

What Caused the B-52 Cambodia Bombing Error

Washington

A senior Air Force officer said yesterday the accidental bombing that killed 137 Cambodians in the town of Neak Luong on August 6 was due primarily to the failure of the B-52's navigator to throw a single switch.

The officer, who asked not to be identified, also confirmed that the B-52 was using a technique of finding its target that the Air Force abandoned six years ago in South Vietnam as "too dangerous."

The technique involves the use of a ground beacon broadcasting high frequency radio waves on which the bomber fixes as a navigational point. The beacon enables the bomber, using a computer on board, to hit targets in the vicinity.

SWITCH

However, if the navigator does not throw a switch on a so-called "offset bombing" mechanism, the bomber zeroes in on the beacon instead of the intended target. This is what happened at Neak Luong, the officer said.

The officer said that an inquiry by the Strategic Air Command at Eighth Air Force Headquarters on Guam had also established that Cambodian government soldiers had placed the ground beacon, which he described as "no bigger than a woman's handbag," on a pole six feet off the ground in the heart of the garrison town.

"It should have been put a mile or so away in the boon-docks," he contended.

ACCIDENT

A similar accident caused the Air Force to abandon the ground beacon system in 1967, when a B-52 radar-navigator failed to pull the offset bombing switch to its "in" position. The bomb load dropped directly on a hovering helicopter that was carrying the beacon, "blowing it out of the sky."

The officer said the ground beacon technique had been replaced in South Vietnam by "ground radar," a system manned by Strategic Air Command personnel.

Ground radar picked up incoming B-52s and by computing their positions relative to the intended targets directed them to the sites.

5 Missing Newsmen Reported OK

Saigon

A Viet Cong spokesman said yesterday five European newsmen who were missing Wednesday in a Viet Cong zone north of Saigon were safe and being well treated.

The newsmen drove through a South Vietnamese government military check-point without stopping on route 13 about 35 miles north of Saigon on Wednesday morning.

They are Jean Louis Arnaud, Saigon bureau chief of the agency France press news agency and West German TV correspondent Peter Scholl Latour, and three camera crewmen.

Reuters

"But when the cease-fire took effect we pulled out all the ground radar," he said, "and that is why they returned to the beacon in the later raids on Cambodia."

Compounding the danger in the Neak Luong incident, he continued, was the assignment of an inexperienced crew to the mission.

"It was what the Air Force calls a 'five-X crew'—a pickup crew," he said, "and the navigator was a man who was out on his first mission ever in Southeast Asia."

The officer said the inquiry indicated that the navigator, who is supposed to assist the radar-navigator on the bombing run, "froze" at the critical moment.

"The generals were well aware of the dangers of the system and everybody knew what could happen when you have a scratch crew," he said. "Ninety-nine times out of 100 you can hack it. But this time it didn't."

"It often happens that a new kid freezes," he said. "So the radar-navigator figured he had to do it all by himself and he did, except for switching the offset from 'out' to 'in.'"

New York Times