

Operation Arc Light marked first time in combat for B-52

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BARKSDALE AIR FORCE BASE, La. -- Fifty years ago, the B-52 entered combat for the first time as part of Operation Arc Light in Vietnam, which was the culmination of several years of planning and preparation.

Strategic Air Command had always harbored a residual conventional capability with its bombers, but it was not until the early 1960s that its leaders began planning for limited war capabilities. Originally designed as a cold war nuclear bomber, the B-52 required modifications to allow it to carry conventional weapons.

"SAC had been testing a conventional bomb training program for selected B-52 wings since 1963," Shawn Bohannon, AFGSC History Office, said. "In particular, the 320th Bomb Wing at Mather AFB, California, tested dropping more than 100 conventional bombs from a B-52.

The 320th was one of the units selected by SAC to train and be ready to use conventional bombs on short notice, Bohannon said. By October 1964, all the wing's aircraft had undergone a modification enabling them to carry 24 750-pound bombs externally, almost doubling the bomber's original conventional bomb load. Lt. Gen. Archie J. Old, Jr., Fifteenth Air Force Commander, was quoted as saying:

"If anyone had suggested a few years ago that we hang iron-bombs from our airplanes, we would have thrown up our arms in horror. Now we are begging to stay in the plan - to get in on the fighting, and make use of our unique capability to pin-point targets."

In February 1965, 30 conventionally-laden B-52Fs deployed to Andersen Air Base, Guam. The crews, who hailed from Mather and Barksdale Air Force Bases, planned to strike targets located in North Vietnam. However, the B-52s sat on the ground for several months before they were used.

"Political reasons proved to be the chief reason for the delay," Bohannon said. "Many in political and military circles equated using B-52s in combat with an escalation in the war, likely as the bombers were nuclear capable. Until the B-52s were used for the first time, smaller Air Force and South Vietnamese tactical aircraft were, however, flown on strike missions in South Vietnam."

Bohannon added that after President Johnson's issuance of National Security Action Memorandum No. 328 on April 6, 1965, which permitted a wider employment of U.S. troops, and his appeal to bring more friendly nations into the fight - only South Korea, New Zealand, and Australia responded with troops - the fighting in Vietnam began to intensify as it transitioned to an American-led war. This set the stage for the combat debut of the B-52.

On June 18, 1965, 30 bombers (15 from the 7 BW and 15 from the 320 BW) took off from Andersen headed for a target located in South Vietnam and measuring about one mile by two miles square. Earlier, weapons technicians had loaded twenty four of the B-52s with 51 750-pound general purpose bombs while the remaining six carried 27 1,000-pound semi-armor piercing bombs internally and the normal 24 750-pounders externally. In all, the 30 bombers carried 1,530 bombs into combat.

"The B-52s brought an enormous bomb load to bear on enemy targets and base camps, far more than was possible with tactical aircraft," Bohannon said. "Plus, the altitudes that the B-52s flew at introduced an element of surprise as the enemy could neither see nor hear the bombers as they approached the target area."

Unfortunately, that first mission was fraught with difficulty. It began with tragedy when two of the B-52s collided, killing eight of the crew while another was declared as missing-in-action. Next, another bomber with mechanical malfunctions could not receive fuel from an orbiting KC-135 and had to return to Guam. Lastly, prior to arriving at the target, several aircrews realized they would not be able to release their weapons due to mechanical malfunctions. Nonetheless, the remaining B-52 crews entered the target area and released 1,299 bombs.

A quick survey by allied recon teams found little to no damage in the target area and few dead. The press immediately focused on the unorthodox use of a strategic bomber drawing the analogy of "using a sledge hammer to kill gnats." But, while the criticism tended to focus on the costly B-52 air-to-air collision, the military considered the mission a success. Historians later wrote, "that the B-52's mission was to harass the VC, to disrupt his normal activities, to permit him no respite from danger even in his jungle redoubts, and to wear him down psychologically."

However, in the months that followed, while B-52 crews continued to harass the Viet Cong, they eventually accepted a new mission, a mission to directly support the allied ground forces. This began in November 1965 during the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley, the first major encounter of the war between U.S. Troops and the North Vietnamese Army. But later in December, B-52 crews also supported the Marines during Operation Harvest Moon.

By the end of 1965, SAC's 30 bomber force had increased its monthly sortie rate to roughly 300 and by the end of 1966 more than half the B-52 strike requests came from field commanders.

In a short amount of time during the war in Vietnam, B-52 crews transformed the airplane from a Cold War nuclear bomber to a close-air-support juggernaut. B-52 crews provided support to ground forces, harassed the Viet Cong, and wrote a new chapter in the bomber's history.

Editor's Note: Portions of this article are re-published from the Dec. 4, 2012, story, "ARC LIGHT marked beginning of B-52 involvement in Vietnam." The AFGSC Office of the Command Historian also contributed to this article.