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The Strategy of the Old Bombers

By Hanson W. Baldwin

The lessons of the eleven-day bombing blitz against the Hanoi-Haiphong area are under intensive study in the Pentagon.

The loss of fifteen B-52 bombers and thirteen other aircraft in the attacks against the industrial-economic-communications heartland of North Vietnam surprised the American public. Air Force and Pentagon spokesmen maintain that the loss rate—fifteen bombers shot down, six or seven damaged (one of them perhaps irreparably)—out of a total of some 700 B-52 sorties flown represents a loss of only slightly more than 2 per cent, roughly comparable to the World War II rate of about 1.5 per cent for the entire war.

Nevertheless a variety of reasons for the losses—some of them highly technical—are being carefully analyzed.

The first and most important cause for the losses is that the United States was pitting what is essentially an obsolete weapons system—the B-52, which dates back to the state of the

art in the early 1950's—against the most modern and concentrated anti-aircraft defenses in the world.

The B-52 is a relatively slow subsonic bomber, limited (with bomb load) to the modest (for these days) altitudes of 30,000 to 40,000 feet, somewhat sluggish in maneuver, and not stressed for the G-forces often encountered by our lighter and faster fighter-bombers.

The air-defense system in North Vietnam is technically and electronically almost as advanced—with one exception, interceptor aircraft—as the Soviet system. The missile and anti-aircraft gun defenses around the Red River delta are more concentrated by far than those in any other area of comparable size in the world. There are hundreds of anti-aircraft guns and scores of SAM-2 missile sites.

More than 1,050 of the so-called "flying telegraph poles" were fired at our planes; after the first raids, most of them were launched—not singly—but in salvos of multiple missiles in a kind of missile-barrage fire. Carpets of bursting flak were laid over other areas at lower altitudes.

The SAM-2 missile was specifically designed for use against high-level bombers: 30,000 to 40,000 feet is an optimum altitude for the missile. Moreover, the carpet-bombing techniques of the B-52's require, for optimum accuracy, straight and level flight by three-plane elements during "bombs away."

Another factor in the loss rate was the limited flak-suppression effort. To maximize surprise and mass, the B-52's started their attacks on the very first day, Dec. 18, before any extended and intensive efforts to eliminate SAM sites, radar sites and anti-aircraft gun positions had been made. No bombers were lost on the first mission. Attacks on SAM sites and radars and the use of missiles that "home" on enemy radar apparently increased as the raids continued, and the B-52 loss rate—none at first—peaked to eleven in the first five days and then gradually declined to none on the last day.

And finally, the enemy appears to have won in the initial stages of the eleven-day blitz, a skirmish in the unending "silent" war of electronics and counter-electronics.

The "war of the ether" really started some 33 years ago during the Battle of Britain, when twenty-odd radar stations around the coast of Britain—the "first operational radar system anywhere in the world"—surprised the German Luftwaffe and led to an effective defense.

Hanoi's defenses demonstrated improved Russian competence in the "silent war."

The total loss rate of the big bombers—pitted for the first time on the enemy's terms against modern air defenses—were not, in any way, crippling, but could be, if long continued. A 2 per cent loss rate is supportable for years of warfare as World War II showed, as long as replacements for bombers and crews are available. But, measured against the total number of B-52's actually earmarked for the Vietnam war—about 200—the absolute loss was 7.5 per cent in eleven days, and there is today no bomber production line and only a limited air crew replacement training program.

Hanson W. Baldwin, now retired, was formerly military affairs editor for The Times.