try to cover our ears, but we found that this made a man's brain explode so we just forgot about the ears."