

# Some B-52 crewmen bitter over losses in Hanoi raids

WASHINGTON — We have talked by overseas phone to B-52 crewmen who are bitter over their losses during the controversial Hanoi raids last December. Some B-52s were shot down, they charge, because of poor planning.

We have also had access to records

## Jack Anderson

which tell what really happened over Hanoi. The records confirm the complaints of crewmen that failure to change the flight patterns for three nights endangered lives. But even after the flight patterns were belatedly altered, the toll of B-52s remained high.

One pilot, a veteran of many combat missions, was so upset that he wrote to President Nixon on Christmas Day. "The number of B52s shot down," he complained, "were not necessarily due to enemy marksmanship but rather due to inept, unimaginative and indifferent planning"

### A poignant letter

The same pilot sent an even more poignant letter to Sen. George McGovern, himself a former bomber pilot. "I am an Academy graduate that has become frustrated with and ashamed of the career I have chosen," wrote the embittered crewman, "for I have seen the ideals that I learned at the Academy become a sham in the working Air Force. Dignity is more important than integrity, and 'cover-your-ass' has replaced honor."

The pilot spelled out some of his specific complaints: "If the military planners had done everything possible to avoid the losses and they occurred anyway, then assuming the raids were necessary, the vast number of aircraft and men shot down would be acceptable. But to have so poorly planned the mission and then for the military to state that the losses were expected, is to us tragic.

"It is not true that the planners were limited as to the flight paths required to get the B-52s in and out of North Vietnam. After the crews complained of the flight planning, the next days of raiding saw drastic changes to the ways that the B-52s entered and departed the Hanoi-Haiphong area."

### Like shooting ducks

The secret reports to the Pentagon confirm that the big bombers, winging in one after another like ducks in a shooting gallery, followed the same flight patterns for three nights in a row. Thereafter, the B-52s varied their approach, hitting Hanoi from

every point on the compass.

A top Air Force general acknowledged to us, "in retrospect," that the flight tactics should have been changed earlier. On December 18, the first day of the saturation bombing, a salvo of 100 SAM missiles brought down two B-52s. On the second day, approximately 150 missiles were tracked, but they bagged only one bomber.

The third day was the worst. The anti-aircraft crews below had their missiles trained on the B-52 flight path. When the great bombers arrived following the same heading, the sky suddenly was filled with missiles. In shotgun bursts, more than 400 streaked up at the B-52s. It was a miracle, the shaken crewmen told us, that only three bombers were knocked down.

### Flight pattern changed

Their complaints finally moved the Eighth Air Force command to change the flight pattern. On the fourth day, the defenders were able to get off only 70 SAMs. Nevertheless, they bagged another three bombers.

Thereafter, both the SAM missiles and B-52 losses declined. By Christmas Eve, the defenders were able to launch only seven SAMs. They used the Christmas truce, however, to repair their defenses. On December 26, they sent up a barrage of 100 missiles, another 120 the next night. But by December 29, the number was back down to 20.

All told, 15 B-52s were shot down, another nine heavily damaged during "Operation Linebacker," as the Hanoi raids were called. Six of the damaged bombers have been repaired. Two more should be ready to return to the air in February; the ninth will take until July to rehabilitate.

### Crewmen complain bitterly

Several B-52 crewmen complained bitterly about the Hanoi missions, but only Capt. Michael Heck refused to fly any more bombing raids. An F-4 Phantom pilot, Capt. Dwight J. Evans Jr. also refused to fly any more combat missions. The total dropped from flying status during the eight years of the Vietnam War is only 23—19 because of fear, four for refusal. This compares with 979 who were suspended from flying status during the Korean War for motivational reasons.

Footnote: The pilot who wrote to Nixon and McGovern signed his name. When we reached him in Guam, he acknowledged writing the letters but refused to discuss them. Afterward, his family appealed to us not to use his name.