

Nightmare up North – B-52s Over Hanoi in Linebacker II

By Paul Novak Vietnam Magazine

Truly it was "one of the most awesome armadas ever assembled," as Major Bill Stocker, in command of the lead B-52, later described it. The roar could be heard and vibrations felt 10 miles away when our 78 giant bombers went to full throttle on all eight turbojet engines, one after the other, over 2½ hours, and took off from Andersen Air Force Base in Guam.

Thousands of observers cheered the spectacular sight – the complex choreography of the largest launch of B-52s ever undertaken. The 26 three-ship cells of aircraft moved from 5 miles of walled-in, fortified parking areas and taxiways into position on the runway. The spectators included the crew of a Russian trawler off the coast of Guam.

Forty-two additional US bombers left later from the U-Tapao airfield in Thailand. We were all headed for Hanoi and the port city of Haiphong. The trawler's crew radioed Hanoi and gave the North Vietnamese hours of advance notice that the BUFFs (Big Ugly Fat Fellows) were on their way. The date was Dec. 26, 1972. All 120 Boeing B-52s plus dozens of Air Force, Navy and Marine support aircraft would reach their targets and drop thousands of tons of ordnance over a 15-minute period.

Some of us would not return.

I was an Air Force captain and the navigator of a six-man crew from Westover Air Force Base in Massachusetts that included aircraft commander Captain Richard "Dick" Purinton, co-pilot Captain Malcolm "Mac" McNeill, radar navigator and bombardier Lt. Col. Jean Beaudoin, electronic warfare officer Major Bob Dickens and tail gunner Master Sgt. Calvin Creasser.

We were one of the lucky teams that made it "over the fence," safely out of enemy territory after hitting our target. The December 26 flight, part of Operation Linebacker II, which began December 18, was our second mission over the enemy's capital city and our third in North Vietnam.

Most Heavily Defended City

In 1972 Hanoi was considered the most heavily defended city in the world, protected by layers of air defense and the sheer massed quantity of Soviet-made supersonic surface-to-air missiles and MiG fighter aircraft. In previous air campaigns over North Vietnam – Rolling Thunder in the mid-1960s and Linebacker I in mid-1972 – the US military command had not allowed B-52s to attack Hanoi's air defenses.

The North Vietnamese used early-warning radar with a range of about 170 miles to spot incoming B-52s. The located target was handed off to fire-control radar that directed the SAMs and at about 40 miles provided more refined data on the position, altitude and speed of the arriving aircraft. Soviet-built MiG-17s, -19s and the technologically advanced -21s, strong

competition for American fighters, were launched against the bombers to "pace" them and report altitude and speed to the SAM operators.

B-52s confronted the SAM threat with electronic countermeasures, such as jammers that created an "electronic cloud" over enemy radar and thus covered the aircraft's specific location. Flying in three-ship cells maximized this effect, hiding all three aircraft.

As the lead navigator, or "Nav," of our three-ship formation, I had to get those aircraft to the target within 30 seconds of our scheduled drop time in a coordinated attack with the 117 lumbering giants in the other cells.

We were coasting into Qui Nhon, South Vietnam, after a five-hour leg from Andersen and an air-to-air refueling over the Philippines, when I called out to Purinton, "Pilot, Nav, right to 3-4-0," giving our intended heading in compass degrees. The only sound in the aircraft was the comforting roar of the engines.

It was also my job to advise the crew of action points – entering the threat zone, the initial point of the bomb run and the time to target: "Crew, Nav, we're 25 minutes south of the Gulf of Tonkin, about one hour to the target." Those updates ensured that the items on the bomb-run checklists would be completed. Each crewmember performed critical tasks at designated points along the flight route. Missing one of these in hostile territory could prove fatal.

I was stationed on the windowless lower deck along with Beaudoin, a gray-haired Frenchman. As our radar navigator – "Radar" or just RN during flight – Beaudoin had to direct the rendezvous with the Boeing KC-135 air-to-air refueling tanker, prepare the bombing system, locate the precise aiming point for our target and release our 54,000 pounds of ordnance.

Trouble Over the Gulf

"Pilot, Nav, we've got a problem down here." My navigation position counters, which showed our latitude and longitude, had failed. The counters were continually updated by the radar navigator, who gets latitude and longitude figures by locating a known radar return on the ground and placing a set of electronic crosshairs on it, much like an arcade video game.

"Nav, Pilot, what's your plan?" Purinton asked.

"We have the radar. We'll go range and bearing since I can't use the counters." This meant I would have to manually identify ground returns from my 5-inch radarscope. Then I would plot their range and bearing from the aircraft on my chart in order to initiate turns and call action points.

"You want No. 2 to take over navigation for the cell?" was the pilot's logical question. I wanted to remain as the lead navigator. I was trained to work without the counters and knew I could. We were 10 minutes from hostile territory.

"No problem. I can get us to the target," I replied. We were entering unfamiliar territory, and I realized it would be a challenge to identify radar returns. Many of the ground landmarks were built of wood, which does not reflect radar. This was, in fact, a big problem.

"Rog, copy," was the pilot's only response. He understood the situation and trusted us to get the job done. For the first time, a knot formed in my stomach.

"Crew, Nav, we're over water and into the Gulf of Tonkin." This first warning of hostile territory alerted everyone to keep a sharp eye as we made our way toward the coast of North Vietnam.

Threat Area

"Pilot, Nav, left to 2-9-0. Crew, seven minutes to next turn. We're 60 miles from the coast. Seventeen minutes to target."

I instructed electronic warfare officer Dickens to watch for SAMs, even though I knew he was already focused on that activity: "EW, Nav, threat area at the turn."

"Crew, EW, I have launch on two: 1 o'clock and 9 o'clock. No uplink." An "uplink" meant the North Vietnamese ground radar was sending guidance signals to the missile. No uplink was good news for us. That meant it would be easier to dodge the two missiles.

"Pilot, Nav, right to 3-5-5. Crew, 20 miles from coast-in. RN let's get the checklists done."

We were 70 miles from Hanoi. "I've got a SAM!" Purinton called.

"EW has uplink."

SAMs suddenly came at us like an angry swarm of bees. We were told later that more than 200 of them were fired at the seven waves of B-52s that night. Our bombers couldn't run from them. We cruised at 450 mph; the SAM at 2,400 mph.

But no one panicked. When we realized we hadn't been hit, we instantly went back to work and got ready to unleash total destruction on the Van Dien vehicle depot, 18 miles south of Hanoi.

"Crew, guns," called tail gunner Creasser, who sat 140 feet behind the rest of us. "I have aircraft at 7 o'clock, tracking."

The tail gunner, manning four .50-caliber machine guns, each with 600 rounds of ammunition, used radar to track and target hostile aircraft. But the plane Creasser spotted this time turned out to be a friendly escort, a McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom II.

Our small tables on the lower deck were covered with maps, navigation plotters, checklists, stopwatches and a variety of other navigation equipment. Amid the mess, the radar navigator and I methodically kept the aircraft on time and on course for the bomb run to Hanoi.

"RN, Nav, confirm that return is Thai Binh," a city about 70 miles from Hanoi.

Beaudoin set the radar range at 100 miles, and Hanoi popped up at our 11 o'clock position, right where it should be. I stared at it for a moment wondering what was in store for us, certain that I didn't want to know the answer.

"You're right, Nav. It's Thai Binh."

"Pilot, Nav, left to 3-2-0. Crew, seven minutes to target. Radar, bomb run checklist."

The interphone chatter crescendoed as we neared the target. The co-pilot, gunner and pilot called out SAM launches and clock positions. The electronic warfare officer confirmed SAM reports and told us whether missiles had locked on to us. Beaudoin and I reported navigation points, times to target and the action points that alerted other crewmembers to the tasks they needed to perform. It was the organized chaos verbalized by a B-52 combat crew at war. Each crew member knew what needed to be done and accomplished it.

One might think fear would lurk about or even dominate the thoughts of a combat flight crew facing possible death or capture and torture. But it didn't. Perhaps the training, the necessity of getting a job done or the frenetic activity pushed such thoughts aside. I don't really know. I honestly don't remember feeling afraid. And in talking later with other crewmembers, I learned that fear had no home on that aircraft.

TO BE CONTINUED - THE CONTENT SIZE WAS TOO BIG FOR A SINGLE POST!

Bomb Run

In six minutes our three-ship cell of B-52s was scheduled to unload 162,000 pounds of explosives on the vehicle depot, rendering it unusable to the North Vietnamese. To reach the target, we had to go through "wall-to-wall SAMs every step of the way," as one crew member said.

We started the bomb run with our three aircraft arranged in an offset triangle, separated by 1 mile of distance and 500 feet of altitude. The formation was crucial to obtain that "jamming" effect on enemy radar, which enhanced our chances of survival.

The radar navigator placed the electronic crosshairs on our aiming point for the target.

"Nav, confirm aim point," Beaudoin said.

I studied my radarscope for 10 seconds and replied, "Rog, that's it."

"Pilot, RN, center the PDI." The pilot direction indicator was a steering needle on Purinton's instrument panel tied into the bomb system. When the indicator was centered, the aircraft was aimed directly at the target.

Beaudoin and I worked our way through the checklist for releasing the bombs. The arming sequence did not start until a wire was automatically pulled from each bomb as it left the racks.

Dickens interrupted: "Crew, EW, multiple SAM launch, 12 o'clock."

"Pilots searching," co-pilot McNeill announced. Then "Bingo, have what looks like two, no, three, coming up from our 12 o'clock."

"Uplink!" replied the electronic warfare officer.

"EW, co-pilot, two tracking across."

The two missiles were moving across the pilot's line of sight and going away from us. The bad news was the third missile.

"Third one still has uplink."

"Damn, comin' straight at us," McNeill yelled the bone-chilling words.

"Crew, starting combat turns," Purinton said.

He put the aircraft into a series of steep banked turns left and right, a tactic meant to break the missile's lock on our aircraft. The turns also diminished the effectiveness of our electronic countermeasures, but the decision, with a missile headed straight for us, was easy for the pilot to make.

"EW dispensing chaff," Dickens said, referring to aluminum foil-like material ejected to fool the enemy radar and divert the missile.

In the midst of this, the radar navigator and I finished our checklist and concentrated solely on the target, just 90 seconds away.

"I'll need it straight and level at 30 seconds to go, Pilot."

This was essential so the bombing gyro would stabilize before the weapons were released. Without stability, the bombs could be tossed anywhere.

"Rog," was all Purinton had time to say. I could hear the strain in his voice. Maneuvering the steep turns was like driving a loaded cement truck with no power steering, no automatic transmission and no brakes.

"Lost uplink," called the electronic warfare officer, his voice at a lower pitch. The missile missed us and wandered upward.

"Pilot, 60 seconds to target, straight and level, center the PDI," the radar navigator calmly requested.

"Rog, straight and level, PDI centered."

"Crew, Nav, 30 seconds to target."

I counted down. "Twenty seconds to target," speaking rather calmly, I thought.

"SAM launch dead ahead," called the electronic warfare officer.

"Searching," one of the pilots said to no one in particular.

"Bingo, have it. Looks like it could hit us right between the eyes."

A SAM traveling at 2,400 mph would take about 10 more seconds to reach the aircraft. At bombs away, it would hit the aircraft.

This time we couldn't execute combat turns to get out of the way. Our aircraft was a sitting duck.

"Ten seconds. Bomb doors open."

We didn't open the doors earlier because that would have created a bigger radar target for SAMs.

"EW dispensing chaff."

"Missile still tracking visually," McNeill said.

"Crew, prepare for bailout," Purinton announced, as calmly as a bus driver announces the next street.

"At bombs away, I'm gonna bend the fuselage" – put the aircraft into an almost impossibly steep turn.

"Five seconds," from the radar navigator.

"Holy Mother..." someone pleaded. (Maybe it was me....I don't remember.)

"Bombs away," Beaudoin said.

The aircraft shuddered as all the weapons departed simultaneously. The severe turn yanked me to the right, and the ejection seat shoulder straps burned into my skin through the flight suit.

Where was it? The bailout light? Where was it? Oh yeah, look up, Paul. My mind was doing things my body couldn't comprehend. All in the flash of an instant. Nav bails out first. How can we get this far and then get blown out of the sky? Ejection D-ring, find it, find it, gotta find it... there. Keep your elbows in. Brace your back. All galloping through my mind.

Not us. Why us? Stay with me, God. Tighten your seatbelt. Already did that. A voice. There's a voice. Foggy. Not making sense. A voice....

An explosion. A brilliant flash. The airplane vibrated and rocked from side to side. The SAM detonated far enough away that there was no damage.

"Crew, Pilot, keep your eyes open. We're not out of it yet."

What did the voice mean, keep my eyes open? How could I if I was dead?

"Nav, Pilot, heading?"

Heading... Heading... Nav... yeah... that's me... must not be dead... Heading...

"Crew, Radar, bomb doors closed."

What seemed like minutes of agony flashed by so quickly that no one noticed my slight hesitation responding.

"Left 2-6-0," I heard myself say.

"Everybody OK?" Purinton polled the crew and got a positive response.

We may have avoided the SAM because of the pilot's extreme hard turn, but we also surmised that the missile missed us because it never achieved uplink. If it had, the electronic warfare officer would have detected the signals. The SAM must have been launched visually, without radar guidance from the ground, as a desperation salvo.

Later... Over the Fence

"Crew, Nav, out of the threat area," I announced. We could finally relax.

The pilot made his call to the airborne mission commander: "Over the fence with three."

As we turned south, the aircraft was silent. No interphone chatter, no activity. It was as if we had entered a different dimension – peaceful and quiet. The adrenaline left my body, and I sagged in my ejection seat. It was then that it all hit me: what we did, the danger and the magnitude of it. We were all drained.

At our debriefing we learned that two B-52s had been shot down. Two friends of mine weren't coming back. I had played golf with one of them 36 hours earlier. That made it personal. Before, it was a mission – a dangerous one –but it was a thing, a possibility, not the death of a golfing buddy you just had a pitcher of beer and a pizza with at the officers club.

Dick Purinton and I glanced at each other but never spoke of it. We couldn't do that. There were more missions to fly. "Guys, let's hit the roach coach and get a couple chili dogs," he offered. "I'll buy."

So we did... and he did... and everything was back to normal, at least until we launched again for Hanoi.

Four months after the Christmas bombings, Purinton was diagnosed with leukemia at his flight physical. He died in June 1974 – a true hero. The man's skill flying this nation's frontline strategic bomber saved my life.

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