The Toronto Sun, Monday September 10, 1984

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Brief for the B1

Last week the first operational B1B heavy bomber rolled off the production line. After years of debate and hesitation, after once being cancelled by Jimmy Carter, America's first new bomber in 30 years was, at last, a reality.

Even the crash a few days earlier of a test prototype B1 failed to dampen the enthusiasm of the U.S. Air Force, and with good reason. The 100 planned B1s would restore the conventional and nuclear striking power of the air force and, incidentally, ensure that the Strategic Air Command remained dominated by pilots rather than missile technicians.

The B1 arrived just in time. America's fleet of 316 B-52 bombers is so old that most of the pilots flying the aircraft are younger than their planes. The elderly B-52s are no longer considered capable of penetrating heavily defended zones of the Soviet Union; most are being reconfigured as cruise-missile carriers. No one would be expected to drive a 30-year-old car, but this is exactly what U.S. Air Force pilots have to do.

Why does the U.S. need heavy bombers in an age of ICBMs? First, because the Russians have a paranoia about air defence. Fully 25% of the current defence budget is devoted to defence of Soviet airspace. This includes 600,000 troops, 7,000 radars, 12,000 missile launchers and 2,600 interceptors. So long as U.S. bombers can penetrate Russian airspace, the Soviets will have to support this massive expenditure.

Each B1 can carry a nuclear payload equivalent to at least 50 Minuteman missiles. Bombers have the added advantage of being recallable — missiles, once fired, cannot be stopped. One B1 bomber can destroy five Soviet cities in a single mission.

Critics of the B1 have claimed that even with its low-altitude flight capability it will not be able to penetrate Soviet air defences. They need look at last year's Korean airline incident.

Startling inefficiency

Flight 007 lumbered along at 35,000 feet over some of Russia's densest air defences. In spite of targeting anti-aircraft missiles and scrambling scores of interceptors, the Russians only brought down the airliner as it was exiting Soviet airspace. Intercepted Russian communications show confusion, panic and startling inefficiency in their much-vaunted defences.

Now imagine a B1 coming in at 300 ft. altitude, hugging the earth's contures, using valleys to mask its path from Russian radar. The B1's powerful electronic warfare systems would jam or spoof Russian radars, creating false images and "snow." If the Soviets were barely able to shoot down one high-flying airliner, how would they cope with scores of B1s flying in at treetop altitude — and with a radar cross-section 100 times smaller than a B-52 bomber or, for that matter, a Boeing 747.

In addition to its nuclear-strike role, the B1 has another very important mission — conventional warfare. Bombers provide the ability to project great power over long ranges, a vital concern for American strategists who must be prepared to fight battles far from U.S. shores.

A squadron of B1s, for example, could strike at Russian spearheads attacking the Persian Gulf within 16 hours of an alert. By contrast, U.S. ground troops would take weeks to arrive. Cuba, a growing threat to NATO maritime supply lines in wartime, could be flattened by sustained bomber strikes. Just the presence overhead of conventionally armed B1s would do much to quiet the ambitions of pesky Third World troublemakers.

Equally important, B1s will greatly enhance U.S. naval capabilities. Armed with Harpoon and Tomahawk anti-ship missiles, a single B1 can assure control of thousands of square miles of ocean, freeing naval vessels for more pressing duties.

The ability of the B1 to fly unrefuelled for thousands of miles and strike at enemy naval units means that no Soviet fleet is safe anywhere in the world.

Enormously expensive

Thanks to its huge bomb load, the B1 can also carry large numbers of mines. Within a few hours, B1s could seal off the narrow choke points in the Norwegian Sea and Sea of Japan through which the Soviet fleet must pass in order to gain open waters. One B1, armed with mines, could close the exit from the Baltic at the Skagerrak.

Now for the negatives. The B1s are enormously expensive, some $280 million each. They are also subsonic and not very manoeuvreable. Originally designed to be supersonic and agile, delays and cost concerns finally limited the B1 to lower speed. But, as a bomber, the B1 is still a formidable machine.

The Russians do not number among the liberal-left armchair critics of the B1. They have copied it and, perhaps, brought out an even better version, their new Blackjack bomber. It is larger and faster than the B1, supersonic and more agile. Only in its electronic suite is it inferior to the B1. The Russians are also producing updated versions of their old, but still excellent, TU-95 turboprop bomber, probably intended as a carrier for their new cruise missiles.

In June, the Russians used their TU-16 medium bombers for the first time in anger to stage massive carpet-bombing attacks against Afghan rebels in the Panjshir Valley. The results were, apparently, nearly as devastating as the American B-52 strikes against communist troops during the Vietnam War.

These developments mean that heavy bombers, only recently derided as obsolete, are now very much back in military vogue. The Soviets are greatly worried about the B1. Now our turn is coming to worry about the new generation of Russian bombers and cruise missiles.

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