Since the beginning of WW II, air warriors have known a “downtown.” It’s usually the last place they want to go: it’s the enemy’s capital, and it’s jealously defended. WW II had two downtowns: Tokyo and Berlin. Since then, hot spots in Bosnia and Afghanistan have been “fun cities”; Baghdad has been and may be again. For my compatriots and me, downtown was Hanoi.
The yellowshirt deck crew helped us taxi into the launch position (photo by Check Six Photography/www.planepix.com).

PLANNING THE TRIP
We were given a day’s target tasking on the previous night: then the air wing commander (CAG), his staff operations and weapons officer, squadron commanders and operations officers met in Coral Sea’s strike operations room—about the size of a motel room—to lay out the plans for the next day’s raids.

Four squadrons aboard Coral Sea delivered ordnance: two A-4 squadrons—VA-153 and VA-155, and two F-4 units—VF-151 and VF-161. A fifth squadron—VA-25, flying the last of the venerable propeller-driven Douglas ADs—acted as rescue combat air patrol (RESCAP) in case of a downed Navy or USAF crew, or bombed selected targets, usually away from high-threat areas. The A-4 and F-4 squadron commanding officers, executive officers and CAG headed the major strikes. Experienced squadron operations officers—usually the third senior officer—led smaller groups. The strike leader was the producer/director of and lead actor in each strike. It was his show.

October 27, 1967, was our 50th day of operations and the last day of our three-week line period. We had been very effective so far but at great cost to our air wing. Lt. Cmdr. Fred Gates was our first casualty on August 19, just a few days after we began operations in the Gulf of Tonkin. Lt. Mike Allard, an A-4 pilot, was lost on August 29. Lt. Cmdr. Jim Veselius, head of our F-8 photoreconnaissance detachment, was lost 10 miles north of Haiphong on September 21. Lt. (jg) Fred Forman was killed on October 17. On October 24, VF-151 lost two F-4s over Hanoi; squadron CO Cmdr. Chuck Gillespie and Lts. (jg) Bob Flishman and Earl Lewis became POWs. Lt. (jg) Dick Clark, Gillespie’s radar intercept officer (RIO), was declared missing and presumed killed in action. On the day before, Oct. 26, the executive officer of the VA-155 Silver Foxes, Cmdr. Vern Daniels, began his tour in the Hanoi Hilton from overseas Hanoi. It had been a bad month. Losses were mounting. Nine guys in all; eight in the last month. Things were hot!

The morning strike, the larger of the two today, went to a petroleum storage facility 10 miles northeast of Haiphong. The leader of the noon strike to Hanoi was Cmdr. Bill Searfus, CO of VA-155, one of our A-4 squadrons. Bill, always positive and cheerful, was one of those great leaders we seldom meet in life. Many said they would follow Bill to the gates of hell.

Lt. (jg) Barrie Cooper (Coop) and I, along with Lt. Cmdr. Dave Dungan and his RIO Lt. Walt Estes are flying our F-4s as flak suppressors for the five A-4s assigned to drop mines in the Kim Quan ferry crossing two miles south of Hanoi. Our F-4s also will provide MiG cover for the strike group; Coop, my RIO, mans my back seat and operates the radar, navigates and watches for threats. He’s damned good!

Our strike is coordinated with Air Group 16 from USS Oriskany, going after a powerplant in downtown Hanoi, just north of our target. We are to arrive seconds before and stay beneath the Oriskany’s F-8s and A-4s that will dive from 15,000 feet.

Five A-4s from VA-155 are to lay delay-axed mines—MK-36 DSTs—in the Kim Quan ferry crossing on the Red River, two miles south of the notorius Paul Doumer Bridge in the middle of Hanoi. This target assignment came about because the USAF had mined two crossing north of the bridge a few days before. Someone in Washington thought the Navy deserved equal opportunity.

MK-36 DST mines are conventional MK-82 500-pound bombs armed with delay fuses set to explode after a number of boats have passed. Boatsmen never quite know where the mines are or which one has its name on it. These mines don’t lend themselves to conventional delivery tactics, such as a 45- to 60-degree dive from 15,000 feet. Such a steep delivery would concentrate the mines in one spot—not an optimum spread. DSTs are fairly new on the scene, so few specific delivery tables existed to plan the tactics. Bill Searfus

The 7th Air Force in Saigon assigned targets, other than
targets of opportunity, such as trucks or waterborne logistics craft. They were given orders by experts from afar in the base-
ments of the White House or Pentagon. Never in the annals of
air warfare had so many in combat been given so much
detailed direction from so many far from the action. This sit-
uation often had pacing, it not lethal, consequences.

Glaring examples of this ignorant micromanagement were
the raids on the major seaport of Haiphong, which after Hanoi,
was the foremost hotbed of flak and SAMs up North. Its wealth
of bridges supported the flow of war materiel coming from its
docks and those of Cam Pha, several miles to the east, where
Ho Chi Minh and company traded locally mined coal for ammun-
tion brought in by ships—among others—
Chinese and British flags.

In good weather, the Navy sent repeated, devastating strikes
to Haiphong. After a few days of those, the triple-A and SAM
activity eased as the defenders ran out of ammunition. Lots of
bridges fell. We also had a first-class effect on the pontoon
bridges that appeared soon after we had splashed the concret
bridges.

Clear weather held, so we could have heaped even more
damage on Haiphong. But guess what? Over morning coffee,
some expert from afar thought it more effective to take out the
Hu Phuong Dung truck park that was nestled among the nar-
kem miles inland. And, as we sprayed trucks, railroad cars, im-
plements of war and limestone chunks about the landscape, the
clear weather in Haiphong changed. During this convenient
hiatus, the industrious citizens of Haiphong reloaded and
rearmed.

Now, you’ve guessed the very next target on our list: it was
Haiphong, where, as you might imagine, we were given a
fireworks welcome that rivaled a Fourth of July celebration at
the Washington Monument.

YANKER STATION
During October 1967, I was flying the F-4B Phantom II on my first combat tour as a lieutenant commander with 10 years of service and 3,000 hours in the air.

Hanoi was a nasty place. First, it had a hefty concentration of every arrow in the North Vietnamese quiver: small arms—rifle
and machine guns; rapid-firing 37mm antiaircraft cannon fired
visually; 57-, 85- and 100-millimeter radar-guided triple-A (anti-
aircraft artillery) and, everyone’s delight, lots of SA-2 surface-to-
air missiles. Second, it was 60 well-defended miles inland from
the safety of the Gulf of Tonkin from which the Navy operated.

Between 1965 and 1973, the Navy always had three carriers
and a variety of other ships stationed in Southeast Asia. Two of
the carriers manned Yankee Station in the northern Gulf of
Tonkin. In October 1967, we—Carrier Air Wing 15—were there
aboard the USS Coral Sea. Carrier Air Wing 16 was on USS
Oriskany. The third carrier, USS Intrepid, was in port.

In good weather, both carriers typically launched two large
daily strikes called “Alpha” strikes. The Alpha (usually 24 air-
craft) used five types of airplane: eight A-4E bombers, four F-4B
flak suppressors, a pair of A-4 “Iron Hand” SAM suppressors and
two KA-3B tankers to pump fuel into planes flying to and from the
target. An electronic-warfare-equipped Douglas EA-3B based
at Da Nang stayed with the tankers offshore and sprayed high-
powered electrons and electronic noise at the North
Vietnamese to disrupt their radar and communications.
A Grumman E-2A sporting a large, pancake-shape radar antenna
atop its fuselage flew offshore and controlled the strike air-
planes coming from and going to the carriers.

Air Wing 16 covered the same missions, but because their
carrier deck was smaller, they used Chance Vought F-8Cs
instead of F-4Bs.

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and his weapons crew perused ballistics tables to construct a delivery profile that was part science and part art. Their solution only added to the danger: a 30-degree dive from 8,000 feet, 3,500-foot release altitude and pullout by 2,000 feet—well within the lethal small-arms and triple-A envelopes. As we'll see, the fog of war blanketed these well-laid plans.

The scorecard lineup went like this: five A-4s carried six DSTs each; one division of three led by Bill Searfus, and a section of two led by CAG operations officer Lt. Cmdr. Tom Brown. Two F-4 flak suppressors flown by Lt. Cmdr. Dave Dungan and me hauled four 750-pound cluster bombs (CBU) each; two MiG combat air patrol F-4s from VF-161 and two Iron Hand A-4s from VA-153 were to launch Shrike missiles at SAM sites.

Bill Searfus chose our route to the target to minimize time over hostile territory and to avoid interfering with the Oriskany strike group that would approach higher from the west. Our route would be a straight line from Coral Sea to Hanoi over sparsely settled lowlands, splitting the 40-mile distance between Nam Dinh (famous for its very heavy and accurate triple-A) and Haiphong, with lots of flak and SAMs. The rest of the track would continue 60 miles—and 10 long minutes—to Hanoi. We’d retrace the same route going home. It was the best of all the bad choices available.

Bill’s briefing was short and sweet: “After launch, rendezvous at 15,000 feet. F-4s join on the tankers and take on 2,000 pounds of fuel. When you’re done, join up, then we’ll climb to 20,000 feet—A-4s ahead in the middle. F-4s will be on the flanks and slightly to the rear. Iron Hands farther back on the flanks. Tankers over the northern SAR [search and rescue] destroyer. We’ll coast in at Luc Linh and head straight to Hanoi. We’ll start downhill at feet dry to help the A-4s hit the 8,000-foot roll-in at max energy. When I say, ‘Switchboxes go,’ F-4 flak suppressors pull out ahead from the flanks and roll in. A-4 divisions follow me coming in from the southeast paralleling the Red River. Turn right off target. Everyone grab a wingman and haul ass for the water. F-4s cover our rear on the way out. Any questions? Good luck, guys.”

Radio transmissions would be few. We all knew the routine.

Such seemingly loose tactics were actually very well considered, and they worked. As a result of good planning, creativity and intuition, airplanes showed up at the right target and on time. Each strike had a unique set of tactics. Back in the ready rooms, the crews add finishing touches: who’s in which aircraft, emergency procedures, fuel loads and section and division tactics. Tending to minutiae is a better way to kill the time to launch than silently contemplating your fate.

People manage prelaunch jitters in diverse ways: some are loudmouths, but that’s their nature; others trade sarcastic jabs and laugh nervously; and a few just stare ahead quietly, lost in their own thoughts. Fear is present in varied degrees; all suppress it. It’s bad self-discipline and leadership to do otherwise. Few, if any, consider their mortality because people in their 20s and 30s seldom do. The specter looms, but as a vague, distant concept. More worrisome is becoming a POW—a very uncertain fate. Dog tags, ID cards
and Geneva Convention cards—whatever good they might be—are the only identification we carry. Wallets and rings go in the tents. We look right and left, as if in a strange city, to avoid stepping on someone. When you get to the flight deck, you’re surrounded by a greater disorder of flight and survival equipment and make our way around several corners and up stairs to the noise and organized disorder of flight and survival equipment and make our way around several corners and up stairs to the noise and organized disorder of flight and survival equipment.

The order to man airplanes comes down from air operations 30 minutes before launch. Coop and I saddle up with 45 pounds draped over his shoulders, shows us gear lock and pins. We’re next, the brown-shirted plane captain, heavy tie-down chains and foul, living in a dissonance of aircraft noises, wind, rain and moving machinery. A misstep can kill.

Suddenly, we’re yanked forward, and G-forces narrow my vision. My hands, clenched around the wheel of the F-4, are now gripping it like a snake. We’re going to fly into the air at 150 knots in two seconds.

Takeoff is a pretty sight, but today, I’m not absorbing the beauty. It’s hot and then a stop signal as the nosewheel eases over and drops ahead of the catapult shuttle.

The airplane lurches forward slightly after the catapult officer signals the catapult crew to tension the catapult. He waves two fingers to let Coop know full-power run-up. Check the gauges. They’re OK. No. He shows a wide-open palm ordering maximum afterburner. I push the throttles forward and then outboard to light them. Check the gauges again. Stick full back. Rotate wing forward. Brace right arm.

Coop, a man of few words, was true to form. Coop and I haven’t said much since we lit the engines. I only trust him to prevent me from doing dumb things. We had worked as a team since joining VF-151 the previous February, building a firm mutual trust and respect in the process. He trusted me not to do dumb things that would kill us both; I trusted him to prevent me from doing dumb things.

Leaving Home

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Men scurry beneath the airplane for a last check, and they stand behind the nosewheel and the bridges that connect us to the shuttle that, when fired, will yank 50,000 pounds of air- plane into the air at 150 knots in two seconds.

Coop and I haven’t said much as we live in the engines. I only offer, “This oughta be sporty today.”

Coop, a man of few words, was true to form. “That’s kinda my thinking.”

The sea is milpond calm. The ship is making all the wind for the launch. Usually, the deep blue ocean ahead would be a pretty sight, but today, I’m not absorbing the beauty. It’s hot and then a stop signal as the nosewheel eases over and drops ahead of the catapult shuttle.

Following the signal from the yellowshirt on my right, I extend the nosewheel and set the vertical gyro to zero. The airplane hunches forward slightly after the catapult officer signals the catapult crew to tension the catapult. He waves two fingers to let Coop know full-power run-up. Check the gauges. They’re OK. Od. He shows a wide-open palm ordering maximum afterburner. I push the throttles forward and then outboard to light them. Check the gauges again. Stick full back. Rotate wing forward. Brace right arm.

“Yo, Coop?”

“Head back. I salute the cat officer with my left hand. We’re ready to go. Clamp my left hand back on the throttles. Like it or not, we’re on our way.

Suddenly, the throttles go forward, and G-forces narrow my vision to a small tunnel that widens after two seconds of rumbling and clattering down the cat track. I ease the stick forward to catch the nose coming up at a 12-degree attitude. Gear up. We claw for altitude in the muggy air ahead of the ship. At 220 knots, flags are raised, and I take us out of burner. Accelerate to 300 knots. Stick the radio to depar- ture control.

On the Road

Left to a heading of 300 knots, climb to 15,000 feet. Switchbox 106, stops from the starboard cat just before us with Dave Dungan and Walt Estes aboard, is in an easy left turn half a mile ahead of us. We bank left and join them, easing into a comfortable position four feet from their right wingtip. Dave steers for the K-3 tanker, ahead and above.

Although in-flight refueling can be tricky, especially at night and in bad weather, the tanker with its three-foot-wide drogue tailing is always a welcome sight because in a jet, fuel, like speed, is life. We join on the tanker’s right quarter a few hun- dred feet away. Dave slides into position and slips his protrud- ing fuel probe into the K-3’s refueling hose. I sense he has done this many times before.

Dave unprops as smoothly as he entered and then slides to the left. Our turn! I press the refueling probe switch, and the probe emerges like a cobra from its home in the fuselage next to my right wing: it bites the air outside the canopy and adds a loud, rumble to the steady noise inside the airplane. Its bow appears in my peripheral vision near my right ear. As the probe reaches full extension, I ease up to about 10 feet behind, slightly left and below the refueling drogue. I ease toward the basket at about five knots closure. Don’t watch the basket or you’ll fence with it! Listen to Coop. If he says, “You’re looking good,” believe him. I feel the satisfying clunk as the probe seats in the basket, and I see the ripple of the hose ahead. Good plug. Add a little power to push the hose until in a green light appears on the refueling store. We’re taking fuel. Just relax, fly formation on the tanker, and take our 2,000 pounds—enough additional fuel to get us to Hanoi and back.

The yellow light on the store indicates we got our share. I sneak a little power and ease out gently to unplug. To do otherwise can damage the basket or the refueling store. I retract the probe and the low rumbled.

The nine other planes of our strike group are ahead, about a mile to the right, flying in a wide, lazy circle. Circling are strike leader Lt. Cmdr. Tom Brown and wingman Lt. Dick Butterfield, two MiG CAP F-4s from VF-161 and the two A-4 Iron Hands from VA-151. They form the yellowshirt A-4 mine layers in the lead; Dave and I on the left flank slightly to the rear, the MiG Cappes opposite us to the right and the Iron Hands just above and behind the formation. Bill Searfus, Silver Fox One, calls to switch the tranquil blue water ahead. As we approach, the twisting brown rivers and streams stand out from the verdant flandlands. The dark outlines of small towns and the bright white specks of pagoda spires begin to appear. Thirty miles to the left, the ghostly blue-gray karst nudge juts up. If you didn’t realize where you are and what you are doing, the
peaceful scene below could be enchanting. The direct route from Yankee Station to Hanoi passes over green marshes and small hamlets but all within range of three well-armed sites—the port of Haiphong, Nam Dinh and Ninh Binh.

We cross the coast, leaving the Gulf and safety behind. "Armament panel set," I tell Coop.

As briefed, the A-4s start downhill at full power from 20,000 feet at the coast toward their planned roll-in altitude of 8,000 feet. Speed is life. The A-4s want all the airspeed they can cook up in the 60 miles to Hanoi. The F-4s accelerate and weave alongside the slower A-4s to maintain their energy but stay with the formation.

Weird but familiar noises come over the electronic warning receivers: chirp, click, click-click, swish, swish-swish, chirp—the sounds of different types of radar. Their intensity increases as we close on Hanoi. Just out of range, black puffs of radar-guided 100-millimeter appear ahead, left and right. The strike group weaves more vigorously. Survival depends on keeping the airplane moving right and left, up and down. Hard turns—back and forth—never flying steady on one course; jinking always becomes more aggressive as you near a target. You're most vulnerable in the several seconds of diving, steady flight, while you aim at the target. But that's yet to come. This is just the warmup.

Thirty miles to go. SAM tracking tones now merge with the weird cacophony and underscore the drama's dialogue: "Got a SAM lifting at one o'clock. " "There's another at eleven. " "Two more at twelve. " Many more calls. As the tempo increases, voices are now louder, more excited and higher up the scale. No John Waynes here; this is real!

"I've got the ones ahead, Coop. Got any more?"

"Nope."

Heads swirling, we look for more, as I pull the plane hard left and right. The strike group's formation loosens as we turn more vigorously. We descend as we trade altitude for airspeed and energy.

More SAMs, more flak, and now we hear the frightening warbles of SAM guidance warnings—a distinctive sound you never forget that tells us they're in the air and nearby. The triple-A and SAMs have driven us much lower than planned, the A-4s' 8,000-foot roll-in altitude went by the wayside long ago. We're flying almost due north, with the Red River just to our left, down in the weeds at a few hundred feet—a treacherous tactic that offers a low survival rate. The A-4s must climb to at least 500 feet to drop, but the powerful F-4s can plug in afterburner and climb to 8,000 feet to go after their flak sites. This strike is not going according to plan, but here we are, and we must play the hand dealt.

Out ahead, huge reddish-brown clouds of dust and flames develop as more SAMs lift. Many of them nose-dive and crash, tumbling along the ground like huge, flaming telephone poles. We're below their low-altitude guidance limit. Ahead, one of the SAMs smashes into the north end of a small town, rolls toward us down the main street and wipes out every flimsy structure in a huge explosion. Countless SAMs now shoot overhead toward the A-4s and F-8s of Oriskany's strike group just moments behind us. They are coming in high and going after Hanoi's thermal powerplant, a few miles north of the Kim Quan ferry crossing. Now they bear the brunt of the SAM volleys.

The triple-A is thick. A hail of 37mm orange golf balls whizzes by us. We fly through a barrage of black, brown, orange and white puffs. Our airplane rocks as some explode nearby. I glance at Dave's F-4, which is about 300 feet to the right and slightly ahead. Fear intensifies my alertness, but training, focus and concentration don't permit panic. No time to think about it. Nothing to do but yank, bank and hope. My
body tangles with the rush of adrenaline as we fly through the Technicolor maelstrom—almost like in a movie.

Strike leader Searfus breaks through a blizzard of electronic noises, SAM sightings and tactical chatter. “Switchboxes go!”

This is our signal to fly ahead and take out their flak sites. Coop shouts, “Master arm!”

“Master arm on!” Damn; almost forgot it.

Dave and I, now several hundred feet apart, split right and left. I stuff the throttles forward and outboard to hit max burner, and I horse the stick back to climb to our roll-in altitude: 8,000 feet. I feel the exhilarating acceleration as the burners light. Muzzle flashes below bring the guns up; we try to hide from the flak suppressors. Their primary targets are the A-4s. If the A-4s fall in right behind the F-4s, they’ll get much more flak. Otherwise, they’ll get hammered when the guns lift their heads after the flak suppressors have passed.

At 8,000 feet, I roll inverted, haul the throttles back and pick out the flak site burned into my memory by pre-strike photos. I could see the flak site. The airplane groans under the strain as I haul hard left. I count “one-potato, two-potato” to take interval on the two MiG CAP F-4s ahead. As we turn downhill at 450 knots to our 600-foot pattern entry point, take off the brakes and aim for the glide slope but on speed. Sneak off a little power to correct altitude. Not too much, or I’d fall up in low and raise the odds on a ramp strike. The ball eases to the middle, where it stays as I continuously check lineup, meatball position and angle of attack in rapid succession. Coop calls airspeed, “135, 132, 135, 133 …” The ramp passes by. Wham! The airplane slams into the deck at 12 feet per second, and I stuff throttles full forward, in case we miss all four arresting wires. But a welcome tug grabs my shoulder straps as I’m thrown forward at the instrument panel.

No time to congratulate myself. I must clear the deck for the next airplane. Snap the throttles to idle. Flaps up, and I feel the airplane roll backward and then see a brake signal followed by a rapid “Come ahead!” from the yellowshirt on my right. The hook’s clear. Add power, and start the wing fold. We’re now clear of the foul line that marks the edge of the landing area, and we’re taxiing toward the right side of the flight deck forward of the island. We’re passed to another yellowshirt and then another as we’re guided forward.

Our parking spot is as far forward as we can go on the starboard board. The director guides us so the right tire is within an inch of the lip of the flight deck. Sure hope he’s right because all I can see on that side is blue water. Forward we go until all I can see over the nose is water and a waast-up view of the yellowshirt who conducts me forward with an artistic combination of slow walk movements and head nods. He directs a hard left brake to turn our nose inboard, gives the hold signal and waves the brown-shirt plane captains beneath our airplane to chock and attach chain tie-downs. That finished, we shut down. Coop and I unstrap, slowly pull our sweat-soaked selves out of the airplane and find the nearest place to clear the flight deck on the starboard catwalks—the quicker, the better.

We weave our way through the maze of passageways and doors to the intelligence spaces to render our version of the strike to our air intelligence officer, Lt. (jg) Jay Hoppus. How many SAMs? We saw 15 to 20. How much triple-A? Bags of it! Strike leader Searfus informs this is our signal to fly ahead and take out their flak sites.

As we approach the landing, the F-4s, the strike group begins an easy climb and merges for the Gulf of Tonkin—clear blue sky, an uncommonly thin haze and hope no gunner will get lucky with smaller arms. Not time for complacency.

Returning from the mission, it sort of felt like I was on Coral Sea photo courtesy of author.

As the MiG CAP F-4s are abreast, flying opposite on their downwind leg, Dave breaks hard left. I count “one potato, two potato” to take interval on Dave and snap the airplane into a 90-degree left bank, then I had the throttles to idle and yank hard on the stick to pull 4G to bleed off airspeed to 250 knots—gear-lowering speed. Flaps and slats down at 220. Deceleerate to just above landing speed—135 knots, at this weight. Turn abreast the ship’s bow and keep the pattern tight. We’re looking for a 30-second landing interval. Pattern discipline around the ship is essential—combat or no combat.

My attention shifts to the landing. I fly a slow, turning descent to intercept the glide path at three-quarters of a mile behind the ship, where the orange meatball appears just slightly above the green datum lights that mark the center of the mirror landing aid on the left side of the landing area. Coop calls the ball, “Phantom, ball, 3.0, Parvus.” I’m slightly high on the glide path but on speed. Sneak off a little power to correct altitude. Not too much, or I’ll end up low in close and raise the odds on a ramp strike. The ball eases to the middle, where it stays as I continuously check lineup, meatball position and angle of attack in rapid succession. Coop calls airspeed, “135, 132, 135, 133 …” The ramp passes by. Wham! The airplane slams into the deck at 12 feet per second, and I stuff throttles full forward, in case we miss all four arresting wires. But a welcome tug grabs my shoulder straps as I’m thrown forward at the instrument panel.

No time to congratulate myself. I must clear the deck for the next airplane. Snap the throttles to idle. Flaps up, and I feel the airplane roll backward and then see a brake signal followed by a rapid “Come ahead!” from the yellowshirt on my right. The hook’s clear. Add power, and start the wing fold. We’re now clear of the foul line that marks the edge of the landing area, and we’re taxiing toward the right side of the flight deck forward of the island. We’re passed to another yellowshirt and then another as we’re guided forward.

Our parking spot is as far forward as we can go on the starboard board. The director guides us so the right tire is within an inch of the lip of the flight deck. Sure hope he’s right because all I can see on that side is blue water. Forward we go until all I can see over the nose is water and a wait-up view of the yellowshirt who conducts me forward with an artistic combination of slow walk movements and head nods. He directs a hard left brake to turn our nose inboard, gives the hold signal and waves the brown-shirt plane captains beneath our airplane to chock and attach chain tie-downs. That finished, we shut down. Coop and I unstrap, slowly pull our sweat-soaked selves out of the airplane and find the nearest place to clear the flight deck on the starboard catwalks—the quicker, the better.

We weave our way through the maze of passageways and doors to the intelligence spaces to render our version of the strike to our air intelligence officer, Lt. (jg) Jay Hoppus. How many SAMs? We saw 15 to 20. How much triple-A? Bags of it! Any MiGs? None. Did you see any of the Oriskany planes get shot down? No, but we saw a couple of fireballs and heard reports of two chutes and lots of talk about seeing a guy land in the lake in the middle of town.

On that day, October 27, 1967, two pilots from the Oriskany strike group began their five-and-a-half-year-long visit to the Hanoi Hilton. They were Lt. (jg) Charlie Rice, an F-8 pilot from VF-162 [and a future Continental Airlines captain], and the guy who landed in the lake: Lt. Cmdr. John McCain, VA-163—future U.S. congressional and senator from Arizona and a 2000 presidential candidate. It was some kind of day! °°