Flak Bait

Navy F-4s battle North Vietnamese AAA

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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.

F-4 launches from waist catapult of USS Coral Sea (photo by Check Six Photography/www.planepix.com).

The yellowshirt deck crew helped us taxi into the launch position (photo by Check Six Photography/www.planepix.com).

Yankee 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—rifles and machine guns; rapid-firing 37mm antiaircraft cannon fired visually; 57-, 85- and 100-millimeter radar-guided triple-A (antiaircraft 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 aircraft) 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 airplanes 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.

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 basements 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 so far from the action. This situation often had puzzling, if 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 ammunition brought in by ships flying—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 concrete 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 Phlung Dung truck park that was nestled among the karst miles inland. And, as we sprayed trucks, railroad cars, implements 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.

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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 Vescilius, head of our F-8 photoreconnaissance detachment, was lost 10 miles north of Haiphong on September 21. Lt. (jg) Fred Fortner 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 Frishman 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 overhead 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-fused mines—MK-36 DSTs—in the Kim Quan ferry crossing on the Red River, two miles south of the notorious Paul Doumer Bridge in the middle of Hanoi. This target assignment came about because the USAF had mined a crossing two miles 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. Boatmen never quite know where the mines are or which one has their 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 were fairly new on the scene, so few specific delivery tables existed to plan the tactics. Bill Searfus

The deck crew readies a VF-151 "Switchbox" for a launch (photo courtesy of author).

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 retread 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

"I pull the nose through to match the sight picture for a 30-degree dive delivery, roll back upright and steady up the target on my sight on the windscreen. I press the bomb pickle ..." (photo by Jay Hargrove courtesy of Warren Thompson).

and Geneva Convention cards—whatever good they might be—are the only identification we carry. Wallets and rings go in stateroom safes. Roommates know the combinations.

Leaving home

The order to man airplanes comes down from air operations 30 minutes before launch. Coop and I saddle up with 45 pounds of flight and survival equipment and make our way around several corners and up a ladder to the noise and organized disorder of the flight deck. Tow tractors and start carts whiz by as the flight-deck crew puts the last-minute touches on the deck spot, which, no matter how well planned, always needs last-minute changes. Our airplane, Switchbox 110, is second in a line of eight F-4s parked aft along the portside.

We look right and left, as if in a strange city, to avoid stepping into danger. I've been treading flight decks for 10 years but have yet to be comfortable in the confusion. That's just as well because complacency here kills.

Coop and I approach 110. Red flags hang from the arming pins of the two 750-pound cluster bombs attached to racks under each wing. After we've dropped them, they'll fall until they are only a few hundred feet above the ground, then they'll open like huge alligator mouths and spray thousands of golf-ball-size bomblets on the waiting gunners below. More red flags dangle from the two AIM-7E Sparrow radar-guided missiles that are half-submerged below the forward fuselage, and two AIM-9D Sidewinders that hang on each of the right and left wing racks. The missiles support our fighter-escort mission. Our payload is 4,600 pounds.

We share the preflight duties. Coop checks the left side of the airplane; I inspect the right. Nothing is amiss in the nooks and crannies of our F-4. We can't look in the rear of the engines because they hang out over the catwalk and the ocean, but our plane captain had checked them before the flight-deck crew parked our airplane. Trust is paramount in Naval aviation.

As Coop settles down in the back seat, I attach my oxygen and radio rig to the seat as the plane captain snaps the shoulder straps to my harness. He pulls the ejection seat's safety pin and shows it to me. We exchange thumbs-up as he climbs down ready to manhandle chocks and tie-down chains when we taxi forward.

The start and checkout were second nature to Coop and me. 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.

Men in shirts of various colors are the corps de ballet on the most hazardous stage on earth. Red shirts haul, hang and check the ordnance; purple shirts fuel aircraft; green shirts and brown shirts keep up the airplanes. They're all on deck, fair weather and foul, living in a dissonance of aircraft noises, wind, rain and moving machinery. A misstep can kill.

"Yellowshirts" orchestrate the flight-deck ballet. The special mutual trust and respect between pilots and yellowshirts is developed over time by working together on the flight deck. After landing on a dark night, you might be taxied to the first spot on the port bow, and your only guidance is two dim yellow wands in the hands of a yellowshirt. All else to the left and ahead is black and water. You have to trust the director not to taxi you over the side.

A red-shirted ordnance man comes into view ahead of my airplane and signals to see four hands in the air—two from me and two from Coop—to assure him that nobody is playing with switches in the cockpit and risking the safety of his people as they check the ordnance and pull pins. Shortly, a "redshirt" steps in front of the airplane and displays flagged safety pins. Next, the brown-shirted plane captain, heavy tie-down chains draped over his shoulders, shows us gear lock and pins. We're good to go. Canopy down and locked.

"Ready to roll, Coop?"

"Yep."

Dave Dungan, our flak-suppressor section leader parked a few feet to our left in Switchbox 106, taxies toward the starboard catapult. A yellowshirt appears in front of us and points us toward the port catapult 100 yards ahead. As we spread and lock our wings, another yellowshirt guides the slow, precise approach to the catapult hookup: an easy come-ahead with his wands, head nods left and right to direct my nosewheel steering and then a stop signal as the nosewheel eases over and drops ahead of the catapult shuttle.

Men scurry beneath the airplane for a last check, and they attach the catapult holdback and the bridles that connect us to the shuttle that, when fired, will yank 50,000 pounds of airplane into the air at 150 knots in two seconds.

Coop and I haven't said much since we lit 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 millpond 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 here in the Gulf of Tonkin, even at the end of October. The F-4s launch with less than full fuel because *Coral Sea*'s catapults are older than those on the bigger carriers that were brought on line well after WW II. Even when lightly loaded, the heat and humidity can cause the first moments off the "cat" to be exciting as the F-4 grasps for airspeed and altitude.

Following the signal from the yellowshirt on my right, I extend the nosewheel strut and set the vertical gyro to zero. The airplane lurches forward slightly after the catapult officer signals the catapult crew to tension the catapult. He waves two fingers high—the signal for a full-power run-up. Check the gauges. They're OK. Nod. He shows a wide-open palm ordering max afterburner. I push the throttles forward and then outboard to light them. Check the gauges again. Stick full back. Rotate wrist forward. Brace right arm.

"You set, Coop?"

"Yep."

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, we're yanked 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, flaps are raised, and I take us out of burner. Accelerate to 300 knots. Switch the radios to departure control.

On the road

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

The Oriskany's Carrier Air Wing 16 consisted of F-8s, A-4s and other aircraft (photo by Dick Schaffer courtesy of Warren Thompson).

Although in-flight refueling can be tricky, especially at night and in bad weather, the tanker with its three-foot-wide drogue trailing is always a welcome sight because in a jet, fuel, like speed, is life. We join on the tanker's right quarter a few hundred feet away. Dave slides into position and slips his protruding fuel probe into the basket, barely rippling the hose ahead. I sense he has done this many times before.

Dave unplugs 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 elbow: it bites the air outside the canopy and adds a loud, low rumble to the steady noise inside the airplane. Its head 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 in until 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 off a little power and ease out to gently unplug. To do otherwise can damage the basket or the refueling store. I retract the probe and the low rumble stops.

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 Bill Searfus and his wingman, Lt. (jg) Joe Gerber, plus a third A-4; 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-153. We gather in a loose formation: five A-4 mine layers in the lead; Dave and I on the left flank slightly to the rear, the MiG Cappers opposite us to the right and the Iron Hands just above and behind the formation. Bill Searfus, Silver Fox One, calls to switch from departure to strike frequency to check in with Red Crown—the Navy ship below that keeps track of airborne traffic in the Gulf. All check in: "Silver Fox One up, Two up, Three up"; "Switchbox One up, Two up," and so on in order until all report aboard. Then silence. No talk needed.

After five minutes, the green coast of North Vietnam seems to float in the shallow brown water of the Red River delta that stains the tranquil blue water ahead. As we approach, the twisting brown rivers and streams stand out from the verdant flatlands. 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 ridge 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 swiveling, 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

On this mission, we lost two guys from the Oriskany. This is Lt. (jg) Charlie Rice's ship, an F-8 from VF-162, going down after being hit by a SAM (photo by Dick Schaffer courtesy of Warren Thompson).

Returning from the mission, it sure felt good to trap on Coral Sea (photo courtesy of author).

body tingles 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 briefly stop as the gunners 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 less flak. Otherwise, they'll get hammered when the gunners 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 pull the nose through to match the sight picture for a 30-degree dive delivery, roll back to upright and steady the target on my windscreen sight. Coop calls altitude and airspeed: "5,500, 480; 5,000, 500; 4,500, 500." I press the bomb pickle, and the airplane jumps slightly as four 750-pound CBUs leave to rain on the flak site. The airplane groans under the strain as I haul hard on the stick to pull out as high as I can.

I yank the airplane hard to the right and then to the left and back right again, and I look over my right shoulder to check the hits. DSTs splash into the river. CBUs erupt in giant doughnut patterns as thousands of bomblets explode around the flak sites. Triple-A intensifies now as the *Oriskany* F-8s and A-4s roll onto their targets and we head for the sanctuary of the water that's 60 miles southeast. Heavy flak erupts around us again as we're hosed by gunners at Gia Lam airfield; some of our A-4s take hits.

I join loosely on Dave, who comes off the target as we weave behind our A-4s and scurry in scattered groups toward safety. The strike group jinks back and forth—the A-4s out ahead and the F-4s covering the rear looking for MiGs. No MiGs in sight. The heavy action is now behind us, but it's no time for complacency. Complacency kills.

Just behind us, the hornets' nest of triple-A and SAMs we disturbed sting *Oriskany*'s F-8s and A-4s. Downtown's defenders are furious. The play-by-play fills the strike and emergency frequencies. "SAMs lifting at nine o'clock ... Looks like they got one plane, maybe two ... See one chute ... There's another ... First guy's landing in a lake in the middle of town."

We stay low, not because it's a good idea but to maintain speed. The A-4s traded altitude for speed long ago and need whatever energy they can muster to keep jinking until they're over water. We weave over the flat, green countryside and hope no gunner will get lucky with smaller arms. Not time to relax yet.

Once over the Gulf, we grab extra altitude and count noses: "Silver Fox One, Two, Three, Four, Five ... Switchbox One, Two ... Rock River One, Two ... " We're all aboard. We join closely to check one another. Three of the five A-4 mine layers have holes in their outer wings and tail assemblies, but no leaks. Everyone else is clean. Good fuel states. No tankers needed. Strike leader reports feet wet to Red Crown, who's tracking all the strike aircraft from his ship offshore.

Going home

Scattered across the sky in groups of two and three A-4s and F-4s, the strike group begins an easy climb and merges for the return. Ahead, several minutes later, the welcome sight of a broad white wake and the dark shape of *Coral Sea* appears. Not much talk on the radio as we routinely switch from strike frequency to approach.

"Wanna try that again soon, Coop?"

"Nope. That's enough thrills to last for a day or two."

We hear a welcome transmission. "You have a ready deck. Charlie on arrival. Switch to tower."

I ease in to four feet from Dave's right wingtip as we roar downhill at 450 knots to our 600-foot pattern entry point, taking interval on the two MiG CAP F-4s ahead. As we turn inbound, flying gracefully across the ship's foaming wake, I notice the calm beauty of the sea ahead. It's an unusual day in the Gulf of Tonkin—clear blue sky, an uncommonly thin haze and no turbulence. Formation flying today is pleasure, not work.

My eyes are glued on Dave's airplane as we enter the pattern. I glimpse our ship in the background. As the MiG CAP F-4s are abeam, 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 haul 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. Decelerate to just above landing speed—135 knots, at this weight. Turn abeam 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, Purvis." I'm slightly high on the glide slope 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 bow. 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 waist-up view of the yellowshirt who conducts me forward with an artistic combination of slow wand 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 catwalk—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. congressman and senator from Arizona and a 2000 presidential candidate.

It was some kind of day! +