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B-52

(DOCU - GERMANY-U.S.-SWITZERLAND)

A Cofilm (Humburg)-Big Sky Film (U.S.)-Dschoint Ventschr Filmproduktion (Zurich) co-production. (International sales: Basis Film, Berlin.) Produced by Albert Schwinges, Hartmut Bitomsky.

Directed, written by Hartmut Bitomsky, from an idea by Ben Nicholson. Camera (color), Volker Langhoff, Hugo Kroiss; editor, Theo Bromin; sound, Gerhard Metz, James R. Benning; assistant director, Mike Jarmon. **Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (Forum)**, Feb. 13, 2001. Running time: 122 MIN.

By DAVID STRATTON

This sober, nonpolemical documentary dispassionately relates the story of America's B-52 bomber, tracing the history of the aircraft from its inception in the Cold War days of 1947 until now. Filmmaker Hartmut Bitomsky needs nothing more than the cold facts surrounding this awesome weapon to get across a message

Turn to next page

B-52

Continued from previous page
about the importance of peace. Quietly impressive film might prove too demanding for theatrical play, but deserves TV slots.

With a wingspan of 185 feet, a weight of 450,000 pounds, a maximum speed of 638 mph, a range of 8,388 miles without refueling (but capable of mid-air refueling) and a crew of only six, the B-52 is indeed a juggernaut. Designed as a high-altitude carrier of nuclear bombs, the plane was designed to withstand the radiation of its own attacks.

In fact, a B-52 has never dropped a nuclear bomb. Archive material from the 1950s shows the early models, which became the center of Strategic Air Command policy, with its famous motto, "Peace Is Our Profession."

Scenes of the giant bombers refueling in flight inevitably recall Stanley Kubrick's masterful black comedy, "Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb" (1964). One retired vet describes flying a mission in the early '60s that he feared might end in an attack on the Soviet Union.

In the present, pilots and other crew members escort Bitomsky and his camera around a B-52, explaining (up to a point) how it all works.

Considerable footage is devoted to the role the B-52 played in Vietnam, with eyewitnesses talking about what it was like to be on the ground and in the firing line, while U.S. vets relate their impressions. Footage of cluster bombs raining down on the landscape, and contemporary footage of the pock-marked terrain, tell their own story.

Bitomsky also refers to B-52 accidents, notably the events of Jan. 17, 1966, near Palomares, Spain, when a B-52 collided with the aircraft that was refueling it in mid-air. Four nuclear weapons fell from the wreckage. Two years later, near Thule in Greenland, another B-52 crashed, and the nuclear payload of four H-bombs disappeared under the ice.

The B-52s are now obsolete, and, in scenes reminiscent of "The Best Years of Our Lives," the carcasses of dismembered planes sit incongruously at an Arizona air base.

The overall effect of spending two hours with this material is rather devastating. So much intelligence, effort and money went into producing these weapons of destruction, which, there's no doubt, were successful as a Cold War deterrent, but at what cost? "B-52," despite its length, sustains its interest in a fascinating subject.