Airpower through the Cold War, Part II

Cognitive Lesson Objective:
• Comprehend the impact airpower and other key events had on the USAF and US policy during the Cold War.

Cognitive Samples of Behavior:
• Explain the significance of the August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Incident.
• Describe how airpower was used in Southeast Asia.
• Describe Rolling Thunder, Linebacker I, and Linebacker II bombing campaigns.
• Summarize the uses and effectiveness of the B-52 in the Vietnam War.
• Give examples of tactical airlift missions flown during the Vietnam War.
• Describe the US Air Force’s search and recovery mission in Vietnam.
• Summarize the lessons learned from the Vietnam War.
• Identify missile and aircraft systems developed after the Vietnam War.
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• State the U.S. objectives from operation URGENT FURY.
• Identify the key Air Force Function that was a difference-maker in operation EL DORADO CANYON.
• Identify which AF Aircraft was used for the very first time in operation JUST CAUSE.

Affective Lesson Objective:
• Respond to the importance of airpower during the Cold War.

Affective Sample of Behavior:
• Actively participate in classroom discussions.
The flexible response strategy increased the Air Force’s responsibilities, which now ranged from waging all-out nuclear war to supporting the Army in limited conflicts. Tragically, the lessons of Korea had to be relearned in the skies over Vietnam. During the French Indochina War, as early as 1954, the JCS considered Operation VULTURE, in which the U.S. Air Force would be deployed to save the French army at Dien Bien Phu. The operation would involve nuclear and conventional bombing around the isolated French garrison. President Eisenhower vetoed this proposal, concerned, like General Omar Bradley during the Korean War, that this was “the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy.” The Geneva Agreement of 1954 left Vietnam divided at the 17th Parallel into the Communist north under Ho Chi Minh, and the pro-Western south, under Bao Dai and Ngo Dinh Diem. The desire to contain the spread of Communism brought about America’s involvement in Vietnam. When President Kennedy declared that the United States would “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty,” the stage was set. The Taylor-Rostow mission of October 1961 investigated the situation in South Vietnam and proposed the use of American air power against North Vietnam. Between 1965 and 1974 the United States would drop three times as many bombs in Southeast Asia as it did in all of World War II, but victory would prove even more elusive than in the Korean War.

Driven by its nuclear strategic bombing doctrine, the Air Force was ill-prepared for a limited war in Vietnam. Air Force training, technology, and strategy focused on general nuclear war with the Soviet Union. F-105 Thunderchief “fighters” had been designed to carry tactical nuclear weapons in an internal bomb bay, but were forced into use in Vietnam carrying 750-pound high-explosive bombs. F-104 Starfighters, the fastest fighters in the world, were designed to intercept Soviet bombers, but lacked the range and dogfighting ability to compete for air superiority over North Vietnam. Fortunately for the Air Force, the Navy had begun the development of two superb fighter-bombers, the F-4 Phantom II and the A-7 Corsair II, better suited to combat, although the absence of a machine gun in the former aircraft limited its usefulness as an air superiority fighter until the arrival of the gun-equipped E model.

U.S. Air Force aircrews flew combat missions in South Vietnam before 1964, but only if accompanied by South Vietnamese aircrews. The Gulf of Tonkin incident involving the Navy destroyers C. Turner Joy and Maddox in August 1964 resulted in a nearly unanimous Congressional vote of support for President Johnson “to take all necessary measures to prevent further aggression.” As in Korea, however, there would be no declaration of war. Neutral sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia would be off-limits to aerial attack for much of the conflict. Targets close to China and in Hanoi and Haiphong would also be off-limits for fear an expanded fight would lead to a direct confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union and China, with the possible result of a nuclear holocaust. Vietnam would be another limited war. National objectives were, for the military, exasperating: “Don’t lose this war, but don’t win it, either.” As President Johnson stated: “The Air Force
comes in every morning and says, ‘Bomb, bomb, bomb’...and then the state department comes in and says ‘Not now, or not there, or too much, or not at all.’ The strategy was designed to hold off North Vietnam until South Vietnam became a viable nation able to defend itself. The Air Force would fight two wars—one against internal subversion by South Vietnam-based Viet Cong, the other against North Vietnamese aggression.

The Air Force initially intended to destroy North Vietnam's industrial fabric and then to interdict its supplies to Viet Cong units in South Vietnam by attacking its railroads and Ocean shipping and mining its harbors. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell Taylor vetoed the air plan, however, because it might prompt Chinese or Soviet intervention. Like that in Korea, the strategy in Vietnam was to punish the enemy until it agreed to a ceasefire and peace, not to provoke the Chinese or Soviets.

The Air Force, they stated, would provide close air support for Army units operating in South Vietnam. The sustained bombing of North Vietnam began when circumstances changed in South Vietnam. On February 8, 1965, Operation FLAMING DART I launched tit-for-tat retaliatory bombings in response to enemy attacks on American installations in South Vietnam. Such an attack on the Pleiku Special Forces base resulted in limited air strikes against oil supplies and naval bases in North Vietnam. The strikes were intended to deter the enemy with the “potential” of American air power.

These circumscribed efforts gave Ho Chi Minh time to construct perhaps the strongest air defense network in the world at the time. Eventually, it included over 8,000 antiaircraft artillery pieces, over 40 active surface-to-air missile (SAM)sites, and over 200 MiG-17s, -19s, and -21s. Continued Communist ground action in South Vietnam brought the Air Force into the teeth of this network. Operation ROLLING THUNDER began in March 1965 and continued until October 1968. (Please reference the “Focus On: Graduated Response” article.) It was a frustrating air campaign marked by limits at every turn, gradualism, measured response, and, especially, restrictive rules of engagement. Doctrine drove the Air Force to strike against industrial web, but Air Force and Navy aircraft would be bombing a nation with a gross national product of $1.6 billion, only $192 million of which came from industrial activity. Like those of Korea, the industrial sources of North Vietnam's power were in China and the Soviet Union, beyond the reach of American air power.

ROLLING THUNDER'S initial targets were roads, radar sites, railroads, and supply dumps. Because of bad weather the first mission of March 2, 1965, was not followed up until March 15. The Johnson administration did not permit attacks on airfields until 1967. SA-2 surface-to- air missile sites went unmolested; North Vietnam was permitted to establish SAM sites, and only after missiles were launched from them could they be attacked. Another rule restricted operations in a 30-mile zone and prohibited operations in a 10-mile zone around Hanoi. In 1965 and 1966 165,000 sorties against the North killed an estimated 37,000, while the war intensified in the South, with 325,000 American troops stationed there by the end of 1966.
In the summer of 1964, the JCS had proposed a list of 94 strategic targets as part of an intensified bombing campaign over which President Johnson and his advisers maintained careful control, assigning targets during Tuesday luncheon meetings at the White House. They doled out enough to pressure Ho Chi Minh but not too many to prevent peace negotiations or to invite Soviet or Chinese intervention. Of the many bridges bombed, the two most famous were the Thanh Hoa bridge eight miles south of Hanoi and the Paul Doumer bridge in Hanoi itself. Both were critical to transport supplies flowing from China into North and South Vietnam. Hundreds of bombing sorties conducted over several years failed to bring down the solidly-built Thanh Hoa bridge. When the Johnson administration finally permitted the bombing of the Doumer bridge in 1967, fighter-bombers quickly dropped one span. After several weeks, repair crews put the bridge back into operation and it had to be bombed again. Over France in World War I, American airmen contested with Fokkers for air superiority and over Germany in World War II, with Focke-Wulfs and Messerschmitts. Over Korea they fought MiGs. Over North Vietnam they fought fewer MiGs as the struggle became primarily directed against surface-to-air missiles and antiaircraft artillery. When the Johnson administration approved the cessation of bombing north of the 19th parallel in the spring of 1968, North Vietnam agreed to negotiate. Peace negotiations began in Paris in November 1968, and the United States halted ROLLING THUNDER. The JCS then limited Air Force operations in North Vietnam to protective reaction missions. Aircraft would conduct reconnaissance and would strike only if attacked.

Meanwhile, in South Vietnam, the ground war worsened. In 1965 American commander, General William Westmoreland, oversaw the change of commitment in South Vietnam from a coastal enclave strategy for the protection of large cities, to direct ground involvement (“search and destroy” missions) into the interior after Communist forces in a massive campaign of close air support and interdiction. By 1968 over half a million American troops were engaged. Again, as it had in Korea, American strategy called for substituting air power for ground action whenever possible to reduce Army casualties. Ironically, while dropping less than one million tons of bombs on North Vietnam, the enemy, the United States dropped more than four million tons on South Vietnam, the ally. When Westmoreland ordered a major offensive into the “Iron Triangle” northwest of Saigon, more than 5,000 Air Force tactical strike sorties, 125 B-52 strikes, and 2,000 airlift sorties paved the way.

Operations included an extensive defoliation campaign (RANCH HAND) in which C-123 Providers and other transports sprayed 19 million gallons of herbicides over the jungles that provided convenient hiding places for Viet Cong guerrillas and North Vietnamese regular units out to ambush American ground troops. The overwhelming firepower brought by America to Vietnam gave Air Force airlift a major role in the war. Because jungle roads were rarely safe, Allied forces called on Army helicopters and Air Force C47 Skytrains, C-119 Boxcars, C-123 Providers, and C-130 Hercules to move mountains of supplies around South Vietnam. C-141 Starlifters and C-5 Galaxies, augmented by commercial airlines, helped move in personnel and critical supplies from the United States.

Despite the fact that many targets were obscured much of the time by Vietnam’s triple canopy jungles, the key to limiting ground casualties was close air support. As in earlier
wars, the solution was to drop more bombs to inundate an area. Carpet bombing by B-52 Stratofortresses, each dropping up to 108 500- and 750-pound bombs, was the favored technique. Directed by LORAN, occasionally to within one thousand feet of American units, these ARC LIGHT missions flew at 30,000 feet. Bombs fell without warning. After the war, Vietnamese who survived this deluge described the ARC LIGHT experiences as the most terrible they had faced. Another technique involved employing newly developed gunships, including the AC-47 Spooky (known popularly as Puff the Magic Dragon), AC-119 Shadow, and AC-130 Spectre. The later carried four 7.62-mm machine guns and four 20-mm cannon, each firing 6,000 rounds per minute, and 40-mm and 105mm cannon. Orbiting over enemy concentrations at night, they covered the jungle with a rain of projectiles, well-appreciated by American soldiers nearby.

Again, as it had in Korea, the Air Force in Vietnam learned that the most difficult function of air power was interdiction; its major effort involved interdicting the flow of enemy troops and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos and Cambodia into South Vietnam. Many targets were merely geographical coordinates superimposed over the vast green jungle of Southeast Asia. Others were the smoke and dust kicked up by enemy forces as they moved down the trail by day. At night, they were campfires, hot engines, and other man-made infrared signatures picked up by airborne sensors. Fighters soon compelled the enemy to move only by night, when gunships took over. But using $10 million aircraft to destroy $10,000 trucks was no solution. Three Soviet ZIL-157 six-wheel drive trucks or 400 bicycles carrying 75 pounds each could provide the fifteen tons of supplies to Communist forces in South Vietnam each day. More came from plundered American and South Vietnamese storehouses.

On January 30, 1968, enemy units launched the Tet Offensive, striking cities and other targets throughout South Vietnam. In February alone, Air Force units launched 16,000 strike sorties in support of ground operations, helping to blunt the offensive. The focus of the Air Force’s operations, however, was the besieged firebase at Khe Sanh, where 6,000 Marines faced three North Vietnamese divisions. President Johnson told General Westmoreland that he did not want another “damn [Dien Bien Phu].” Air power would have to hold off Communist attacks. Three months of Operation NIAGARA totaled 24,000 fighter-bomber and 2,700 B-52 strikes, 110,000 tons of bombs, and nightly assaults by gunships. Additionally, the Air Force airlifted 12,000 tons of supplies to the surrounded Marines. Air power guaranteed that there would be no repeat of the French disaster at Dien Bien Phu.

The Tet offensive proved a military defeat for the Communists, who lost between 50,000 and 80,000 soldiers, but it represented a political victory that galvanized the antiwar movement in the United States. It led many other Americans to question the war’s objectives, especially in the face of General Westmoreland’s announcement just before its launching that he could see “the light at the end of the tunnel.” The Tet offensive (and a poor showing in the New Hampshire primary) convinced President Johnson not to run for reelection. It also brought to the Oval Office a new president, Richard Nixon, committed to ending American involvement in the war and turning it over to the South Vietnamese. F-5 Freedom Fighters strengthened the South Vietnamese Air Force while
Nixon withdrew American ground units. On March 30, 1972, the North Vietnamese Army invaded South Vietnam with 12 divisions from the north and west. Although South Vietnamese forces were no match for the invaders, the Spring offensive was a major miscalculation. American ground forces were gone, but U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy aviation remained. For the first time in the war, the Air Force was up against the kind of conventional war it could win. Eighteen thousand fighter-bomber and 1,800 B-52 sorties stiffened South Vietnamese resolve. In the desperation of the moment, fighter pilots found themselves aiming 2,000-pound laser-guided bombs at Communist tanks—not cost effective, but effective nevertheless. The massive employment of air power bought more time for South Vietnam.

Although American air power had repelled the invasion, implications for Nixon’s Vietnamization strategy were clear. American hopes for ending the war revolved around the Air Force’s applying greater pressure on North Vietnam to influence its negotiators to return to the Paris peace talks. The LINEBACKER I bombing campaign from May to October 1972 was a major escalation of the war and included the mining of Haiphong and other ports. Bridges that had resisted bombing now fell before precision laser-guided and electro-optically-guided bombs. Before LINEBACKER, peer pressure and pride drove American aircrews, even as they asked: “What the hell is this all about?’ During LINEBACKER they had a clear and limited objective—forcing the regime in Hanoi back to Paris. (Please reference the “Focus On: Easter Offensive” article.)

In Paris some progress was made, but in December 1972 Communist negotiators became recalcitrant. Their delaying tactics prompted President Nixon to order the most concentrated and only purely strategic bombing campaign of the war—LINEBACKER II. For 11 days beginning on December 18, with a Christmas break, SAC B-52s struck at rail yards and other targets in the outskirts of Hanoi and Haiphong. On the first mission, 129 B-52s penetrated the area, supported by a wide array of Air Force and Navy aircraft. F-4s dropped chaff in wide corridors. EB-66s, EA-3s, and EA-6s jammed enemy radar with electronic countermeasures. F-105 Wild Weasels with Shrike radar-seeking missiles attacked enemy radar sites. SR-71s provided reconnaissance. EC-121s fed early warning information to the attacking aircraft. F-4s, A-7s, and F-111s struck airfields, storage sites, and other precision targets. F-4s flew MiG suppression. KC-135s orbited over the Gulf of Tonkin, ready to feed thirsty jets. This was the air war the Air Force had wanted from the beginning. A B-52 tail gunner shot down a MiG on the first night, but 200 surface-to-air missile launches claimed three B-52s—the first 3 of 15 lost.

By December 27 North Vietnam had depleted its supply of SA-2 missiles and much of its antiaircraft ammunition. Interdiction strikes against rail lines and bridges coupled with mines in Haiphong Harbor prevented resupply from China or the Soviet Union. By December 30, LINEBACKER II had destroyed many industrial and military targets in the Hanoi and Haiphong area, although its major impact was on North Vietnam’s morale. To Captain Ray Bean, an F-4 crewman imprisoned in the “Hanoi Hilton,” the B-52s “got the attention of the North Vietnamese” because the United States seemed to have forsaken precision attacks on purely military and industrial targets in favor of “wholesale destruction.” North Vietnam witnessed the path of devastation a single B-52 could create, especially in an
urban environment. *(Please reference the “Focus On: Strategic Bombing” article.)* Its negotiators returned to the peace talks, agreeing to a cease-fire in January 1973 and signing a treaty in April. Before the year was out Congress cut funds for Southeast Asian operations and passed the War Powers Act, which limited the President’s options.

Two years later North Vietnam launched a final offensive against a South Vietnam operating without American air support. After 55 days, on April 29, 1975, Saigon fell. In Vietnam, the United States lost 58,000 men and women. The war helped cause a decade of inflation and alienated a generation. The Air Force had invested over 1.2 million fixed wing sorties, 6.2 million tons of explosives, 2,118 dead, 599 missing in action, and 2,257 aircraft (at a cost of $3.1 billion).

The Air Force learned the dangers of political and military micro-management, of gradualism, and of being used to influence the conduct of America’s enemies instead of defeating them. Restrictive rules of engagement caused aircrews to die and left little room for initiative. “Route packages,” artificial divisions of North Vietnam in which Air Force and Navy aircraft operated separately, guaranteed a dilution of effort. A generation of future air leaders came away convinced that “body counts,” sortie rates, and tons of bombs dropped were all poor means for judging air power’s effectiveness. Leaders, like General Robin Olds and Colonel George E. “Bud” Day, were instrumental in focusing the Air Force on its core competencies and core values. *(Please reference the “Focus On: Leadership, Gen. Robin Olds” and “Focus On: Valor” articles.)* They also relearned the importance of air superiority, but with a twist-air superiority now involved not only overcoming an enemy’s air force; it involved also overcoming an enemy’s air defenses on the surface. Air power had to be focused, united, and coordinated in what was termed “jointness” after the war.

Most of all, the Air Force learned the dangers of strict, uncompromising adherence to doctrine. In the years after Vietnam a new generation of air leaders realized that the Air Force had focused almost exclusively on the strategic bombing of industrial chokepoints without regard for the character of the society to be bombed or the type of war to be fought. Training, technology, and doctrine revolved around the destruction of a developed nation’s industrial fabric or the nuclear destruction of a nation’s cities. The Air Force had become imprisoned by a doctrine established in the years before and after World War II. Applied against undeveloped states such as North Korea and North Vietnam, each equipped and supplied by other countries, and unable to use nuclear weapons because of the Cold War and moral considerations, strategic bombardment and its related strategies did not prevail. For additional resources on Vietnam please visit [http://www.vietnamwar50th.com/](http://www.vietnamwar50th.com/).
THE COLD WAR CONCLUDED

President Kennedy’s flexible-response nuclear war-fighting doctrine of the early 1960s lacked the technology to match its vision of many options adapted to meet the varieties of Cold War crises. Advances in geodesy (Geologic science of the size and shape of the earth) and cartography and the integrated circuit developed in the early 1960s for missile and satellite guidance systems, significantly improved missile accuracy. Decreased CEP (circular error probable—the radius of a circle in which at least 50 percent of the targeted missiles would hit) meant that warheads could be smaller. New warheads could be sized to detonate at kiloton or megaton ranges. Because they were smaller and lighter, more warheads could be mounted to each ICBM and SLBM. In the early 1970s the DOD developed MIRVs (multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles), allowing three or more warheads on each ICBM and SLBM. The Air Force’s arsenal did not rise above 1,054 ICBMs; many now carried three MIRVs (Minuteman III) as opposed to earlier models that carried a single warhead. Strategic launchers remained static, but warheads multiplied.

Although Secretary of Defense McNamara introduced “counterforce” targeting in 1962, the improvement in CEP and dramatic increases in the number of nuclear warheads in the American arsenal of the 1970s encouraged the Air Force to return to the more traditional practice of bombing precise military targets instead of countervalue cities. Counterforce targeting identified enemy military and industrial choke points—command centers, military industries and bases, and ICBM silos. Whatever the targets selected, in the 1960s political leaders adopted a doctrine for deterring nuclear war known as “assured destruction,” i.e., the capability to destroy an aggressor as a viable society, even after a well-planned and executed surprise attack on American forces. This doctrine held that superpower strategic nuclear forces would be sized and protected to survive a nuclear attack and then to retaliate with sufficient force to ensure a level of destruction unacceptable to the other side. With such retaliatory destruction assured against an aggressor, no rational Soviet or American leader would consider starting a nuclear war. On May 26, 1972, the United States and the Soviet Union signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which limited both sides to two ABM sites each to protect the national capital and an ICBM complex. The treaty reinforced the continued effectiveness of assured destruction in deterring war in the face of new, destabilizing ABM weapons. SALT I, the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty which was signed at the same time, limited the numbers of nuclear weapons with the objective of obtaining a verified freeze on the numerical growth and destabilizing characteristics of each side’s strategic nuclear forces.

The Nixon administration adopted counterforce targeting beginning with SIOP 5 of 1974. The Carter administration continued this focus with Presidential Directive 59 and SIOP 5D. Counterforce, however, offered an option to assured destruction of a limited, prolonged nuclear war based on accurate attacks with limited collateral damage while maintaining a creditable second strike capability. In an address on March 23, 1983, President Ronald Reagan proposed replacing the doctrine of assured destruction with one of assured survival, in the form of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). SDI was to focus on the development and deployment of a combination of defensive systems.
such as space-based lasers, particle beams, railguns, and fast ground-launched missiles, among other weapons, to intercept Soviet ICBMs during their ascent through the Earth’s outer atmosphere and their ballistic path in space. While the ABM Treaty restricted various methods of testing SDI weapon systems, the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union removed the justification for the level of research and development associated with this project, although research continued at a much reduced level under the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization.

Beginning in March 1985, Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev initiated major changes in Soviet-American relations. The Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in December 1987 eliminated short-range nuclear missiles in Europe, including Air Force ground-launched cruise missiles stationed in the United Kingdom. Gorbachev’s announcement in May 1988 that the Soviet Union, after nine years of inconclusive combat, would begin withdrawing from the war in Afghanistan, indicated a major reduction in Cold War tensions, but it provided only a hint of the rapid changes to come. Relatively free and open Russian elections in March 1989 and a coal miners strike in July shook the foundations of Communist rule. East Germany opened the Berlin Wall in November, which led to German reunification in October 1990. A coup against Gorbachev in August 1991 which was put down by Boris Yeltsin, led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and its replacement by the Commonwealth of Independent States on December 25, 1991.

This chain of events brought major changes to American nuclear strategy. Under START I, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty signed by the United States and the Soviet Union in July 1991, the U.S. was reduced to a level of 6,000 total warheads on deployed ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers. START II, which was never ratified by the U.S. Senate, was signed in January 1993. It was designed to reduce (upon entry into force) total deployed warheads to a range of 3,000 to 3,500. The resulting force structure would ultimately lead to the deployment of five hundred single warhead Minuteman III ICBMs, 66 B-52H and 20 B-2 heavy bombers. Ninety-four B-1 heavy bombers would be reoriented to a conventional role by 2003, in addition to all Peacekeeper ICBMs would be removed from active inventory through the elimination of their associated silo launchers. The Air Force, by Presidential direction in September 1991, notified SAC to remove heavy bombers from alert status. SAC was subsequently inactivated several months later in June 1992. U.S. Strategic Command replaced Strategic Air Command, controlling all remaining Air Force and Navy strategic nuclear forces.

Rebuilding the conventional Air Force after Vietnam began with personnel changes. The Vietnam-era Air Force included many officers and airmen who had entered its ranks in World War II. President Nixon ended the draft in 1973 in favor of an “all volunteer” American military. The Air Force attracted recruits as best it could, but encountered problems with the racial friction and alcohol and drug abuse that reflected America’s social problems. Enough Vietnam career veterans remained, however, to direct this new all volunteer force and institute changes. One of the most noticeable changes was more realistic, and thus more dangerous, combat training. In combat simulations Air Force pilots flew as aggressors employing enemy tactics. By 1975 their training had evolved into Red Flag
at the U.S. Air Force Weapons and Tactics Center at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada, in which crews flew both individual sorties and formations in realistic situations, gaining experience before they entered actual combat.

The vulnerability of air bases to enemy attack and sabotage had long been the Achilles heel of land-based air power. In western Europe, living under the threat of a massive Warsaw Pact air offensive and land invasion, the U.S. Air Force spearheaded an active program to improve the survivability and readiness of air bases. The effort was marked by the construction of thousands of reinforced concrete aircraft shelters and other hardened facilities, alternate runways, rapid repair elements, chemical weapons protection, and a host of other defensive measures.

The Air Force’s post-Vietnam rebuilding also involved applying improved technology. The battle for control of the skies over North Vietnam underscored the need for a dogfighting aircraft that featured maneuverability before speed—one armed with missiles and cannon. Begun in the late 1960s and operational in the mid-1970s, the F-15 Eagle and the F-16 Fighting Falcon filled this need. The struggle against radar-guided antiaircraft artillery and surface-to-air missiles in Vietnam encouraged the Air Force to pursue stealth technology utilizing special paints, materials, and designs that reduced or eliminated an aircraft’s radar, thermal, and electronic signatures.

Other Vietnam War technologies included precision guided missiles and bombs. From April 1972 to January 1973 the United States used over 4,000 of these early “smart weapons” in Vietnam to knock down bridges and destroy enemy tanks. Continued development of laser-guided bombs and electro-optically-guided missiles offered the prospects of pinpoint, precision bombing on which traditional Air Force doctrine rested—the destruction of chokepoints in an enemy nation’s industrial web with economy of force and without collateral damage. These technologies, which afforded a strike precision far beyond that available to earlier air power thinkers, sparked a revision of the traditional doctrine of strategic bombing. This revision took two forms. First, the Air Force, to overcome numerically superior Warsaw Pact forces, cooperated with the Army in updating the tactical doctrine of AirLand Battle promulgated in Field Manual 100-5 in 1982. The Air Force would make deep air attacks on an enemy army to isolate it on the battlefield, conduct battlefield air interdiction (BAI) to disrupt the movement of secondary forces to the front, and provide close air support (CAS) to Army ground forces. The Air Force procured the A-10 Thunderbolt II CAS attack-bomber in the 1970s to support such missions.

Participation in three crises in the 1980s allowed the Air Force to test these new ideas and technologies. Operation URGENT FURY (October 1983) rescued American students and restored order on the island of Grenada. In this operation the Air Force primarily transported troops and cargo, but discovered problems with command, control, planning, and intraservice and interservice coordination. President Reagan called on England-based F-111s to strike against Libya on April 19, 1986, in support of his policies to counter state terrorism. Operation ELDORADO CANYON exposed continuing difficulties with target identification and intelligence, punctuated by some inaccurate bombing. (Please reference the “Focus On: Precision Attack” article.) Finally, Operation JUST CAUSE
in 1989 again tested air operations, this time in Panama. The Air Force provided the airlift for troops and supplies, although the F-117 Nighthawk stealth fighter made its debut when it and an AC-130 Spectre gunship intimidated Panamanian troops loyal to the dictator Manuel Noriega.  (*Please reference the “Focus On: Decisive Battle” article.*)

Second, the Air Force pursued a new approach to conventional strategic bombing doctrine in the fertile atmosphere of the post-Vietnam era. Key leaders in the effort were Generals Charles Boyd and Charles Link and Colonel Dennis Drew. Strategic bombing doctrine of the Air Corps Tactical School, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam had relied on carpet bombing to saturate linear chokepoints, with industry as the key. Colonel John Warden’s ideas in the Gulf War relied on precision munitions to attack an expanded complex of targets. He viewed an enemy nation’s war-making capacity in five concentric rings. The center ring consisted of its civilian and military leadership, the first ring out, its key production sources, the second ring out, its transportation and communication infrastructure, third ring out, the will of its population, and, the last ring, its military forces. An air attack on these would be “inside-out” warfare, starting from the center and working outward. The first objective of an air war would be to seize air superiority followed by attacks on an enemy’s leadership and other vital centers. Colonel John Boyd focused on “control warfare” and “strategic paralysis” by loosening the observation, orientation, decision, and action loops (the “OODA Loop”) that maintained the “moral-mental-physical being” of an enemy nation.
It was our best chance to knock North Vietnam out of the war, but it was doomed to failure.

Rolling Thunder, the air war against North Vietnam, began on March 2, 1965. The first mission was an indication of things to come.

The targets, timing of the attack, and other details of the operation were all decided in Washington, D.C. There were only two targets. Both were relatively minor, located just north of the Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Vietnam. The enemy’s real strength around Hanoi and Haiphong was not touched, not even threatened. It was a strange way to begin a war.

Air Force F-105s, F-100s, and B-57s struck an ammunition depot at Xom Bang, 10 miles north of the DMZ. Meanwhile, Navy and South Vietnamese aircraft bombed a naval base at Quang Khe, 65 miles from the DMZ.

It would be almost two weeks before the next Rolling Thunder missions took place, again against minor targets not far above the DMZ.

Maxwell D. Taylor, the ambassador to South Vietnam (and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), doubted that the enemy was impressed. “I fear that to date Rolling Thunder in their eyes has merely been a few isolated thunderclaps,” Taylor said.

“The North Vietnamese probably didn’t even know the planes were there,” said Adm. U.S. Grant Sharp, commander in chief of US Pacific Command.

Rolling Thunder would last for more than three years, making it the longest air campaign in US history to that point. More bombs would be dropped on Vietnam than were dropped on all of Europe in World War II.

The campaign ended in 1968 without achieving any strategic results. It did not persuade the North Vietnamese to quit the war, nor did it stop Hanoi’s infiltration of troops and equipment into South Vietnam.

From beginning to end, Rolling Thunder was hampered by a policy of gradual escalation, which robbed air strikes of their impact and gave North Vietnam time to recover and adjust. For various reasons—including fear of provoking a confrontation with North Vietnam’s Russian and Chinese allies—all sorts of restrictions and constraints were imposed.

US airmen could not attack a surface-to-air missile site unless it fired a missile at them. For the first two years, airmen were forbidden to strike the MiG bases from which enemy
fighters were flying. Every so often, Washington would stop the bombing to see if Hanoi’s leaders were ready to make peace.

“In Rolling Thunder, the Johnson Administration devised an air campaign that did a lot of bombing in a way calculated not to threaten the enemy regime’s survival,” Air Force historian Wayne Thompson said in To Hanoi and Back. “President Johnson repeatedly assured the communist rulers of North Vietnam that his forces would not hurt them, and he clearly meant it. Government buildings in downtown Hanoi were never targeted.”

Drift to War

Rolling Thunder was not the first combat for USAF airmen in Vietnam. Air Force crews deployed there in 1961 to train and support the South Vietnamese Air Force. By 1962, they were flying combat missions in response to emergency requests. However, Gen. William W. Momyer said in Airpower in Three Wars, they were “not authorized to conduct combat missions without a Vietnamese crew member. Even then, the missions were training missions although combat weapons were delivered.”

The conflict became overt in August 1964 when communist patrol boats attacked US Navy vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin. In response, Congress passed a resolution authorizing the President “to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force” to repel any attack, prevent further aggression, and assist allies.

The Navy promptly launched reprisal strikes, dubbed Pierce Arrow, against North Vietnamese PT boat bases, and the Air Force moved into Southeast Asia in force. B-57s, F-100s, and F-105s deployed to bases in South Vietnam and Thailand. The presence of the newly arrived aircrews was soon challenged.

In November, a Viet Cong mortar attack at Bien Hoa killed four Americans, wounded 72, and destroyed five B-57s. In February 1965, eight Americans were killed and more than 100 wounded in a sapper attack on Pleiku. Navy and Air Force aircraft flew reprisal strikes, called Operation Flaming Dart, against North Vietnam Feb. 7-11.

The Johnson Administration decided that these reprisal missions were not sufficient. A Presidential directive on Feb. 13 called for “a program of measured and limited air action” against “selected military targets” in North Vietnam. It stipulated that “until further notice” the strikes would remain south of the 19th parallel, confining the action to the North Vietnamese panhandle.

In his memoir, The Vantage Point, Lyndon B. Johnson said the decision for sustained strikes was made “because it had become clear, gradually but unmistakably, that Hanoi was moving in for the kill.” The Vietnam Advisory Campaign (Nov. 15, 1961, to March 1, 1965) was over. The Vietnam Defensive Campaign was about to begin. The first Rolling Thunder mission was readied.
Doubts and Redirection

The conventional wisdom, often repeated at the time, was that the United States must not get bogged down in a land war in Asia. Nevertheless, that was exactly what was about to happen.

On March 8, 1965, marines deployed to Da Nang to defend the air base there. They were the first US ground combat forces in Vietnam. “President Johnson’s authorization of Operation Rolling Thunder not only started the air war but unexpectedly triggered the introduction of US troops into ground combat as well,” McNamara said.

By the middle of March, Rolling Thunder consisted of one mission a week in the southern part of North Vietnam. Apparently, the White House expected this to produce fast results and was disappointed when it did not.

“After a month of bombing with no response from the North Vietnamese, optimism began to wane,” said the Pentagon Papers, a secret history of the war written in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and leaked to the New York Times in 1971.

Although President Johnson had decided to use ground troops in Vietnam, there was no public announcement. The decision was embodied in an April 6 National Security Action Memorandum. The President ordered that “premature publicity be avoided by all possible precautions.”

The fighting forces were told of the change in strategy at an April 20 Honolulu conference, when McNamara announced that US emphasis from then on would be the ground war in the south. Targets in the south would take precedence over those in the north, and sorties would be diverted from the north to fill the requirement.

“This fateful decision contributed to our ultimate loss of South Vietnam as much as any other single action we took during our involvement,” Sharp later charged in his book, Strategy for Defeat.

The President on May 12 called a week long halt to the bombing—the first of many such halts—to see if North Vietnam was ready to negotiate. It wasn’t.

Micromanagement of the air war continued. “I was never allowed in the early days to send a single airplane north [without being] told how many bombs I would have on it, how many airplanes were in the flight, and what time it would be over the target,” said Lt. Gen. Joseph H. Moore, commander of the 2nd Air Division and its successor organization, 7th Air Force. “And if we couldn’t get there at that time for some reason (weather or what not) we couldn’t put the strike on later. We had to ... cancel it and start over again.”

Thuds, Phantoms, and Others

In Rolling Thunder, the US attacked the North with all sorts of aircraft, but the worst of the fighting was borne by the F-105s and the F-4s.
The F-105—Thunderchief, Lead Sled, Thud—flew 75 percent of the strikes and took more losses over North Vietnam than any other kind of aircraft. When Rolling Thunder ended, more than half of the Air Force’s F-105s were gone.

The F-4 Phantom, better able to handle North Vietnam’s MiGs, flew both strike missions and air cover for the F-105s. As the war churned on, the F-4 became the dominant USAF fighter-bomber. The F-4 also accounted for 107 of the 137 MiGs shot down by the Air Force.

Pilots were credited with a full combat tour after 100 missions over North Vietnam. That was not an easy mark to reach. “By your 66th mission, you’ll have been shot down twice and picked up once,” F-105 pilots said. A report from the Office of the Secretary of Defense in May 1967 said, “The air campaign against heavily defended areas costs us one pilot in every 40 sorties.”

F-105s and F-4s flew mostly from bases in Thailand and worked the northern and western “route packs” in North Vietnam. Navy pilots from carriers at Yankee Station in the Tonkin Gulf flew mainly against targets nearer the coastline.

Notable among the Navy aircraft was the A-6 Intruder, an excellent all-weather medium bomber. The Air Force did not have an all-weather capability in the theater except on its B-52 bombers, which were not permitted to operate more than a few miles north of the DMZ.

Among those flying north or supporting the operation were tankers, escort jammers, defense suppression airplanes, rescue aircraft, and reconnaissance systems, as well as command and control airplanes.

One of the big operational changes in the Vietnam War was the everyday refueling of combat aircraft. Fighters on their way into North Vietnam topped up their tanks from KC-135 tankers, which flew orbits above Thailand, Laos, and the Gulf of Tonkin, then met the tankers again on the way out to get enough fuel to make it home. Aerial refueling more than doubled the range of the combat aircraft.

USAF fighters flying from Thailand bases were part of a strange organization called 7th/13th Air Force. It was created for several reasons, one of which was to let US Pacific Command keep control of the air war in the north rather than turning it over to the Army-dominated Military Assistance Command Vietnam.

When the aircraft and pilots were on the ground, they were in 13th Air Force, with headquarters in the Philippines. When they were in the air, they were controlled by 7th Air Force in Saigon—which, for these missions, reported to Pacific Air Forces and US Pacific Command, not to MACV.

**MiGs, SAMs, and AAA**

When Rolling Thunder began, North Vietnam’s air defense system did not amount to much and could have been destroyed easily. US policy, however, gave the North Vietnamese the time, free from attack, to build a formidable air defense.
The system consisted of anti-aircraft artillery, SA-2 surface-to-air missiles, MiG fighters, and radars, all of Soviet design, some supplied by the Soviet Union and some by China.

Although the SAM and MiG threats got more attention, about 68 percent of the aircraft losses were to anti-aircraft fire. By 1968, North Vietnam had 1,158 AAA sites in operation, with a total of 5,795 guns deployed.

The first SAM site in North Vietnam was detected April 5, 1965, but US airmen were not permitted to strike it.

In a memo to McNamara, John T. McNaughton, assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, said, “We won’t bomb the sites, and that will be a signal to North Vietnam not to use them.” On a visit to Vietnam, McNaughton told Moore at 2nd Air Division, “You don’t think the North Vietnamese are going to use them! Putting them in is just a political ploy by the Russians to appease Hanoi.”

McNaughton must have been surprised on July 24 when a SAM, fired by a Soviet missile crew, shot down an Air Force F-4C.

Almost 5,000 SAMs were fired during Rolling Thunder, bringing down 101 US aircraft. The fighters could avoid the SAMs by dropping to lower altitude, but that put them into the lethal shooting gallery of the guns.

By the rules of engagement, US airmen could attack a SAM site only if it was actually shooting at them. In one instance, Navy pilots discovered 111 SAMs loaded on railcars near Hanoi, but were denied permission to bomb them. “We had to fight all 111 of them one at a time,” one of the pilots said.

The Air Force had two ways of dealing with the SAMs: jammers and “Wild Weasels.”

EB-66 jamming aircraft accompanied Air Force strike flights. Eventually, fighters got their own jamming pods to disrupt the radars that guided the SAMs and the AAA.

A more direct solution was the fielding of the Wild Weasels, fighter aircraft especially equipped to find and destroy the Fan Song radars that directed the SAMs. The original Weasels, which demolished their first SAM site in December 1965, were F-100Fs. Subsequently, they were replaced by two-seat F-105Gs in the Weasel role.

The enemy fighters that operated over North Vietnam were MiG-17s and MiG-21s. There were some obsolete MiG-15s around, but they were used mostly for training. The MiG-19, imported from China, did not make its appearance in Vietnam until Rolling Thunder had ended.

The MiG-17 was no longer top of the line, but it performed well as an interceptor, especially effective at lower altitudes where it used its guns to good advantage. Three of North Vietnam’s 16 aces flew MiG-17s.

The MiG-21 was North Vietnam’s best fighter and a close match in capability with the F-4. It was equipped with a gun but relied primarily on its Atoll missiles.
"The North Vietnamese were able to expand and develop new airfields without any counteraction on our part until April 1967 when we hit Hoa Loc in the western part of the country and followed with attacks against Kep," Momyer said. "The main fighter base, Phuc Yen, was not struck until October of the same year. Gia Lam remained free from attack throughout the war because US officials decided to permit transport aircraft from China, the Soviet Union, and the International Control Commission to have safe access to North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese, of course, used Gia Lam as an active MiG base."

The best known air battle of the war was Jan. 2, 1967, when pilots of the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing from Ubon, Thailand, led by Col. Robin Olds in the famous MiG Sweep, shot down seven MiG-21s over the Red River Valley in North Vietnam.

"MiG killing was not our objective," said Maj. Gen. Alton D. Slay, deputy chief of staff for operations at 7th Air Force. "The objective was to protect the strike force. Any MiG kills obtained were considered as a bonus. A shootdown of a strike aircraft was considered ... a mission failure, regardless of the number of MiGs killed."

**Lines on the Map**

Key parts of North Vietnam were off limits to US air strikes. For the first month of Rolling Thunder, the operations were confined to a stretch of the panhandle south of the 19th parallel, which runs just below Vinh. The first targets around Hanoi and Haiphong were not approved until October and November.

The boundary line for "armed reconnaissance"—the area in which such targets as trucks and trains could be hit when they were found—gradually crept north but very slowly.

"This east-west bomb line was joined by a north-south line at 105 degrees 20 minutes east that permitted armed reconnaissance in northwestern North Vietnam (so long as the bombs stayed at least 30 nautical miles south of the Chinese border)," said Air Force historian Thompson. "The two lines fenced off Route Package 6 (the 'northeast quadrant' containing the major cities of Hanoi and Haiphong) from armed reconnaissance until the spring of 1966, when rail and road segments were targeted there."

Even after that, Hanoi and Haiphong were surrounded by large doughnut-shaped areas on the map which were protected from air strikes by US policy. The outer sections—the "doughnuts" themselves—were restricted zones, in which strikes required special permission (which was seldom given) from Washington. The "holes" in the doughnuts were prohibited zones, in which the limitations were more severe.

60 miles wide, encircling a 20-mile prohibited zone. The restricted zone at Haiphong was 20 miles wide and the prohibited zone, eight miles.

"Knowing that US rules of engagement prevented us from striking certain kinds of targets, the North Vietnamese placed their SAM sites within these protected zones whenever possible to give their SAMs immunity from attack," Momyer said. "Within 10 miles of Hanoi, a densely populated area that was safe from attack except for specific targets from
time to time, numerous SAM sites were located. These protected SAMs, with an effective firing range of 17 nautical miles, could engage targets out to 27 miles from Hanoi. And most of the targets related to the transportation and supply system that supported the North Vietnamese troops fighting in South Vietnam were within 30 miles of Hanoi.”

The White House held firm control of the targeting.

“The final decision on what targets were to be authorized, the number of sorties allowed, and in many instances even the tactics to be used by our pilots was made at a Tuesday luncheon in the White House, attended by the President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, Presidential Assistant Walt Rostow, and the Presidential Press Secretary (first Bill Moyers, later George Christian),” Sharp said. “The significant point is that no professional military man, not even the Chairman of the JCS, was present at these luncheons until late in 1967.”

Taking obvious pride in the process, LBJ said, “I won’t let those Air Force generals bomb the smallest outhouse ... without checking with me.” On another occasion, he said that “I spent 10 hours a day worrying about all this, picking the targets one by one, making sure we didn’t go over the limits.”

The President and his advisors were reluctant to bomb the ports and supply centers around Hanoi and Haiphong, preferring to target the infiltration routes farther south. That was the hard way to do it.

“To reduce the flow through an enemy’s supply line to zero is virtually impossible, so long as he is willing and able to pay an extravagant price in lost men and supplies,” Momyer said.

“To wait until he has disseminated his supplies among thousands of trucks, sampans, rafts, and bicycles and then to send our multimillion-dollar aircraft after those individual vehicles—this is how to maximize our cost, not his,” he said.

**The POL Strikes**

McNamara’s growing unhappiness with Rolling Thunder was hardened by the results of the POL (petroleum, oil, and lubricants) strikes in the summer of 1966.

North Vietnam had no oil fields or refineries. All of its petroleum products were imported, mostly from the Soviet Union, and arrived through the port at Haiphong. From there, they were taken by road, rail, and waterways to large tank farms, only a few of which had been bombed.

On June 29, 1966, US aircraft attacked the Hanoi and Haiphong POL complexes for the first time. The Air Force struck at Hanoi, the Navy at Haiphong. More than 80 percent of the storage facilities were destroyed.

It was a strong operation, but it had come too late. North Vietnam, anticipating that the POL facilities would eventually be struck, had dispersed some of its supplies and had developed underground storage facilities.
“It became clear as the summer wore on that, although we had destroyed a goodly portion
of the North Vietnamese major fuel-storage capacity, they could still meet requirements
through their residual dispersed capacity, supplemented by continued imports that we
were not permitted to stop,” Sharp said. “The fact that they could disperse POL stores in
drums in populated areas was a great advantage to the enemy. We actually had photos
of urban streets lined with oil drums, but were not allowed to hit them.”

According to the Pentagon Papers, “Bulk imports via oceangoing tanker continued at
Haiphong despite the great damage to POL docks and storage there. Tankers merely
stood offshore and unloaded into barges and other shallow-draft boats, usually at night,
and the POL was transported to hundreds of concealed locations along internal waterways.
More POL was also brought in already drummed, convenient for dispersed storage and
handling and virtually immune from interdiction.”

“The bombing of the POL system was carried out with as much skill, effort, and attention
as we could devote to it, starting on June 29, and we haven’t been able to dry up those
supplies,” McNamara later told the Senate Armed Services and Appropriations Committees,
adding that “I don’t believe that the bombing up to the present has significantly reduced,
nor any bombing that I could contemplate in the future would significantly reduce, the
actual flow of men and materiel to the South.”

**Hanoi Hangs On**

One of many snide observations in the Pentagon Papers—written at the behest of Assistant
Secretary McNaughton, the official who had seen no threat in the SAMs—was that “1967
would be the year in which many of the previous restrictions were progressively lifted and
the vaunting boosters of airpower would be once again proven wrong. It would be the
year in which we relearned the negative lessons of previous wars on the ineffectiveness
of strategic bombing.”

A number of important targets were struck for the first time in 1967. Among them were the
Thai Nguyen steel complex (in March), key MiG bases (in April and October), the Doumer
Bridge, over which the railroad entered Hanoi (in August and December), and several
other targets inside the Hanoi and Haiphong restricted areas (in July).

As always, though, political considerations were trumps. An approved strike on Phuc
Yen air base was called off in September because the State Department had promised a
visiting European dignitary that he could land there without fear of bombing.

“In 1967, we were allowed better targets than in ’66 and were allowed to use more strike
sorties, so that the air war progressed quite well,” Sharp said later. “Of course, ships were
still allowed to come into Haiphong, and we weren’t allowed to hit close to the docks. We
were able to cut the lines of communication between Haiphong and Hanoi so that it was
difficult for them to get materiel through. If we had continued the campaign and eased the
restrictions in 1968, I believe we could have brought the war to a successful conclusion.”
For his part, McNamara had already given up on the air war, and in cooperation with McNaughton and a group of civilian consultants, was pursuing plans—later abandoned—to build a 160-mile barrier of minefields, barbed wire, ditches, and military strong points across Vietnam and Laos.

Disheartened, McNamara left office Feb. 29, 1968. In his memoir, In Retrospect, he said, “I do not know to this day whether I quit or was fired.”

**End of the Thunder**

President Johnson visited the war zone in December 1967, spent a night at Korat, Thailand, where he met with aircrews and commanders, and seemed buoyed by the contact.

In January, however, North Vietnam launched its Tet Offensive, the biggest attack of the war, striking bases and cities all over the South. The offensive was not a military success, but it jolted the American public. Support for the war fell severely.

Challenged by fellow Democrats in the Presidential primaries and losing ground in the opinion polls, Johnson at last decided that he had had enough. On March 31, he announced that he would neither seek nor accept his party’s nomination for another term as President.

He also announced a partial bombing halt, which ended Rolling Thunder operations north of the 19th parallel. The partial halt merged into an overall halt of bombing in North Vietnam on Nov. 1.

Rolling Thunder was over. During its course—over three years and eight months—the Air Force and the other services had flown 304,000 fighter sorties and 2,380 B-52 sorties.

Earl H. Tilford Jr., writing in The Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War, stated one view of the campaign, saying that: “Rolling Thunder stands as the classic example of airpower failure.”

A Senate Armed Services subcommittee, which held hearings on Rolling Thunder in August 1967, reached a different conclusion.

“That the air campaign has not achieved its objectives to a greater extent cannot be attributed to inability or impotence of airpower,” the panel said. “It attests, rather, to the fragmentation of our air might by overly restrictive controls, limitations, and the doctrine of ‘gradualism’ placed on our aviation forces, which prevented them from waging the air campaign in the manner and according to the timetable which was best calculated to achieve maximum results.”

The campaign’s failure is beyond dispute, but laying the fault to airpower is questionable. There is no way to know what an all-out bombing effort in 1965 might have achieved. Perhaps no amount of bombing would have done the job, but when Rolling Thunder ended, our best chance of knocking North Vietnam out of the war was gone. Rolling Thunder had not been built to succeed, and it didn’t...
Focus On: The Easter Offensive

OPERATION LINEBACKER I


The North Vietnamese forces massed, and that opened them up to attack from US airpower.

Forty years ago, the nation relied on airpower to halt North Vietnam’s biggest conventional invasion of the Vietnam War. This was Linebacker I.

At the time, few expected such a test. It was 1972, the year the US got out of Vietnam and handed off defense to South Vietnamese forces. From a peak of more than 500,000 forces in country in 1968, the US had reduced troops to 156,000 by January 1972, pulling 179,000 in 1971 alone. Plans called for dropping to 67,000 by July.

President Richard M. Nixon called the policy “Vietnamization.” Behind the scenes his Administration conducted peace talks in Paris aimed at getting both the US and the North out of South Vietnam and leaving the country intact. Part of the deal was a pledge to return with air and naval power if needed.

America’s grand strategy was changing, too, and geopolitical shifts would figure in the timing of the North Vietnamese attack. Nixon visited China from Feb. 21 to 28, 1972, and the famous Moscow Summit that for a time melted the Cold War into détente was scheduled for May 1972.

Hanoi took note. The North had not achieved its goal of unifying Vietnam under a communist government. Superpower rapprochement threatened the support for the regime. A successful attack to split South Vietnam would upend the situation and put Hanoi in a much more powerful position. The so-called Easter Offensive launched on March 30, 1972.

The invasion was not spontaneous. Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap had rearmed the North in the years since the failed Tet Offensive of 1968. A force of three divisions, with about 30,000 men and 200 Soviet T-54 tanks, crossed the demilitarized zone. Within a few days, attacks began along three fronts, mounted from over the border in Laos. The plan called for a rapid victory to split South Vietnam into three parts and give the North control of Saigon, capital of the South.

“The North Vietnamese knew from their experience that they could not win at the conference table what they had not gained on the battlefield,” wrote Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold L. Schecter in the 1986 book The Palace File.

Giap wanted to take advantage of the drawdown of American forces. Giap also doubted that his southern opponents—known as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN)—
would provide strong resistance, given their recent poor performance in an aborted invasion of Laos. Whatever gains Giap's forces made would be useful bargaining chips.

“The crucial factor that finally tipped the balance was President Nixon's visit to Peking, which made the Politburo in Hanoi doubt that China would continue to support them as it had before,” Giap’s biographer Peter G. MacDonald confirmed.

**Expeditionary Airpower**

To counter Giap's initiative, the first task was to move fighters back into theater as fast as possible. Contingency plans called for bringing in Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps aircraft to augment the South Vietnamese defenders. But the plan was untried.

Nobody knew whether airpower could swing back into a theater in time to deny enemy objectives.

“If anybody had told me ... that you could take a fighter wing out of Holloman Air Force Base, New Mexico, and have it overseas in less than a week and have it flying in combat, I’d have said, ‘You’re nuts!’ “ said Gen. Lucius D. Clay Jr., who was commander of Pacific Air Forces during Linebacker I.

The USAF rapid deployment was dubbed Constant Guard. In actions during phase one, beginning April 5, 38 C-141 flights in a 72-hour period brought personnel and cargo into Thailand. F-105s from McConnell AFB, Kan., flew to Korat AB, Thailand.

The first wave of 18 F-4Es from Seymour Johnson AFB, N.C., arrived on April 11, and another 18 followed a day later. Phase two of Constant Guard dispatched another 36 F-4s from Homestead AFB, Fla., and Eglin AFB, Fla., in the first week of May.

In Constant Guard III, 72 F-4s were sent from Holloman to Takhli AB, Thailand.

Bombers responded, too. In Strategic Air Command's Bullet Shot operations, some 120 B-52s deployed to Guam and Thailand between April and June. Tankers in theater rose from 30 to 114. Between April 1 and May 24 the number of strike aircraft the US Air Force had available for operations in Southeast Asia went from 375 to 625; by the end of July, it was nearly 900, noted historian Eduard Mark.

“I think this exercise has really proved that the Air Force has grown with the times. It shows our flexibility to go anywhere in the world and do the job assigned,” Clay noted.

The Marines and Navy also rushed forces to the theater. Three squadrons of Marine F-4s deployed to Da Nang in South Vietnam in early April. The Navy had two carriers on station when the offensive began. Three more arrived in early April, a fifth received orders to deploy to Southeast Asia, and a sixth came on April 30.
Giap’s Plan of Attack

Meanwhile, the three-pronged attack was unfolding.

- **Military Region I:** The Easter Offensive began here with a thrust by two divisions and three regiments toward Quang Tri. Another division attacked from the west, toward Hue. In this region, ARVN troops retreated, until a new military commander rallied the defenses. The crucial point became the defense of the My Chanh river.

- **Military Region II:** On April 1, 1972, North Vietnamese forces attacked in the central highlands, toward Kontum and Pleiku. The showdown came with the defense of Kontum.

- **Military Region III:** The attack in MR III was pointed toward potential capture of Saigon. On April 2, the North Vietnamese struck toward the main road to Saigon. They took initial objectives, and then heavy fighting concentrated around the town of An Loc.

In all regions, Giap counted on a few significant advantages. One was the use of dry roads to supply forces via Laos. April promised low ceilings—to shield forces from tactical aircraft. The offensive was also the first to employ Soviet tanks in great numbers. According to Giap’s biographer, the new factor giving him hope for a breakthrough was availability of Russian T-54 and T-72 tanks.

It was not to be. Linebacker I, as it was eventually called, “would halt the invasion and so devastate North Vietnam’s military capabilities that Hanoi would be compelled to negotiate seriously for the first time since peace talks began in 1968,” wrote historian Earl H. Tilford Jr. in his book Setup.

As the new wealth of expeditionary airpower flowed back to Thailand’s bases, Washington widened the war. In 1968, President Lyndon B. Johnson had stopped bombing the North on the condition that North Vietnamese forces did not attack below the DMZ. Giap’s invasion broke the agreement.

On April 2, US aircraft were authorized to bomb the North for the first time since 1968. Nixon told his advisors on April 4: “Let’s get that weather cleared up. The bastards have never been bombed like they’re going to be bombed this time, but you’ve got to have [the] weather.”

Operation Freedom Train from April 6 to May 9 attempted to interdict supplies and railyards supporting Giap’s offensive. On May 1, 1972, after a fruitless meeting with North Vietnamese diplomats, Nixon upped the ante again, deciding to break the invasion.

Nixon expanded the operation and gave it the new code name Linebacker. He was determined “to go for broke,” he told his National Security Advisor Henry A. Kissinger.

But pressure on the North was not the only point. Battlefield airpower was a mainstay, providing fires support to ground forces and resupplying the besieged garrison at An Loc in Military Region III. Despite all the power brought to bear on Hanoi and Haiphong, the South Vietnamese had to hold their ground, Nixon noted.

Air control and coordination were the first tasks. In Military Region I, the air environment could be difficult: The North had moved SA-2s into the region. On Feb. 17, North Vietnam fired 81 SA-2s, taking out three F-4s. In April, fliers reported the SA-7 operational in the South. These SAMs would eventually claim several forward air controllers (FACs) and attack aircraft.

On the ground, the campaign demanded close work between US advisors, airmen, and their South Vietnamese counterparts.

“By 1972, there were very few US ALOs [air liaison officers] still in theater,” wrote USAF Lt. Col. Matthew C. Brand in a 2007 master’s thesis for the US Army Command and General Staff College. Hence most of the terminal air control was provided by airborne FACs, or FAC-As.

Could US airpower halt the attack in Military Region I? For weeks the battle hung in the balance. Forces crossed the DMZ, moving south, and also attacked to the east, past the former firebase at Khe Sanh. The objective was the ancient city of Hue. Between the North and Hue lay the towns of Dong Ha and Quang Tri, along a rail and road line leading directly to Hue.

At one point, Giap’s forces overran 12 fire-control bases, leaving only US Navy surface gunfire and joint aircraft to support defenders. The offensive resumed on April 27, in bad weather. Dong Ha fell the next day and on April 29, four North Vietnamese divisions, about 40,000 men, advanced on Quang Tri.

In a night action, US Army’s 18th Cavalry vehicles held a bridge on the north side of the city, while air strikes destroyed all five enemy tanks attacking the bridge. Then on May 1, the ARVN evacuated Quang Tri, leaving equipment strewn along the road to Hue.

After the debacle at Quang Tri, a new ARVN commander took over. Lt. Gen. Ngo Quang Truong used the first week of May to set up a new defensive line at the My Chanh river, south of Quang Tri, a third of the distance to Hue. Truong also called for air interdiction against North Vietnamese forces pressing toward Hue. Truong tasked air to hit 130 mm artillery, tanks, smaller artillery, and trucks. In three days, fighters dropped 45 bridges between the DMZ and Truong’s line at the My Chanh.

The new tactic of attacking tanks with laser guided bombs helped hold the line. One FAC watched in amazement as the two F-4s he called lased and plinked a T-54 and a PT-76 a mile from the town of My Chanh. Attack aircraft, fighters, and gunships tallied more than 70 percent of the tanks hit in Vietnam in April and May 1972.

By May 13, Truong’s forces were making limited counterattacks. B-52s and fighters struck ahead of the advancing ground forces. The turning point came between May 20 and May
29, 1972. The North launched a final offensive, crossing the My Chanh in several places. But with air support, Truong’s outnumbered defenders held the line. Tactical air destroyed 18 tanks. The last North Vietnamese forces retreated back across the My Chanh on May 29.

The battle for MR I was an air campaign in itself. Some 18,000 sorties were flown in MR I from April through June 1972. In late June, Truong’s forces shifted to the attack, heading north to retake Quang Tri. The strongest of Giap’s offensive drives had been halted and turned back.

**Military Regions II and III**

The attacks in Military Regions II and III relied just as heavily on airpower in many forms. In Military Region II, Giap’s objectives included the city of Pleiku, scene of fighting much earlier in the war.

Giap’s forces again made early gains, including the capture of a vital airfield at Dak To. South Vietnamese forces fell back to make a stand in the city of Kontum.

North Vietnamese forces cut Highway 14 north of Pleiku on April 24, leaving “the defenders of Kontum wholly isolated except by air during more than two months of heavy and close fighting,” wrote the authors of a USAF monograph, “Airpower and the 1972 Spring Invasion.”

C-130s and South Vietnamese Air Force aircraft delivered fuel, ammunition, and rice. Night operations helped, but several C-123s and other aircraft were lost at Kontum airfield due to enemy fire. In late May and June, airdrop became the primary means of resupply.

Air also became the only source of mobile long-range offensive firepower for the defenders. Helicopter gunships and tactical aircraft helped break up a major attack on May 14. Army helicopters eventually claimed 11 T-54 kills around Kontum with tube launched, optically tracked, wire guided (TOW) missiles, while USAF crews claimed 15 tank kills through May 18.

On May 26, Kontum came under heavy shelling, closing the airstrip. B-52s, fixed wing gunships, and tactical air counterattacked. In May alone, the B-52s flew nearly 1,000 sorties in MR II. PACAF concluded “the effect of air on the daily ground situation had been significant,” according to the USAF monograph. Air helped the defenders hold Kontum, counterattacked enemy concentrations, and denied the ability to gain additional territory.

The defense of An Loc—just 60 miles from Saigon—dominated the battle in Military Region III. Some 20,000 military and civilian personnel were trapped there. With Giap’s forces holding Highway 13 south of the city, An Loc was cut off.

In the first two weeks of April, tactical aircraft flew 2,500 sorties in MR III, mostly around Loc Ninh, which fell, and An Loc, which held. Now An Loc emerged as the key to preventing Giap’s forces from pushing down Highway 13 to Saigon.
B-52s conducted close air support. According to the USAF monograph, Army Brig. Gen. John R. McGiffert III described the B-52s as “the most effective weapon we have been able to muster.” He explained that the threat of heavy bombers forced the enemy to break up into smaller units, and when they massed they paid a terrible toll.

Gunships worked with US Army advisors to target buildings and streets with precise, heavy fire and to attack North Vietnamese troops penetrating the city. During the battle, the garrison of ARVN defenders and their American advisors, including two Ranger battalions, relied on air-dropped supplies.

The last North Vietnamese troops were driven out of An Loc on June 12 and the siege lifted on June 18. By the end of June 1972, ARVN forces had returned to the offensive in all three military regions. Giap’s plan had failed.

“Tactical air support was directly instrumental in each of the three main campaigns within South Vietnam, first blunting and then breaking the communist momentum,” concluded the USAF monograph.

An Air Force Historical Studies Office fact sheet summed up the operational outcome: “Nixon’s use of airpower to disrupt supply lines and kill the enemy on the battlefield stopped the offensive and helped drive the enemy back a short distance without a reintroduction of the ground forces he had withdrawn from the South.” Only 43,000 American airmen and support personnel remained by the time of the offensive.

Linebacker’s airpower halted the invasion.

**Lessons of Linebacker I**

Linebacker was a breakthrough in advanced air attack technology and in the overall control of the campaign.

US Air Force and Navy aircraft had considerable success against mobile North Vietnamese forces, including tanks. At critical battles such as the siege of An Loc, gunships, attack helicopters, fighters, and B-52s all destroyed tanks on the move.

While political oversight was tight, Nixon’s guidelines made airpower more effective by removing many of the operational restraints that dogged Rolling Thunder years before.

An Air Force report found, “The prevailing authority to strike almost any valid military target during Linebacker was in sharp contrast to the extensive and vacillating restrictions in existence during Rolling Thunder” operations, the 1965-1968 campaign over North Vietnam. Attacks pushed to within 30 miles of the Chinese border, and later to just 15 miles. Only a few areas and targets in Hanoi remained off limits in Linebacker I.

Nixon and aides approved a master target list then left decisions on strikes to theater commanders.
Linebacker I clearly also benefited from the North’s shift to sustained ground combat with large mechanized forces. This required a much greater logistical effort than guerilla warfare and opened up the supply lines to aerial interdiction.

The sheer weight of US airpower made the biggest impression.

In fact, Linebacker I planted the seeds of success in future campaigns and became the template for the strategy of swinging airpower to halt and deny enemy ground force objectives. That strategy remains at the center of US policy in 2012.

Giap himself summed it up best. Although he would eventually capture the South in 1975, he gave grudging acknowledgement to the role of airpower in battles.

“The American Air Force is a very powerful air force,” he told an interviewer 10 years after the battle. “Naturally, that air force had an influence on the battlefield. It was a great trump card.”
**Focus On: Strategic Bombing**

**LINEBACKER II**


The massive air campaign was hard-fought and deadly, but it finally brought North Vietnam back to the negotiating table.

In December 1972—40 years ago this month—the US executed Linebacker II, the largest B-52 bombing campaign of all time. The period from Dec. 18 to Dec. 29 saw the huge USAF bombers mount shattering strikes on North Vietnamese railways, airfields, surface-to-air missile storage sites, petroleum dumps, and other infrastructure targets around Hanoi.

B-52 crews flew 729 nighttime sorties. Their Air Force and Navy fighter escorts provided another 769 sorties for suppression of air defenses, combat air patrol against MiGs, escort, and chaff dispensing.

By the time the Linebacker II campaign was finished, North Vietnam was “on its knees,” in the words of National Security Advisor Henry A. Kissinger. It was ready and willing to sign a peace agreement that included the return of American prisoners of war.

The price was high. Communist defenses downed 15 B-52s, containing 92 bomber crew members. According to airpower historian Walter J. Boyne, eight of these airmen were killed in action or later died of their wounds. Twenty-five were missing in action. Thirty-three became prisoners of war. Only 26 were recovered alive before capture.

Linebacker II stemmed from the breakdown, in late 1972, of promising negotiations aimed at ending the Vietnam War.

The so-called Paris Peace Talks between Kissinger and North Vietnam’s Le Duc Tho had brought the sides close to agreement in October 1972. President Richard M. Nixon was so optimistic about the tentative peace agreement reached on Oct. 8, 1972, that, on Oct. 23, he suspended all US bombing north of the 20th parallel.

Not long afterward, however, Hanoi began to renege on its undertakings, and the peace talks moved toward collapse.

This infuriated Nixon, who vented his frustration in a Dec. 10, 1972, telephone conversation with Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador to the United States. (The recording was declassified in 2008.) “It’s ... hard for me to understand how they can go back on what we had agreed on,” Nixon told Dobrynin. “[Soviet leader Leonid] Brezhnev and I, and your government, we got bigger fish to fry than this damn thing.”

To Nixon, “this damn thing” was the Vietnam War; the “bigger fish” was detente between the two superpowers, which the Vietnam War threatened to derail.
Nixon pressed the Soviet Union to put pressure on its belligerent client Hanoi. The tactic did not work. Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., the Army officer who was serving as deputy national security advisor, brought the bad news to Nixon on Dec. 12.

According to Dobrynin, said Haig, “Hanoi claims it’s Kissinger who’s intransigent and that there were many issues unresolved.” The Dobrynin message made it clear North Vietnam was in no hurry to resume talks or sign a treaty.

To break the logjam and extricate the US from the Southeast Asian quagmire, Nixon needed an extraordinary act, and he soon decided what it would be.

Nixon had already laid the groundwork for an air campaign option. On Nov. 30, 1972, he convened a White House meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to discuss contingency plans. The original concept was for three to six days of B-52 strikes. The plans were to be put in motion if talks broke off or if talks succeeded but North Vietnam later violated the cease-fire agreement.

Nixon wanted a military action that would be, in his words, “massive and effective.” The President added, “Above all, B-52s are to be targeted on Hanoi,” North Vietnam’s capital city that had enjoyed sanctuary status for most of the war years.

All concerned in the planning knew that only overwhelming heavy bomber attacks could make a major difference in the delta during bad weather, historian Wayne Thompson wrote in his book To Hanoi and Back. Thus, Nixon believed he had one option left: to bomb prime military targets near Hanoi—and bomb them hard.

And We Can’t Do That

The Nixon Administration’s willingness to use the bomber weapon became apparent in a Dec. 12 Nixon-Haig conversation:

Nixon: “We’re not going to wait until the end of Christmas if we have to do the bombing.”

Haig: “No. ... And if the talks break off or recess, I think we’ve got to really pick it up. We’ve got to put the heat on them. ... They no sooner get a concession from us on an old issue like the DMZ [demilitarized zone] or our civilians then they pocket our concession and reopen the issue again to get another one.”

On Dec. 15, Nixon dictated to Kissinger a five-page, single-spaced memorandum, instructing him on what to say in a special press conference on Dec. 16.

Nixon wrote, “You should point out on the plus side that, as far as the war is concerned, as we enter this Christmas season, we can all be thankful that no draftees are going to Vietnam, that our casualties have been at either zero or near-zero levels for the last three months, that no Americans are engaged in ground combat, and that, for the first time since the war began, both sides are negotiating seriously to try to find a peaceful settlement.”
Nixon said that Kissinger “should also point out that the President insists that the United States is not going to be pushed around, blackmailed, or stampeded into making the wrong kind of peace agreement.”

Nixon, hashing over final details with Kissinger on that same day, reviewed American options.

“It’s been a long war,” said Nixon, as Kissinger listened. “We have to realize that there isn’t much else left to do unless you’re going to nuke them”—here, Nixon pauses—”and we can’t do that.”

Nixon continued, “What else is there to do then? We’ve done everything. They’ll say, talk to the Russians. We have. Talk to the Chinese? We have. Talk to the North Vietnamese? We have. Bomb them? We have. Mine them? We have.”

The Linebacker II operation kicked off on Dec. 18, 1972. The US position as cabled to Hanoi by Kissinger was that the North was “deliberately and frivolously delaying the talks.” If Le Duc Tho would agree to return to Paris, the US would cease bombing within 36 hours.

Control of the overall campaign was in the hands of USAF Gen. John C. Meyer, commander in chief, Strategic Air Command.

The risks of Linebacker II were hard to assess in advance. B-52 crews had been flying in the Vietnam War theater for years, with the loss of 13 aircraft. Each loss stemmed from an accident of some sort, save for one. On Nov. 22, 1972, a B-52D from U Tapao RTAB, Thailand, fell victim to a SAM blast.

Col. James R. McCarthy had recently taken command of the 43rd Strategic Wing on Guam. Large crowds of crew members packed in for three mass briefs.

McCarthy recounted in an Air Force monograph, “As the route was shown on the briefing screen, I said, ‘Gentlemen, your target for tonight is Hanoi.’ It must have been effective, because for the rest of the briefing you could have heard a pin drop.”

The pilots knew that, up north over Hanoi, the North Vietnamese had emplaced thick SA-2 air defenses and backed them up with anti-aircraft artillery. They were supplemented by a rejuvenated force of up to 145 fighters, including MiG-21s.

B-52s flew to waypoints to circle around the zone and penetrate from specific angles. Their chief protection from SAMs lay in chaff clouds dispensed by fighters, electronic jamming from escort aircraft, and electronic countermeasures from their own aircraft. Each BUFF carried four .50-caliber tail guns to deal with any MiG that might slip in behind.

On Night No. 1 of the campaign, a total of 129 B-52s from Guam and U Tapao attacked in three waves, but the communist SAMs proved deadly. The missiles claimed three B-52s plus one Navy A-7 attack aircraft and one F-111 lost for unknown reasons after its bomb run.
North Vietnamese MiGs suffered a loss, too. B-52D tail gunner SSgt. Samuel O. Turner shot down a MiG-21—scoring the first ever B-52 aerial victory.

Capt. Michael H. Labeau, a B-52 radar-navigator, belonged to an augmentee crew led by Capt. Robert J. Morris Jr., a pilot from Kincheloe AFB, Mich. Labeau flew a Night No. 2 mission from Guam. “It was not particularly dangerous,” Labeau judged. Their target that night was not right “downtown” and “we did not see a MiG.”

Disaster struck on Night No. 3. SAMs and MiGs blasted away at bomber formations. Six B-52s and an A-6 from USS Enterprise were shot down. Five B-52s were hit in post-target turns.

Maj. Dick Parrish that night was the radar-navigator in a B-52G in the final cell. The pilot and copilot saw one B-52 on fire and another explode from a direct hit. After bomb release and the turn for home the sky grew quiet.

Both pilots took one last look out the window just as two SAM indications popped up on the scope. “The next thing I knew,” said Parrish, “we were in a steep, descending right turn.”

The B-52 dove away as the SAMs exploded above them.

Two more B-52s were lost on Dec. 21. SAC was already implementing new tactics to change routes to the target. Because of losses, commanders also decided to redistribute some crews from Guam to U Tapao, Labeau said.

The crew from Kincheloe was among those rotated to U Tapao. Labeau flew again on Dec. 24 to hit a railroad target.

“At that time the railroads were not heavily defended,” said Labeau, but missiles still met them. “The North Vietnamese were trying to hit the lead airplane. They were still trying to radar-guide the missiles.”

In another B-52 that night was tail gunner TSgt. James R. Cook, who had flown numerous missions. Tail gunners scouted for MiGs and called out evasive maneuvers to defeat SAM shots, and the D model was best for this because of the visibility from the tail. In a mission on Dec. 24, three missiles came up, and Cook called them out. The B-52D dove to evade. They all scooted by the tail and exploded, Cook recalled.

Operations paused for Christmas Day. Planners and crew members prepared for maximum effort on Dec. 26. Plans called for seven streams of bombers to converge on Hanoi targets. As recalled by 1st Lt. Robert M. Hudson, who was a B-52 copilot on the raid, it was the night “we got bagged.”

The size of the Dec. 26 mission meant that the normal preflight activity was overloaded and confused.
“People were briefing in hallways,” Labeau remembered. “Targets were late, aircraft assignments were late, intelligence was late, the data you took out to the airplane with you was late,” he said.

**Come on, Bob**

Labeau’s crew, which included Morris and Hudson, was assigned to B-52D No. 56-0674 and briefed for the mission as Ebony 3. SAC kept the B-52s in formations of three to maximize coverage from the electronic countermeasures. The original Ebony 2 ground-aborted, and the Morris-Hudson-Labeau airplane moved up as call sign Ebony 2.

As Labeau recalled, “A lot of little things went wrong that in isolation wouldn’t have made a difference but in combination created the difference that we got hit.”

First, their regular tail gunner became incapacitated and Hudson called for a replacement. Cook had just finished his shift as the gunner assigned to wait on alert. All crews had briefed and stepped to their airplanes when the call came. “A truck came by to pick me up,” he said. “We started down the runway as I was strapping in.”

An engine fire warning lit up on takeoff. Ebony 2 circled over the Gulf of Thailand to get the engine pod shut down, and so now it was behind the other aircraft. Everything became rushed. Flying time from U Tapao to the target might take as little as 45 minutes.

The crew members never gave a thought to turning back, however. For one thing, they didn’t want to they explained in recent interviews. For another, SAC had a “press on” rule, and the Ebony 2 crew knew that dropping out would eliminate all protection for their lead airplane.

Soon the SAMs were popping up. Intelligence reports had suggested the North Vietnamese might be nearly out of SAMs, but that obviously was not the case over Hanoi on Dec. 26.

“They were barrage firing all at one time,” said Labeau.

“It was apparent this was no F Troop doing the aiming,” said McCarthy, who was serving as the aircraft commander for the Dec. 26 mission.

Ebony 2 was coming in from the west and was vulnerable. Because it was part of a two-ship cell, “we stuck out,” said Labeau. Countermeasure defenses were lower with one less bomber, too.

Morris and Hudson watched for SAM launches. If a particular SAM’s flight path could be seen, it could be avoided, Hudson said. If a pilot saw a SAM on the left, they pushed the B-52 into a dive to the right, so as to make the SAM explode far above the aircraft. “The B-52 is much more maneuverable than you think,” Hudson remembered.

Just minutes out from the target, the crew scanned the sky for more SAMs and prepared the bomb run. However, they were down an engine, and they never did quite achieve the planned release airspeed. Procedure called for opening the bomb bay 60 seconds before
the release point. Local tactics cut that to 30 seconds. Ebony 2’s slow airspeed delayed the bay opening even further.

As they approached the release point, Hudson and Morris didn’t see any SAM launches, but they had a blind spot. They didn’t see a SAM that came under the aircraft, recalled Hudson. At the last moment, the onboard electronic warfare officer, Maj. Nutter J. Wimbrow III, spotted something and declared calmly over the intercom, “We’re going to be hit.”

The SAM’s proximity fuse detonated its explosive payload on the left side of Ebony 2. The cockpit windows blew out. The radome was sheared away. Decompression sent objects flying around the crew spaces. Rushing air screamed through the crew spaces and made it hard to hear speakers on the intercom. Damage inside the cockpit was severe in the extreme.

Copilot Hudson looked over at the pilot, Morris. He had died instantly.

Radar-navigator Labeau came on the intercom, saying, “Come on, Bob, we’ve got to get the bombs off the airplane.”

Labeau was speaking to Morris, who was dead, and not copilot Bob Hudson. Still, Labeau’s sharp comment snapped Hudson out of his momentary shock, and he addressed the problem at hand.

Hudson got the crippled B-52’s nose up and turned the big bomber toward the target. Labeau was able to get all the bombs off and away and then directed the bomber south on a heading that was the quickest way out of trouble.

A second SAM hit.

“The whole plane bounced when that second hit came along,” said Cook, the tail gunner. The B-52D rolled on its back.

“The decision was made to bail out,” said Labeau.

Downstairs in the aircraft, he and the navigator, 1st Lt. Duane P. Vavroch, sat side by side.

“We looked at each other,” recalled Labeau. “I said, ‘Get out!’ The navigator ejected. “There’s now a big hole beside me,” said Labeau.

He pulled the ejection handle. The hatch below opened, his seat swung a few degrees back—and nothing happened. Labeau found to his surprise that he was still in the B-52 with the seat stuck partway through the ejection sequence. He yanked on the black and yellow handles again.

“I don’t know how many times I pulled,” he said, “but it eventually shot me out of the airplane.”

Meanwhile, Cook was still in the tail. He’d disconnected his oxygen line and then blown the gun turrets away to open the bailout hatch, but he could not wriggle through the
opening. Every time he tried, the parachute pulled him back into his seat. At over 30,000 feet, his oxygen ran out quickly. He passed out.

McCarthy, on another B-52, was departing the Hanoi area when he saw “a brilliant explosion” in the sky. It was Ebony 2, hit by a third SAM.

Amazingly, the force of the explosion blew tail gunner Cook out of the hulk of the bomber. He was unconscious, but his parachute opened automatically.

Hudson was also in his parachute but in trouble. The force of the ejection dislocated his hips, and he suffered broken ribs where he had not tightly fastened his straps. His mask had filled with blood from a blown-out sinus cavity. He tore the mask off to breathe. The clip banged and cut his face in the cold slipstream of air.

As he descended in his parachute, Hudson was shot in the left shoulder by riflemen on the ground. “They were waiting for me,” he said.

Because of the severity of the pain in his ribs and hips, Hudson did not notice his gunshot wound.

**The End**

For his part, Cook woke up in two feet of water, coughing. He was captured within minutes. He had suffered two broken legs, a broken back, and fractures in a shoulder and elbow. Soldiers wired his wrists and ankles together, put him in a motorcycle sidecar, and drove him to Hanoi.

Labeau and Hudson separately were picked up by villagers and turned over to North Vietnamese Army regulars.

In the “Hanoi Hilton,” the notorious prison used to hold captured American airmen, Labeau found he was one of the least injured of the new POWs. He spent the first week caring for about a dozen injured airmen, including navigator Vavroch, Air Force F-4 crew members, and Navy fliers.

At length, the imprisoned airmen noticed that the B-52 bombing attacks were no longer shaking the ground. “We were pretty sure that, once bombing stopped, something positive would happen,” said Hudson.

He was right. The air campaign of Linebacker II had forced the North Vietnamese to accept US terms and declare that Hanoi would soon return to the peace talks in Paris.

Cook, the Ebony 2 tail gunner, was repatriated; both legs were amputated and he was medically retired from the Air Force. Also returned were navigator Vavroch, copilot Hudson, and radar-navigator Labeau. The latter two recovered from their injuries and were retrained to fly the F-111. The remains of the pilot, Morris, and the crew’s electronic warfare officer, Wimbrow, were repatriated in 1977.
The Dec. 26 and Dec. 27 attacks marked the apex of Linebacker II. On Dec. 28, Kissinger called Nixon to tell him Hanoi had accepted the proposal to return to the peace table and get serious about an agreement.

Nixon: “No conditions?”

Kissinger: “No, it’s all of ours accepted.”

Nixon (later): “What significance do you attach to all this?”

Kissinger: “I think they are practically on their knees. ... For them to accept this ... is a sign of enormous weakness.”

Kissinger then noted that many critics in Washington were challenging the use of such heavy B-52 raids.

Nixon emitted one short, mirthless laugh.

“The main thing now, Henry, is we have to pull this [peace treaty] off. ... My view is we talk and we settle.”

Within 34 hours of the conversation, the US declared Linebacker II to be at an end. On Guam, the last B-52 on the last raid landed just after noon, local time, on Dec. 30, 1972.


Shortly afterward, the US began bringing home its prisoners of war.

*The famous ace influenced generations of pilots, and he always led from the front.*

Few American airmen have had the kind of dazzling talent and charisma possessed by Robin Olds. His persona loomed equally large whether from the cockpit, the lectern, or in face-to-face encounters.

Olds was big, tough, smart, and swaggering, not to mention brave and highly skilled. Even Hollywood would have had a hard time portraying the genuine article on the big screen. He was a truly dynamic force, one who had a positive impact on the Air Force for more than 60 years.

“His influence upon who we are as an Air Force today can hardly be overstated,” Gen. T. Michael Moseley, Chief of Staff, remarked on the death of the retired brigadier general last June. Olds was “a staunch advocate for better fighters, better pilot training,” and the innovative tactics that the Air Force still uses today, Moseley said.

Olds’ effect on USAF varied both in content and in timing. His career can easily be divided into two eras. In general terms, the first era, which ran from West Point to his retirement, was a period in which his effect was chiefly localized. He was achieving notable combat successes, influencing his peers and subordinates, and often antagonizing his superiors.

In the second, postretirement era his effect spread, and Olds became almost universally embraced, even by those who previously had taken exception to his views.

Olds had great stories to tell, and he polished them over the years, weaving them into his presentations with the wit and the timing of a professional actor. He didn’t mind exaggerating the humorous aspects in some of his stories, but he never exaggerated what he accomplished.

**On the Field**

His many devoted fans have further embroidered Olds’ stories, with the result that some have become inconsistent over time. One thing is constant: This man was a warrior who led from the front, who cared for his troops, and who never hesitated to say exactly what he thought.

Born on July 14, 1922 in Honolulu, Olds was the son of Robert Olds, a fighter pilot in World War I and later an aide to Billy Mitchell. Eloise, Olds’ mother, died when he was
four, and he was brought up by his father, who gave him his first flight at the age of eight, in an open-cockpit biplane. In his later years, Robin Olds would speak with admiration of the great leaders—Ira C. Eaker, Carl A. Spaatz, and others—who met often at his home, as his father eventually rose to the rank of major general.

Robin began to gain prominence while a cadet at West Point, where he played tackle on both offense and defense and was named an All American. (Olds was so proficient on the football field that he was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1985.)

In later years, Olds told of being deliberately struck by an opponent’s forearm in a game against archrival Navy. The blow knocked out two upper front teeth and sidelined him for a few plays as his bleeding mouth was packed with cotton. Back in the game, he smashed into the man who had hit him, knocking his opponent flat on his back. Olds stood over him, grinning, pointing to his bleeding mouth and then down to the fallen foe.

He graduated from West Point in 1943—the year of his father’s early death—and months later graduated from pilot training, with his wings being pinned on by Gen. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold himself.

Young Lieutenant Olds was well-trained, with more than 650 hours in aircraft, including the Lockheed P-38 Lightning, when he entered World War II combat. He flew with the abandon of a man who knows he is invulnerable and for whom the enemy is only a target.

Olds began his sensational rise as a fighter pilot in Europe, where he flew 107 missions, scored 12 aerial victories, and destroyed another 11-and-one-half enemy aircraft on the ground. His knowledge of air combat grew with his victories and so did his willingness to speak out about his beliefs—no matter how contrary they were to current doctrine. It was a trait that would work more often against him than for him.

From P-51s to P-80s

At the peak of the air war against Germany, Olds saw how heavy bombers’ precision attacks were being converted into area bombing by wind, weather, and enemy opposition.

He put forth the idea that 70 P-51s armed with 500-pound bombs could do more damage to a target requiring precise accuracy than a formation of 1,000 B-17s.

As an idea, it was 20 years ahead of its time—and it ran directly contrary to USAAF philosophy. It was the first of many of Olds’ ideas whose time had not yet come, a condition that would frustrate him over the years, and helped induce in him flamboyant behavior that worked against both his acceptance and his advancement.

The refusal to accept his idea about precision bombing was puzzling to him because he was awarded many decorations. Most satisfying of all, he was given command of his squadron as a 22-year-old major. In later life, he sometimes remarked on the strange “disconnect” between the increase of his responsibility on one hand, and the rejection of his ideas on the other.
After the war, Olds was placed in the very first Lockheed P-80 jet aircraft squadron. This was a desirable assignment, as well as a dangerous one, for the loss rate in the early jet aircraft was high. He also flew with the Aerial Aerobatic Demonstration Team, the forerunner of the Thunderbirds, the first American jet aircraft aerobatic team. For good measure, he also placed second in the jet aircraft division of the 1946 Thompson Trophy Race.

He added to his high visibility level by marrying movie star Ella Raines. He and Raines separated in 1975, but remained married until her death in 1988.

Also of note was his assignment to an exchange program with the Royal Air Force where he flew the Gloster Meteor jet fighter and then served in the prestigious position of commander of No. 1 Squadron, RAF.

However, when the Korean War came, Olds was unable, despite considerable effort, to get back into combat. In private conversations, he would attribute this directly to one of his superiors who told him in essence, "If I cannot get there to fight, you are certainly not going to get there."

After Korea, Olds became deeply discontented with the direction he saw being taken by tactical airpower: Tactical Air Command became increasingly focused on the nuclear mission.

Olds continued to distinguish himself by brilliant flying and the ability to ruffle his superior’s feathers. At a time when TAC was oriented to the delivery of nuclear weapons, Olds, through a series of papers, continually called for intensive training in air-to-air combat, close air support, and development of new tactics. He also sought better pilot training, better fighters, and surgical precision in bombing, just as he had done during World War II.

**Something Missing**

Olds became dissatisfied with his career, despite assignments that most fighter pilots would have coveted. These included the command of a wing in Europe, the 81st Tactical Fighter Wing at RAF Bentwaters, England, where Col. Daniel “Chappie” James Jr. was his deputy commander for operations.

The two men would team up again later, becoming famous as “Blackman and Robin” in the Vietnam War. In between these assignments, Olds worked at the Pentagon and graduated from the National War College. His promotions came in good order, yet despite his satisfaction in leading first-class flying units—and despite the admiration in which he was held by his officers and enlisted men—there was something missing. Olds wanted the acknowledgement that he was a thinker as well as a doer.

Unfortunately, his ideas on a return to training geared to fighting a conventional air war were rebuffed.
His desire to remain in an active flying job was more important to him than his imminent promotion to brigadier general. As commander of the 81st, flying McDonnell F-101 Voodoo fighter-bombers, Olds formed an aerial demonstration team and performed an unauthorized low-level aerobatic display.

His boss reprimanded him, and as punishment, ripped up Olds’ promotion papers. His next assignment was to Shaw AFB, S.C., where it seemed his career had reached a dead end.

In fact the opposite was true: He had crafted a situation where he could return to combat and achieve his greatest fame.

For the first time since his combat in Europe, time and events were on Olds’ side. The United States was becoming increasingly involved in the Vietnam War and in 1966, Olds was assigned to the 4453rd Combat Crew Training Wing at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona. His old friend Chappie James was there, as was then-Maj. William L. Kirk.

There followed the decisive event that would foster Olds’ ascent from simply being a hero to a few and a troublemaker to many. On Sept. 30, 1966, he became commander of the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing, based at Ubon AB, Thailand.

The wing needed Olds as badly as he needed the wing. He introduced himself to his largely dispirited and tired pilots in his usual fashion, with a challenge: Olds was going to fly as a new guy until he learned his job—and then he was going to lead the wing into combat from the front.

There was suspicion that this World War II retread was just talking a good game, but Olds soon proved himself to be a master of the F-4 and an inspiring leader.

The stories of his methods are legion. He shook up the base’s support staff, putting it on the same 24-hour clock as his combat crews. He continually visited the support groups, finding out what their problems were in an effort to get them solved. And he was not above tipping a bottle of beer with his airmen as they discussed how to improve operations.

He led his wing as he had promised, from the front, with flair and aggressiveness. Olds ultimately flew 152 missions in Southeast Asia, 105 of them over North Vietnam. He encouraged camaraderie at the bar, grew an unauthorized mustache, and demonstrated at the age of 44 that he was the physical, mental, and flying equal—or superior—of any man in his unit.
Olds had always had good effect on the morale of the units he led. He was gregarious, was always concerned about the welfare of his people, and like many of his contemporaries he drank too much for his own good.

His prescient view of the types of training required for air combat was far in advance of most of his superiors. It was ignored for many years because it was contrary to contemporary doctrine—and, in truth, partly because of his flamboyant nature.

Unfortunately, prior to the Vietnam War, he was never able to impose his ideas with the same elegance that he used in leading the 8th TFW.

First and foremost, Olds wanted to kill MiGs, but the North Vietnamese were canny. Few in number, they husbanded their resources, striking against Republic F-105 formations when they could do so safely. The North Vietnamese were content, if necessary, with a preservationist strategy of just making the Thunderchiefs drop their bombs before they reached the target area.

It was deeply satisfying for Olds to see over Vietnam that all the ideas that he had advocated—better airplanes, more training in air-to-air combat, bombing, and close air support—had been correct all along. For Robin Olds, it was vindication.

Impatient with the reluctant enemy, Olds conceived a plan that became the single most important air-to-air engagement of the war, and which started him into the second era of his career—the period in which he had immense effect on virtually everyone in the Air Force.

Calling on the skill and guile of the leading members of his wing, Olds created Operation Bolo. The plan was elegantly simple: Modern F-4s would imitate the call signs, routes, and flight profiles of more-vulnerable F-105s in a bid to coax North Vietnamese fighters into a trap. The tactics worked and induced the North Vietnamese Air Force to believe that a Phantom formation was indeed a formation of Thunderchiefs.

In the ensuing battle, seven MiG-21s were shot down, the biggest score of the war. Olds shot down the first of his four MiGs in this battle, raising his total number of victories to 13 on the way to a career total of 16.

A Promotion Long Overdue

After his stint in the war, his Air Force career was distinguished by the popularity he enjoyed as a strict but caring commandant of cadets at the Air Force Academy. He finally became a brigadier general in 1968 (a promotion long overdue in the minds of many), but subsequently was assigned to positions that did not lend themselves to more promotions.

Yet promotions were the furthest thing from Olds’ mind. Asked by Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. John D. Ryan in 1972 to investigate why the Air Force kill ratio had plummeted late in the Vietnam War, Olds came back with a blistering report that impugned USAF’s
contemporary training. He offered to accept a reduction in rank to colonel so that he could go back and personally inculcate the necessary fighting techniques, but this proposal was refused. Olds elected to retire in 1973.

By this time, Olds’ influence was already growing. He continued to put forth his ideas, addressing countless groups around the country, often beginning his talks with four words that truly characterized him.

Olds would stand before the group—sometimes military people, sometimes a Rotary Club, it didn’t matter. He would square his shoulders, wait for a few tension-filled seconds, then shout, “I AM A WARRIOR.” No one ever doubted him.

Though he never seemed to seek it out, his popularity continually increased.

Olds continued to write influential papers on his ideas about aerial warfare. It is the mark of the man that when technology at last reached a point where his ideas on training and tactics no longer applied, he welcomed the change.

Olds realized that the advent of stealth, precision guided weapons, and sophisticated command and control forever changed the dynamics of air combat, and he said so.

He also labored over an autobiography that was not completed by the time of his death, but that would be massively welcomed by his legion of fans.

After a long fight, Robin Olds succumbed to congestive heart failure on June 14, 2007, surrounded by his family and friends. He was interred at the United States Air Force Academy Cemetery with full honors and a unique missing man formation. Four Phantoms roared over, and instead of the customary pull up by the lead’s wingman, in this instance, the lead himself pulled up. It was an appropriate salute to the one, the only, Robin Olds, a leader all his life. Mr. Griffin Taylor published a You Tube presentation on 16 May 2013 regarding the life of General Robin Olds. http://youtu.be/RS1I-SXW5jA
Focus On: Valor

COLONEL GEORGE E. “BUD” DAY

August 2013

- Served in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam Wars
- Initial commander of first forward air controller unit in Vietnam
- Seventy decorations, more than fifty for combat
- Most highly decorated servicemen since General Douglas McArthur
- Congressional Medal of Honor recipient

Colonel George E. “Bud” Day was born in Iowa in 1925. He is America’s most highly decorated living soldier, and the most highly decorated since General Douglas MacArthur. In a military career spanning 34 years and three wars, Day received seventy decorations, more than fifty of them for combat. They include the Congressional Medal of Honor. Day started his military career as a Marine enlisted man in 1942 and served 30 months in the South Pacific during World War II. Returning home, he entered college, studied law, and passed the bar examination in 1949. In 1950, he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Iowa National Guard. He joined the Air Force in 1951 and completed pilot training later that year. He then served two tours in the Far East as a fighter-bomber pilot during the Korean War, flying F-84s.

Day also earned the distinction, while stationed in England, of living through the first no-parachute bailout from a burning fighter. Recognition of his experience and abilities led to his selection as the initial commander of the 416th Tactical Fighter Squadron, the first “Misty” Super FAC unit. In F-100Fs, he and his men flew missions over North Vietnam, finding and marking targets for other fighter-bombers to strike. The Misty squadron flew one of the most dangerous missions of the Vietnam War. In Day’s case, his accumulation of over 5000 hours of flying time and 4500 hours of single-engine jet time came to an abrupt halt while on a mission in the back seat of an F-100F, checking out a new Misty pilot.

On 26 August 1967, Day was shot down over North Vietnam. Following his ejection, the North Vietnamese captured him. Despite serious injuries, he managed to escape his captors and evade through the Demilitarized Zone back into South Vietnam. Within sight of friendly aircraft, the enemy recaptured him. He was then returned to the North, where he was imprisoned. He is the only prisoner ever to escape from North Vietnam and return all the way through the Demilitarized Zone to South Vietnam. Thus, he began a 67-month ordeal that would end only when he was released from captivity. On 14 March 1973, Day left Vietnam in a C-141, and, with his fellow POWs, returned to freedom. In short order, he was reunited with his wife and four children in the United States. After a short recuperative period, Day was returned to active flying status. Colonel Day retired from active duty in 1977. After retirement, he traveled and lectured to civilian and military audiences about

Congressional Medal of Honor Citation

On 26 August 1967, Col. Day was forced to eject from his aircraft over North Vietnam when it was hit by ground fire. His right arm was broken in 3 places, and his left knee was badly sprained. He was immediately captured by hostile forces and taken to a prison camp where he was interrogated and severely tortured. After causing the guards to relax their vigilance, Col. Day escaped into the jungle and began the trek toward South Vietnam. Despite injuries inflicted by fragments of a bomb or rocket, he continued southward surviving only on a few berries and uncooked frogs. He successfully evaded enemy patrols and reached the Ben Hai River, where he encountered U.S. artillery barrages. With the aid of a bamboo log float, Col. Day swam across the river and entered the demilitarized zone. Due to delirium, he lost his sense of direction and wandered aimlessly for several days. After several unsuccessful attempts to signal U.S. aircraft, he was ambushed and recaptured by the Viet Cong, sustaining gunshot wounds to his left hand and thigh. He was returned to the prison from which he had escaped and later was moved to Hanoi after giving his captors false information to questions put before him. Physically, Col. Day was totally debilitated and unable to perform even the simplest tasks for himself. Despite his many injuries, he continued to offer maximum resistance. His personal bravery in the face of deadly enemy pressure was significant in saving the lives of fellow aviators who were still flying against the enemy. Col. Day’s conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty are in keeping with the highest traditions of the U.S. Air Force and reflect great credit upon himself and the U.S. Armed Forces.
Focus On: Precision Attack

EL DORADO CANYON


Air Force and Navy aircraft crossed Qaddafi’s “Line of Death” to strike the terrorist state of Libya.

The United States on April 14, 1986, launched Operation El Dorado Canyon, a controversial but highly successful mission that hit Col. Muammar Qaddafi squarely between the eyes. Working with carrier aircraft of the US Sixth Fleet, Air Force F-111s of the 48th Tactical Fighter Wing flew what turned out to be the longest fighter combat mission in history. The crushing strikes caused a remarkable reduction in Libyan sponsored terrorist activity.

In the mid-1980s, the F-111s of the 48th TFW, stationed at RAF Lakenheath in Britain, formed a key element of NATO power. If war came, the Aardvark’s long range and night, low-level bombing capability would have been vital in defeating a Soviet attack. To the south, in the Mediterranean, the Sixth Fleet engaged Soviet warships in a constant game of mutual surveillance and stayed in more or less permanent readiness for hostilities.

Fate would dictate that the 48th TFW and Sixth Fleet carriers would be teamed in a totally unexpected quarter against a very different kind of enemy. They would strike not in or around Europe but on the North African littoral. They would go into action not against Soviet conventional forces but against an Arab state bent on sponsoring deadly terrorist acts.

Western nations had long been alarmed by state-sponsored terrorism. The number of attacks had risen from about 300 in 1970 to more than 3,000 in 1985. In that 15-year period, a new intensity had come to characterize the attacks, which ranged from simple assaults to attacks with heavy casualties such as the Oct. 23, 1983, truck bombing of the Marine Barracks in Beirut.

Qaddafi, who seized power in a 1969 coup, had long been an American antagonist. Each year, Libya trained 8,000 terrorists, providing false passports, transport on Libyan airliners, and access to safe houses across Europe. Libyan support for terrorist operations exceeded all nations except Iran. It disbursed $100 million to Palestinian terrorists eager to strike Israel.

“Heroic” Actions

Qaddafi joined forces with one of the most notorious terrorists of the time, Abu Nidal. In November 1985, Abu Nidal’s operatives hijacked an EgyptAir transport; 60 passengers were killed, many in the rescue attempt staged by an Egyptian commando team. On Dec. 27, 1985, Abu Nidal terrorists launched simultaneous attacks on airports at Rome and
Vienna; 20 passengers and four terrorists were killed in these events. Qaddafi publicly praised the terrorists, called them martyrs, and applauded what he described as “heroic” actions.

President Ronald Reagan at about this time gave his approval to National Security Decision Directive 207, setting forth a new US policy against terrorism. He had decided that the US needed to mount a military response to Qaddafi and his brethren, but first he wanted to obtain cooperation from the Western Allies and allow time for the removal of US citizens working in Libya.

Meantime, the Sixth Fleet, based in the Mediterranean Sea, began a series of maneuvers designed to keep pressure on Libya. Two and sometimes three aircraft carriers (Saratoga, America, and Coral Sea) conducted “freedom of navigation” operations that would take US warships up to and then southward across a line at 32 degrees 30 minutes north latitude. This was Qaddafi’s self-proclaimed “Line of Death.”

The Line of Death defined the northernmost edge of the Gulf of Sidra and demarcated it-in Qaddafi’s mind, at least—from the rest of the Mediterranean. The Libyan leader had warned foreign vessels that the Gulf belonged to Libya and was not international waters. The message was that they entered at their own risk and were subject to attack by Libyan forces. Thus Qaddafi, by drawing the Line, unilaterally sought to exclude US ships and aircraft from a vast, 3,200-square-mile area of the Med which always had been considered international.

The skirmishing soon began. On March 24, 1986, Libyan air defense operators fired SA-5 missiles at two F-14s. The Tomcats had intercepted an intruding MiG-25 that came a bit too close to a battle group. The next day, a Navy A-7E aircraft struck the SAM site with AGM-88A HARM missiles. At least two of the five threatening Libyan naval attack vessels were also sunk.

Tension further increased on April 2, 1986, when a terrorist’s bomb exploded on TWA Flight 840 flying above Greece. Four Americans were killed. Three days later, a bomb exploded in Berlin’s La Belle Discotheque, a well-known after-hours hangout for US military personnel. Killed in the blast were two American servicemen, and 79 other Americans were injured. Three terrorist groups claimed responsibility for the bomb, but the United States and West Germany independently announced “incontrovertible” evidence that Libyans were responsible for the bombing.

**It’s Time**

President Reagan decided that it was time for the US to act.

In the months leading up to the Berlin bombing, planners at USAF’s 48th TFW had developed more than 30 plans for delivering a punitive blow against Libya. Most were variations on a theme-six or so Air Force F-111 fighter-bombers would fly through French airspace and strike selected military targets in Libya. Planners assumed that the attack
would have the benefit of surprise; the small number of F-111s made it probable that the bombers would be in and out before the Libyan defenses were alerted.

Later, when detailed speculation in the Western media lessened the probability of surprise, attack plans were changed to include support packages that would carry out suppression of enemy air defenses. These packages were to comprise Air Force EF-111 electronic warfare aircraft as well as Navy A-7 and EA-6B aircraft. This was the start of an Air Force-Navy liaison that would prove essential in the actual mission.

However, all the 48th’s plans had been rendered obsolete by April 1986. Continuous media coverage, apparently fueled by leaks from very senior and knowledgeable sources in the White House, had rendered surprise almost impossible. Moreover, the US was having serious trouble with its Allies. Britain’s Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher approved US use of British bases to launch the attack. However, Washington’s other Allies lost their nerve. The fear of reprisals and loss of business caused France, Germany, Italy, and Spain to refuse to cooperate in a strike.

The faintheartedness of these countries forced the US to prepare a radically different attack plan. USAF F-111s would now navigate around France and Spain, thread the needle through the airspace over the narrow Strait of Gibraltar, and then plunge on eastward over the Mediterranean until in a position to attack.

It would prove to be a grueling round-trip flight of 6,400 miles that spanned 13 hours, requiring eight to 12 in-flight refuelings for each aircraft. Inasmuch as a standard NATO F-111 sortie was about two hours, the El Dorado Canyon mission placed a tremendous strain on crews and complex avionic systems at the heart of the aircraft.

US authorities crafted a joint operation of the Air Force and Navy against five major Libyan targets. Of these, two were in Benghazi: a terrorist training camp and the military airfield. The other three were in Tripoli: a terrorist naval training base; the former Wheelus AFB; and the Azziziyah Barracks compound, which housed the command center for Libyan intelligence and contained one of five residences that Qaddafi used.

Eighteen F-111s were assigned to strike the three Tripoli targets, while Navy aircraft were to hit the two Benghazi sites. Navy aircraft also were to provide air defense suppression for both phases of the operation. US authorities gave overall command to Vice Adm. Frank B. Kelso II, commander of the Sixth Fleet.

Enter the Air Force

The composition of the El Dorado Canyon force has stirred controversy. In his 1988 book, Command of the Seas, former Navy Secretary John F. Lehman Jr. said the entire raid could have been executed by aircraft from America and Coral Sea. This claim cropped up again in 1997; in a letter to Foreign Affairs, Marine Maj. Gen. John H. Admire, an operations planner in US European Command at the time, said, “Sufficient naval forces were available to execute the attacks.” Both attributed USAF’s participation to a bureaucratic need to placate the Air Force.
The fact of the matter, however, is the Air Force had long been preparing for such a raid. When Washington decreed that there would be only one attack, it became absolutely necessary to mount a joint operation because only the inclusion of heavy USAF attack aircraft could provide the firepower needed to ensure that the operation would be more than a pinprick attack.

The Navy had only America and Coral Sea on station. According to Air Force officials involved in the plans, these two carriers did not have sufficient aircraft for effective attacks against all five targets in both Tripoli and Benghazi. At least one more carrier, and perhaps two, would have been required, said these officers.

The act of calling in a third or even a fourth carrier to handle both targets would have caused a delay and given away any remaining element of surprise. This fact was pointed out to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. William J. Crowe Jr. Crowe himself recognized that F-111s were needed if both Tripoli and Benghazi were to be struck at more or less the same time. They would also add an element of surprise and a new axis of attack.

For these reasons, the JCS Chairman recommended to Reagan and the National Security Council that the United States use both Air Force and Navy aircraft in the raids.

The F-111Fs of the 48th were special birds, equipped with two Pratt & Whitney TF-30 P-100 turbofan engines of 25,100 pounds of thrust each and a highly classified AN/AVQ-26 Pave Tack bombing system. Pave Tack consisted of an infrared camera and laser designator. It enabled the F-111 crew to see the target in the dark or through light fog or dust obscurations (not heavy dust and smoke). When the target was seen, it was designated by the energy of a laser beam. The 2,000-pound GBU-10 Paveway II laser-guided bomb tracked the laser to the illuminated target. Pave Tack imparted to the F-111s a limited standoff capability, achieved by lobbing the bombs at the target. As events unfolded, the Pave Tack equipment would be crucial to the mission's success.

On April 14, at 17:36 Greenwich Mean Time, 24 Aardvarks departed Lakenheath with the intent that six would return after the first refueling about 90 minutes out. Also launched were five EF-111 electronic warfare aircraft. This marked the start of the first US bomber attack from the UK since World War II. The tanker force was launched at roughly the same time as the F-111s, four of which joined up on their respective "mother tankers" in radio silence, flying such a tight formation that radar controllers would see only the tanker signatures on their screens. At the first refueling, six F-111Fs and one EF-111A broke off and returned to base. Beyond Lands End, UK, the aircraft would be beyond the control of any international authority, operating at 26,000 feet and speeds up to 450 knots.

To save time and ease navigation, tankers were to accompany the fighters to and from the target area. KC-10 tankers, called in from Barksdale AFB, La., March AFB, Calif., and Seymour Johnson AFB, N.C., were refueled in turn by KC-135s, assigned to the 300th Strategic Wing, RAF Mildenhall, and the 11th Strategic Group, RAF Fairford, UK.
Drastic Changes

What had been drafted as a small, top secret mission had changed drastically. The force now included 18 USAF strike aircraft and four EF-111F electronic warfare aircraft from the 42d Electronic Combat Squadron, RAF Upper Heyford, UK. The lead KC-10 controlled the F-111s.

The size of the attack force went against the judgment of the 48th’s leadership, including that of its commander, Col. Sam W. Westbrook III. With the possibility of surprise gone, the 48th felt that the extra aircraft meant there would be too much time over target, particularly for the nine aircraft assigned to strike the Azziziyah Barracks. Libyan defenses, already on alert, would have time to concentrate on the later waves of attackers.

Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, however, was an advocate of a larger strike, and he was supported in this by Gen. Charles A. Gabriel, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Gen. Charles L. Donnelly Jr., commander of United States Air Forces in Europe, and Maj. Gen. David W. Forgan, Donnelly's operations deputy.

The three USAF officers believed the large force increased the possibility of doing substantial damage to the targets.

On the Navy side, the Sixth Fleet was to attack with the forces arrayed on two carriers. Coral Sea launched eight A-6E medium bombers for the attack and six F/A-18C Hornets for strike support. America launched six A-6Es for the attack and six A-7Es and an EA-6B for strike support. F-14s protected the fleet and aircraft.

A high alert status characterized Soviet vessels in the Mediterranean monitoring ship and aircraft movement. Libya’s vast air defense system was sophisticated, and its operators were acutely aware that an attack was coming. In the wake of the raid, the US compared the Libyan network with target complexes in the Soviet Union and its satellites. Only three were found to have had stronger defenses than the Libyan cities.

The difficulties of the mission were great. Most of the crews had never seen combat. Most had never refueled from a KC-10, and none had done so at night in radio silence. The strike force did benefit from the presence of highly experienced flight leaders, many of them Vietnam combat veterans. They were flying the longest and most demanding combat mission in history against alerted defenses—and doing it in coordination with a naval force more than 3,000 miles distant.

Timing was absolutely critical, and the long route and multiple refuelings increased the danger of a disastrous error. The Air Force and Navy attacks had to be simultaneous to maximize any remaining element of surprise and to get strike aircraft in and out as quickly as possible.
Rules of Engagement

Mission difficulty was compounded by rigorous Rules of Engagement. These ROE stipulated that, before an attack could go forward, the target had to be identified through multiple sources and all mission-critical F-111 systems had to be operating well. Any critical system failure required an immediate abort, even if an F-111 was in the last seconds of its bomb run.

At about midnight GMT, six flights of three F-111Fs each bore down on Tripoli. Fatigue of the long mission was forgotten as the pilots monitored their terrain-following equipment. The weapon system officers prepared for the attack, checking the navigation, looking for targets and offset aiming points, and, most important of all, checking equipment status.

The first three attacking elements, code-named Remit, Elton, and Karma, were tasked to hit Qaddafi’s headquarters at the Azziziyah Barracks. This target included a command and control center but not the Libyan leader’s nearby residence and the Bedouin-style tent he often used. Westbrook proved to be prescient in his belief that nine aircraft were too many to be put against the Azziziyah Barracks, as only two of the nine aircraft dropped their bombs. These, however, would prove to be tremendously important strikes.

One element, Jewel, struck the Sidi Balal terrorist training camp where there was a main complex, a secondary academy, a Palestinian training camp, and a maritime academy under construction. Jewel’s attack was successful, taking out the area where naval commandos trained.

Two elements, Puffy and Lujac, were armed with Mk 82 Snakeye parachute-retarded 500-pound bombs, and they struck the Tripoli airport, destroying three Ilyushin IL-76 transports and damaging three others as well as destroying a Boeing 727 and a Fiat G. 222.

Flying in support of the F-111 attacks were EF-111As and Navy A-7s, A-6Es, and an EA-6B, using HARM and Shrike anti-radar missiles. Similar defense suppression support, including F/A-18s, was provided across the Gulf of Sidra, where Navy A-6E aircraft were to attack the Al Jumahiriya Barracks at Benghazi, and to the east, the Benina airfield. The Navy’s Intruders destroyed four MiG-23s, two Fokker F-27s, and two Mil Mi-8 helicopters.

The Air Force F-111Fs would spend only 11 minutes in the target area, with what at first appeared to be mixed results. Anti-aircraft and SAM opposition from the very first confirmed that the Libyans were ready. News of the raid was broadcast while it was in progress. One aircraft, Karma 52, was lost, almost certainly due to a SAM, as it was reported to be on fire in flight. Capt. Fernando L. Ribas-Dominicci and Capt. Paul F. Lorence were killed. Only Ribas-Dominicci’s body was recovered; his remains were returned to the US three years later.
Adrenaline Rush

As each F-111 aircraft exited the target area, they gave a coded transmission, with “Tranquil Tiger” indicating success and “Frostee Freezer” indicating that the target was not hit. Then the crews, flushed with adrenaline from the attack, faced a long flight home, with more in-flight refuelings, the knowledge that one aircraft was down, and the incredible realization that the raid’s results were already being broadcast on Armed Forces Radio. The news included comments from Weinberger and Secretary of State George P. Shultz. One F-111F had to divert to Rota AB, Spain, because of an engine overheat. The mission crew was returned to Lakenheath within two hours.

Early and fragmentary USAF poststrike analysis raised some questions about the performance of the F-111s. Even though all three targets had been successfully struck, only four of the 18 F-111s dropped successfully. Six were forced to abort due to aircraft difficulties or stringencies of the Rules of Engagement. Seven missed their targets and one was lost. There had been collateral damage, with one bomb landing near the French Embassy.

The combined Air Force-Navy raid resulted in 130 civilian casualties with 37 killed, including, it was claimed, the adopted daughter of Qaddafi.

Yet events were soon to prove that the raid had been a genuine success, and as time passed, its beneficial effects would be recognized. It quickly become obvious that Qaddafi, who had exultantly backed the bombing of others, was terribly shaken when the bombs fell near him. His house had been damaged and flying debris had reportedly injured his shoulder. He disappeared from the scene for 24 hours, inspiring some speculation that he had been killed. When he did reappear—on a television broadcast—he was obviously deeply disturbed, lacking his usual arrogance.

Libya protested but received only muted support from Arab nations. In its comments, Moscow was curiously nonjudgmental and withheld a strong endorsement of Qaddafi. More importantly, the following months would see a dramatic decrease in the number of Libyan-sponsored, anti-American terrorist events. The Red Army Faction, one of the groups that had claimed responsibility for the La Belle disco bombing, reduced its activities. Other Libyan-sponsored groups followed suit.

Slight Praise

It became evident that the F-111s and the carrier attack aircraft, ably assisted by Air Force and Navy support units, had achieved a signal success. Ironically, that success was not to receive much formal recognition. There was slight praise for the aircrews. The Air Force declined a nomination for a Presidential Unit Citation, although the Navy awarded its forces a Meritorious Unit Citation. This situation, with an excellent description of the attack, is covered in Robert E. Venkus’ book, Raid on Qaddafi.

Operation El Dorado Canyon was carried out in the finest tradition of the Air Force. Its crews and aircraft were pushed to the absolute limits of their capability. Yet they prevailed,
destroying key targets and shocking Qaddafi as a raid on Benghazi alone would never have done. More important, the effect of El Dorado Canyon went far beyond Libya, registering with the entire terrorist world.

Moreover, the raid demonstrated that the United States had the capability, using fighters and large numbers of land-based tankers, to make precision strikes from land bases at very great distances.

Perhaps as important, F-111 problems surfaced during El Dorado Canyon and the Air Force set about fixing them. This was to pay great dividends five years later when, during Operation Desert Storm, the F-111F Pave Tack system flew more missions and destroyed more targets than any other aircraft in that war.

The main Air Force contribution to Operation Just Cause was the airlift, which doubled the number of combat troops in the country.

In 1989, the United States decided to take down the Noriega regime in Panama by military force. Manuel Antonio Noriega had been dictator of the country since 1983. Over the years, he had been on and off the CIA payroll, but that relationship soured as his corruption, repression, and collusion in drug smuggling became too blatant to ignore.

Noriega had risen in the service of Panama’s previous dictator, Omar Torrijos, who called him “my gangster.”

Torrijos died in an airplane crash in 1981, and Noriega eventually emerged as his successor—promoting himself from lieutenant colonel to four-star general. His power base was command of the Panama Defense Force, which included not only the armed forces but also the police, customs, and investigative services. The PDF owned hotels, liquor stores, and newspapers and extorted millions of dollars through its protection rackets. The nominal government leaders, the President and the national assembly, did Noriega’s bidding.

“You could not buy Manuel Noriega, but you could rent him,” said Gen. Colin L. Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In addition to his moonlighting for the CIA, Noriega had side deals with Cuba, Libya, and other intelligence customers, and he allowed the Soviet KGB to operate freely in Panama. His ties with the Medellin drug cartel in Colombia were close and of long standing.

Noriega was ruthless in eliminating the opposition. He ousted two elected Presidents when they resisted his will. In September 1985, the headless body of one of his enemies was dumped across the border in Costa Rica in a US mailbag. Roving paramilitary gangs called “dignity battalions” or “digbats” intimidated dissenters.

In June 1987, the US Senate adopted by a vote of 84-to-two a resolution calling for Noriega and his associates to “relinquish their duties” pending an independent investigation of the corruption and political violence charges against them. In February 1988, grand juries in Miami and Tampa, Fla., indicted Noriega on 13 counts of violating US racketeering and drug laws. The indictments said he took $4.6 million in payoffs for allowing the Colombian cartel to use Panamanian ports and airports to ship cocaine to the United States. In retaliation, the PDF intensified harassment of US military members and dependents in Panama.
The United States had a stake in Panamanian affairs because of both the drug smuggling and continuing US responsibility for Panama Canal security. The treaty adopted in 1979 set a 20-year transition period, with full control of the canal to pass from the United States to Panama in 1999.

Until then, US forces were based at a dozen installations in what had previously been the Panama Canal Zone. The Army had an infantry brigade at Ft. Clayton. Rotational Air National Guard and Reserve units and some special operations forces were stationed at Howard Air Force Base in Panama. About 50,000 US citizens lived in Panama, 10,300 of them members of the armed forces. The headquarters of US Southern Command was at Quarry Heights in Panama City, 600 yards up the hill from PDF headquarters at the Comandancia.

The Bush Administration, which came to office in January 1989, took a hard line toward Noriega. Years earlier, when he was director of the CIA, Bush had met with Noriega. As vice president in 1988, Bush had urged the Reagan Administration to support the grand jury indictments in Florida. His position became still tougher after the election in Panama in May 1989. The anti-Noriega coalition, led by Guillermo Endara, won by a three-to-one margin, but Noriega annulled the election results. Digbats armed with clubs and metal bars attacked Endara and the other winners. Endara, struck in the head, was hospitalized and afterward was attacked again. One of his bodyguards was killed.

**Sand Fleas**

Several days later, Bush sent 2,000 additional troops to Panama, supposedly to protect American lives and property. Southern Command conducted exercises called “Sand Fleas” to visibly assert US treaty and maneuver rights.

In September, Secretary of Defense Richard B. Cheney relieved Army Gen. Frederick F. Woerner in the middle of his tour as commander of Southern Command.

Woerner, regarded as too easygoing to handle the situation, was replaced by Gen. Maxwell R. Thurman, one of the hardest-charging officers in the Army. Nothing had to be done to energize Thurman. “He is mobilized when he gets up in the morning, which is in the middle of the night,” an admirer on the Joint Staff said. Thurman chose Lt. Gen. Carl W. Stiner to be his war planner, in command of Joint Task Force South. The chain of command was to be simple. “Carl Stiner is my warfighter, and everybody in Panama carrying a gun works for Carl Stiner,” Thurman said.

Powell, a principal in the activity to come, became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Oct. 1, 1989. On Oct. 3, three days after Thurman assumed command, disgruntled elements of the PDF attempted to overthrow Noriega in a coup that failed. As with a similar coup attempt that failed the previous year, the United States avoided involvement, seeing no advantage in trading one bunch of PDF thugs for another.

Thurman concentrated on preparations to carry out an operations plan, dubbed “Blue Spoon,” to topple the regime and capture Noriega. The Justice Department ruled that
the restriction on use of military forces to enforce civilian laws—the Posse Comitatus Act—did not necessarily prevent forces from helping enforce US laws outside territorial jurisdiction of the United States. Execution of Blue Spoon awaited what planners called a “trigger event.”

The PDF did not amount to much as a military threat. Its total strength was 12,800, of which 4,000 were combat forces. It had 38 light airplanes, 17 helicopters, and no significant air defense capability. In a conflict, there would be no air attack on US ground forces. The United States had more than air superiority. It had an air monopoly.

Almost 13,000 US troops were in Panama prior to reinforcement. The operation would be mostly launched from the in-country US bases, which were close to the targets to be assaulted.

Thurman’s command center was in a secure area of Quarry Heights, next door to the Comandancia. Stiner’s headquarters was at Ft. Clayton. Army Maj. Gen. Wayne A. Downing, commander of the Joint Special Operations Task Force, was at Howard Air Force Base, just across the canal from Panama City. The force assigned to attack the Comandancia was at Ft. Clayton, only four miles from Panama City.

It was primarily an Army operation. The Marine Corps was ready to perform an amphibious landing, but that was ruled out. Marines and Navy SEALs would participate in the general assault, but their roles would be secondary. The main Air Force contribution would be an airlift that doubled the number of US forces in Panama. Other Air Force elements, notably AC-130 gunships, would provide strong support for the operation.

A Loss of Security

“Trigger events” were not long in coming. On Dec. 15, Panama’s National Assembly passed a resolution declaring that a state of war existed with the United States. It named Noriega the “Maximum Leader.”

On Dec. 16, the PDF shot three American officers at a road block, killing one of them. The PDF also arrested and assaulted a US naval officer and his wife who had witnessed the shooting.

As D-Day approached, Operation Blue Spoon was renamed “Just Cause.” D-Day would be Dec. 20, with H-Hour at 1 a.m.

In November, Military Airlift Command C-5s had secretly delivered Army helicopters and tanks to Howard Air Force Base, where they were concealed in hangars and under cover. More troops and supplies arrived in December.

US paratroopers would jump on the big PDF base at Rio Hato, on the Pacific coast 100 miles west of Panama City, and on the Tocumen military airfield, adjacent to Torrijos Airport east of the city. The airlift began the afternoon of Dec. 19 when C-130s picked up Army Rangers from airfields at Ft. Benning, Ga., and Ft. Stewart, Ga. A few hours later,
C-141s took off from Pope AFB, N.C., with 82nd Airborne paratroopers from Ft. Bragg, N.C. Other C-141s lifted heavy equipment for the airdrop from Charleston AFB, S.C.

However, all efforts to preserve tactical surprise soon evaporated. With C-141s landing at Howard every 10 minutes, it was obvious that something was about to happen.

US troops warned their Panamanian girlfriends to stay home. That information soon reached the PDF, as did reports of various conversations by Americans overheard by Panamanians.

At 10 p.m., Dan Rather reported on CBS that “US military transport planes have left Ft. Bragg. ... The Pentagon declines to say whether or not they’re bound for Panama.”

The loss of security might have been more serious except that the PDF’s key decision-maker, Manuel Noriega, was drunk and carousing. When the paratroopers landed at Tocumen, Noriega’s aides rousted the groggy general and his companion of the evening from a nearby bungalow and rushed them into hiding.

Just before midnight, a new government—President Guillermo Endara and others who had been legally elected in May 1989—were sworn in at Quarry Heights by a Panamanian judge.

By H-Hour or shortly afterward, MAC had brought in 7,000 additional troops, including the paratroopers. Over the next several days, the airlift would deliver another 7,000, raising the total of US forces in Panama to 27,000, most of them combat forces.

The job for Stiner’s joint task force was to neutralize or secure 27 key positions and PDF installations, most of them around the capital or along the Panama Canal. At 12:45 a.m., 15 minutes before H-Hour, three infantry battalions moved out from Ft. Clayton through Panama City to seize the Comandancia and the PDF’s Ft. Amador and to protect the US Embassy.

About the same time, two F-117 stealth fighters swept down on Rio Hato. They had come from the Tonapah Test Range in Nevada and had refueled four times in flight. The F-117 had been operational since 1983, but this would be its combat debut. The assignment was to drop bombs near the PDF barracks to “stun and disorient” the inhabitants but not to hit the barracks themselves. Each fighter delivered a 2,000-pound GBU-27 laser guided bomb at 1:01 a.m. and vanished into the night.

Moments later, the Army Rangers jumped on Rio Hato from C-130s after a seven-hour flight from the United States. The base held out for five hours before surrendering.

A hundred miles to the northeast, 82nd Airborne paratroopers were landing on Tocumen airfield. At 1:55 a.m., the C-141s air-dropped pallets of heavy equipment at Tocumen. Noriega and his paramour had been at a PDF rest area next to the airfield and barely managed to escape. Meanwhile, US forces secured dozens of other H-Hour targets.
Air Force A-7s and OA-37s from Howard were in the air and available for fire support, but most of that was supplied instead by Army helicopters and Air Force AC-130 gunships. The AC-130s had deployed in advance and were in theater as part of the rotational force.

Speaking later at an Air Force Association symposium, Brig. Gen. Craig A. Hagan of the Army’s Training and Doctrine Command testified to the soldiers’ view of the AC-130. His son, Capt. Steve Hagan of the 82nd Airborne, and his unit were in a difficult situation that first night. Fortunately, Captain Hagan told his father, there was an AC-130 overhead.

“We explained our situation, and the guy [in the gunship] said, ‘Where are you?’ and we showed him, and he said, ‘Where are the bad guys?’ and we showed him that. There was a pregnant pause for a couple of seconds, and then he said, ‘You need to move back 18 feet.’”

That done, the AC-130 guns took care of the problem.

Speaking from the White House at 7 a.m., President Bush said he had ordered the operation “to protect the lives of American citizens in Panama and to bring General Noriega to justice in the United States.” At a briefing shortly afterward, Powell said that Noriega was “not running anything because we own all of the bases he owned eight hours ago.”

**A “Sound Barrier”**

Most of the fighting was over by noon. There was no significant counterattack by the PDF, although scattered resistance by dignity battalions and PDF remnants continued for the next few days. Stiner’s troops were in control of the Comandancia by early evening of Dec. 20.

Noriega hid out for several days in the houses of his supporters and in the province of Chiriqui. He then sought refuge from the papal nuncio, Monsignor Jose Sebastian Laboa, who granted him temporary political asylum in the Vatican Embassy. The nuncio’s representative picked up Noriega in the parking lot of a Dairy Queen and drove him to the embassy Dec. 24.

US troops surrounded the embassy. With Stiner’s approval, a Special Operations Command psychological operations group set up speakers and blasted the nunciature with rock music, played around the clock at an earsplitting volume that could be heard blocks away.

As officially explained later, it was a “sound barrier” to prevent reporters with powerful microphones from eavesdropping on “delicate negotiations.” That lacked something in credibility, and a spokesman for the Special Warfare Center admitted that the purpose had been “a very imaginative use” of psychological tools.

It was one of the few boneheaded decisions of the campaign. With the spectacle playing on television in the United States, Powell called Thurman, told him that Bush viewed the tactic not only as politically embarrassing but also “irritating and petty,” and that Thurman was to stop the music.
Noriega surrendered Jan. 3. US troops took him to Howard, where agents of the Drug Enforcement Administration arrested him on the ramp of a C-130, which flew him to Homestead AFB, Fla. He was convicted in 1992 of drug trafficking and money laundering and sentenced to 40 years in prison.

Trial Judge William M. Hoeveler ruled that Noriega had been captured in the course of an armed conflict, which gave him prisoner of war status under the Geneva Convention. In 1999, Hoeveler reduced the sentence by 10 years, so that with time off for good behavior, Noriega was eligible for release in 2007.

Although he completed his sentence in September 2007, Noriega remains in jail while federal courts consider what to do with him. His lawyers are trying to block Panamanian requests for extradition (for murder) and French extradition requests (for money laundering) on the grounds that he is a POW and not subject to extradition.

The departure of US troops from Panama began Jan. 4 and Operation Just Cause was terminated Jan. 11. A public opinion poll found that nine out of 10 Panamanians favored the US intervention. Nevertheless, the UN General Assembly voted 75-20 (with 40 abstentions) to condemn the operation as a violation of international law.

Casualties and collateral damage were low, thanks to an extraordinary effort by Thurman and Stiner to contain the violence. Despite that, Ramsey Clark, former US attorney general turned international activist, denounced a “conspiracy of silence” about what he claimed was the killing of some 3,000 Panamanians.

**Just Cause, a Template**

Some reports imagined the death toll as high as 8,000. In actuality, 23 US servicemen were killed and 324 wounded. Enemy losses were 314 killed and 124 wounded. The best estimate of civilian casualties was 202 killed and 1,508 wounded. About 1,000 Panamanians were left homeless as the result of arson and looting by the dignity battalions between Dec. 20 and Jan. 1.

The PDF was abolished, although parts of it were reorganized as cadre for the new Fuerza Publica, or Public Force. The Comandancia was torn down.


For a while, there was a flurry of belief among ground force advocates that Just Cause would be the template for US military engagements of the future. The operation had been planned and run by the Army and it used an emphatic Army approach to the employment of joint forces. It was the foremost example of the AirLand Battle doctrine, in which ground forces predominate and airpower was cast in a distinctly supporting role.

This notion was upset by the Gulf War of 1991, which showcased airpower and set the model for subsequent conflicts of the 1990s. Nevertheless, some ground power theorists saw Just Cause as a better model for future wars than Desert Storm.
Just Cause was “everything that subsequent US military operations were not: a rapid, decisive application of overwhelming might,” said Thomas Donnelly, former editor of the Army Times and a member of House Armed Services Committee staff from 1995 to 1999, writing in The National Interest in 2000. “One cannot help but wonder why the campaign has not been enshrined as a paradigm for the American way of war.”

In Donnelly’s analysis, Desert Storm was “fought for more limited goals than those of Operation Just Cause,” and “was also fought in a more limited fashion.” The Gulf War and subsequent operations were “incomplete victories,” he said.

Any legitimate comparison of Just Cause and Desert Storm must take into account differences in scope and distance as well as advantages unlikely to recur in future wars. Noriega had no airpower. The PDF was incompetent. The United States already had thousands of combat troops inside Panama and staging bases within easy reach of the targets. The airlift doubled the US force without opposition.

At a symposium put on in 2007 by the Association of the US Army, Lt. Gen. Thomas F. Metz, deputy commander of Army Training and Doctrine Command, described Just Cause as “the first war of the 21st century” and Desert Storm as “the last war of the 20th century.”

What can be said without argument is that Just Cause was a strong operation, well-planned, capably commanded, and executed with few mistakes. It was the first big success of US arms in many years. Just Cause broke the lingering attitudes and perceptions from Vietnam and re-established the recognition that US forces could fight and win. That was sufficient to earn its place in history.