

BUFFS OVER THE BALKANS

In an echo of a bygone war,
American heavy bombers of the
2nd Bomb Wing, Barksdale AFB,
La., and 5th BW, Minot AFB,
N.D., deployed to a base in Eng-
land and took the fight to an
enemy deep in Europe.

USAF photography by SrA. Greg L. Davis and SSgt. Efrain Gonzalez

***Bombs Gone.** Note the empty pylon under the starboard wing of this USAF B-52H, heading back to England and its temporary base at RAF Fairford, overflying snowcapped Balkan mountains. This BUFF's crew has just put iron on target during an Allied Force combat mission. The bombers of the 2nd and 5th Bomb Wings were combined to form the 2nd Air Expeditionary Group.*





To the Target. A B-52H speeds toward a target inside Yugoslavia during an Allied Force mission, for which it carried approximately 45 500-pound iron bombs. The photo was snapped at high altitude over the Adriatic Sea just minutes before the bomber began its run-in to the target. Note the icing on the tips of the massive wings, caused by flying at high altitude for an extended period.

Today's BUFFs are all B-52H models, delivered to the Air Force in 1961 and 1962. Even now, the aircraft still looks sleek and deadly on its way to the target. While most attention focused on the B-52's newer stablemates—the B-1s and B-2s—the older warhorse saw lots of action in the Balkan operation.

"The target for today." Crews from the bomb wings hold a pre-flight maintenance brief prior to engine start at RAF Fairford, UK. Their mission was to conduct cruise missile launches at targets in Yugoslavia. Any mission generates intense planning, but the Allied Force crews did not take any chances, going over and over even well-practiced procedures.

Early in the conflict, the Air Force required crews to decline to release their names to the press and to remove names that had been proudly painted on each aircraft, the better to avoid reprisals.



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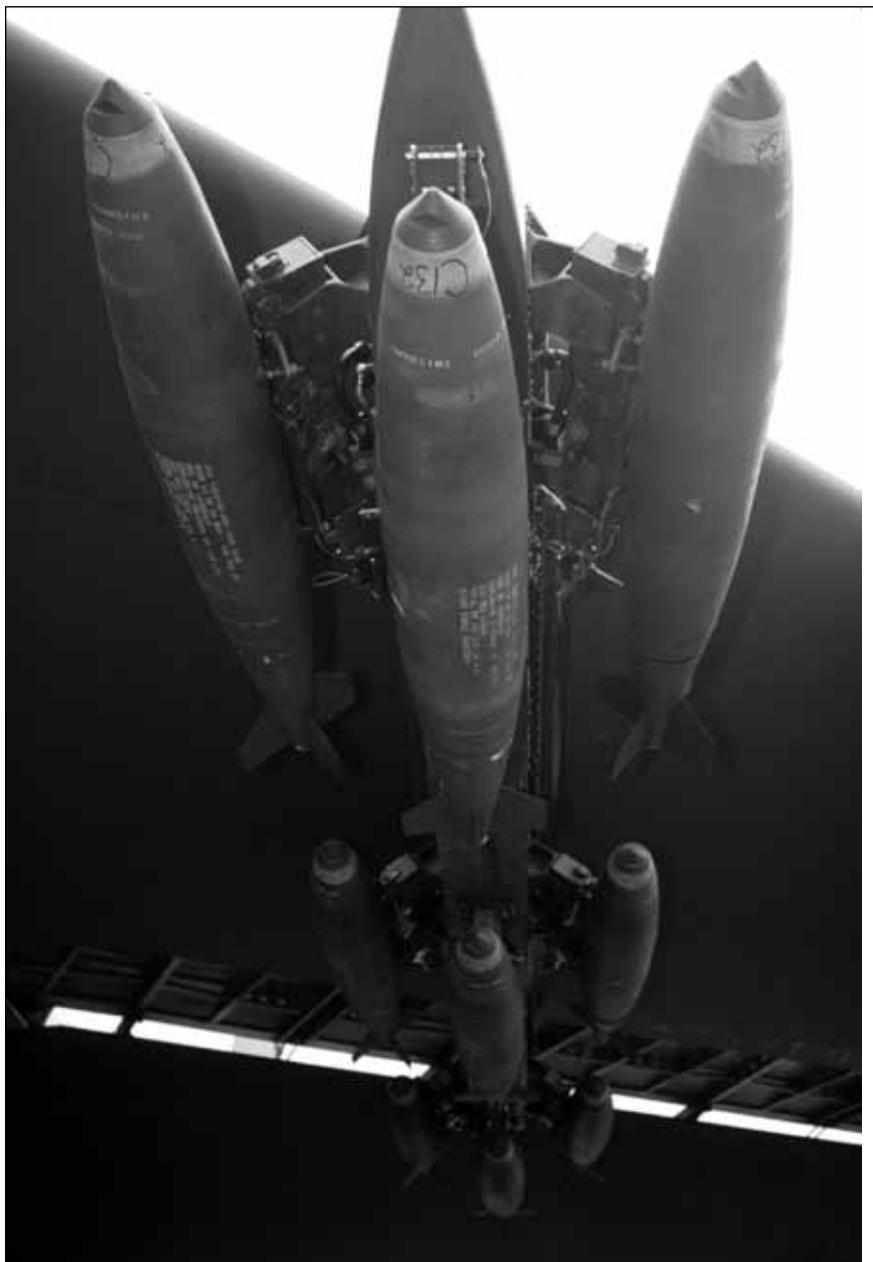
Before the Strike. Allied Force B-52 crew members step to their aircraft, ready to begin preparations for an April cruise missile strike on Yugoslav targets. A B-52 crew includes two pilots, an electronic warfare officer, a radar navigator, and a navigator.



Rack 'Em. A BUFF's normal load includes bombs carried in its cavernous bomb bay as well as on external racks on pylons wedged between the fuselage and inboard engine nacelle. Above, Mk 82 500-pound bombs hang from the racks of the interior bomb bay of a B-52H. (Some of the bombs bear chalk artwork and messages.) At right, nine Mk 82 500-pounders hang from the port-side under-wing pylon of a B-52H that is about to launch. The yellow band at the nose of the bombs signifies that each is a live weapon. B-52s dropped hundreds of these weapons during the operation.

Some aircraft participating in the campaign were capable of dropping only conventional, general-purpose iron bombs.

Others had already received planned modifications, allowing them to drop Conventional Air Launched Cruise Missiles and AGM-142 Have Nap missiles.



One at a Time. At left, munitions specialists work to attach a 500-pound bomb to a B-52H under-wing pylon. Above, other munitions personnel move a 500-pounder to a B-52H.



Intensity. In a unique shot (left), the pilots—masks on, visors down—prepare to make the run to the target. (Seated between the pilots is USAF photographer SrA. Greg L. Davis, who flew on two combat missions for this story.)

Below, one gets a view from the cockpit of a B-52H as it heads toward a target inside Yugoslavia. Visible outside the window is another B-52H leaving contrails while flying at high altitude.

Where military targets were isolated, B-52s were free to use gravity bombs, especially against targets like barracks. Even so, the BUFFs were not used to lay waste to vast areas, as was done in Vietnam. USAF officials said multiple explosions from today's better-equipped bombers could be confined in a footprint only 1,000 feet long.



On Course. At right, a B-52H navigator works at his station during a combat mission. The navigator doesn't get an office window, but he's able to "see" much more, as he monitors a wide array of signals to make sure the aircraft is on course.





Symbols. Above, 15 CALCM silhouettes adorn the fuselage of this B-52H from Barksdale. The aircraft also carries the POW/MIA shield and the nickname "Free Bird" beneath the cockpit windows. Note the names of the crew chiefs have been removed from within the outline of the map of Louisiana, conforming with an ACC directive to eliminate from combat aircraft all possible personal identifying factors.

At right, massive contrails are left by a B-52H while flying at high altitude on the way to a Yugoslav target. This aircraft is home-based at Minot AFB, N.D. When the mission was complete and as the crew turned back to England, they began the process of evaluating the mission, lessons learned, the location and intensity of the threat, and so forth. Mission debrief can last longer than the pre-brief.



USAF photos by S/A Greg L. Davis

USAF photo by SSgt. Efrain Gonzalez



The Next One. At left, crews from the 2nd and 5th BWs engage in a mass briefing for the next mission. These crews and aircraft have since returned home to the United States, but they stand ready for a return to action, if the need arises. ■