

SAM Hunter-Killer Mission By: Gary Barnhill

During an F-105D combat tour out of Takhli, Thailand in 1965, Russian SAM (SA-2 Surface to Air Missiles) begun to appear in North Vietnam. Previously, we had driven over our targets unmolested at 18,000 feet to begin a dive bomb attack. The newly arrived SAM's canceled out our high altitude sanctuary and forced pilots down low, where anti-aircraft fire was intense.

We begged permission to take out the proliferating SAMs before they got to us. Request denied. Prez Lyndon Johnson feared it might hurt the Russians' feelings since they provided the SAMs to North Viet Nam.

One day our base commander, a colonel who did not fly combat missions, bravely announced: "We" are going after the SAM's. Captain Mike Cooper, showing more guts than tact, called out from the back of the room, "What's this 'we' crap, Colonel, are you going along in the F105F two-seater. Getting shot at everyday tends to loosen up one's military decorum.

Navy Lt. Cmdr Powers landed his A4E at Takhli carrying his own 500 lb bombs. Powers was the XO of the USS Oriskany's VA-164 squadron. The Navy had sent their very best. Powers knew this was a big time White House directed mission, and dangerous.

Takhli scheduled two outstanding Flight Commanders. Mike Cooper would lead a flight of four Thuds from the 334th TFS, with mates: Jim Butler, John Stell and Lee Adams. Gayle Williams would lead four from the 562nd: Gary Barnhill and two others whose names escape me. Each Thud would carry 8x750 lb. bombs. This was in the days before "smart" and "dumb" bombs.

This joint Navy/Air Force mission briefing was more like a focus group. Powers wanted to fly across the target level at 50 feet and skip bomb it. We preferred to dive bomb, using a pop-up from the deck to create a dive bomb run. That made it tougher for the ground gunners to track us. No sweat, since Power's would be first across the target and out of the way, his flat pass would not conflict with our dive-bombing.

These were called "Dooms Day missions", because invariably someone got shot down from the heavy defenses around Hanoi. Did guys shy away from these missions? Are you kidding? Your best friend would lie, cheat and screw you to get your slot on a Dooms Day mission.

Power's plane had a magic black box, well, what passed for magic, circa 1965. Actually it was similar to the old coffee grinder ADF (Direction Finder). A needle

would point in the general direction of a SAM site, when and if the SAM was in the SEARCH mode. Operator skill required.

We launched, joined up, refueled and headed North only to find a solid overcast at the let down point. It was a No-Go. Or was it? Power's pulled the Thuds into a tight nine-ship "V" formation and descended into cloud. No one would have criticized him one bit if he canceled for weather and returned to base. He pressed on.

Nearing the target, we finally broke out of cloud and went to the deck. No longer a "formation", now just a gaggle of bomb-laden Thuds strung out in loose single file. At one point, there were hills on both sides and overcast above making a sort of tunnel. I got slung into cloud during a turn and immediately punched the nose down desperately hoping for valley beneath and not hillside. I remember thinking; I'm NOT going to miss this (mission) for anything. I flew so low over a guy driving a farm tractor that he leapt to the ground. He was doin' about two knots, we were doin' 550. When they are shooting at you: Low is good...Fast is good.

My plane was hit by small arms fire causing some yellow caution lights to glow, as we screamed low level towards the target.

The Thud was well built. Once, when all Thuds were grounded do to several inexplicably blowing up, someone suggested giving them to the Army for use as tank crushers. Taxi a Thud over a tank and collapse the gear...crushing the tank. Another joke suggested painting Thuds yellow and using them for ground power units. Rumor was: Republic was going to make the Thud out of cement, but they found out steel was heavier.

We didn't know the SAM's exact location, but hoped the Navy's magic black box could point the way. We were the goats, tethered to lure the lion out into the open for the kill. Until that day, it was a big deal when just one or two SAMs were launched. Now they were firing SAMs like artillery. Fifteen is the number I remember. It's what they mean by: "All Hell's Broken Loose".

Powers calmly transmitted; "I've got 'em on my nose...starting my run". He flew directly over the target at tree top level and was literally disintegrated by withering ground fire.

My turn. I lit the burner and popped up to about 7500 feet, Power's emergency locator beacon screeching in my headset. As the nose came up, I clearly remember saying aloud to myself, "Oh crap, I don't want to do this".

During that brief dive bomb run, which seemed an eternity, there was a sharp knocking sound, like a fist on a door; it was enemy ground fire hitting the plane. I instinctively shouted into my oxygen mask: "Stop It. Stop It".

Years later, a VA shrink would explain that utterance was related to the trauma of a severe belt whipping when I was ten. Got my feet wet in the snow on the way home from school. My Dad held me tightly by the wrist beat my buns and legs with a leather belt. Shrink said I had no evidence at age 10, or on the bomb run that either event was survivable. In both cases, my mind thought I would die. In both cases, I pleaded hopelessly: "Stop It. Stop It".

The anti-aircraft hits caused multiple red and yellow emergency lights to blink incessantly, I transmitted my intention to get to the water off Haiphong before ejecting. Radio chatter was understandably chaotic. Each Thud pilot was individually living his own Hell, jinking violently to get away from the unrelenting ground fire.

Alone and doing 810 knots on the deck (that's right, Buddy, 810 knots) I slowly overtook a Navy F-8 Crusader as if passing a car on the freeway. We exchanged gentle pathetic waves as if to say: "Oh, Hi there, don't know you, but hope you're having a nice day?" I swear it was the most surreal moment of my life.

Still on the deck, but now over the safety of Gulf of Tonkin water, a sort of euphoric invincibility set in. If I ejected over the water, the Navy would surely pick me up.

But the fire warning light had gone out, so I strafed a couple of boats capable of capturing downed pilots. The Vulcan fired six thousand rounds a minute. That's one round of 20 millimeter every 37 inches, literally a stream of lead. It sounded more like a Hoover than a machine gun.

Decided there was no reason to jump out if this bird was still running. Did that last month and it scared the crap out of me. On the radio now, with precious little fuel remaining I was begging for a tanker. Made radio contact with a KC-135 somewhere in cyberspace. Following a terse debate challenging HIS priorities, we got together with barely any fuel reading on my gauge.

Made it back to Takhli. Gear, flap and flight control problems but landed in one piece.

Had hits all over the plane, except the extremely vulnerable underbelly engine area. It required 4,000 man-hours of work just to ferry it somewhere else for repair.

I pleaded with the base commander to award Power's the Air Force Cross. He didn't like the idea. Reminded me that the Navy had their own Navy Cross and handled their own decorations. I pushed my point as if we were equals. Don't you get it; the USS Oriskany lost their top guy while USAF gets a big headline back home. Power's brilliant leadership was why the mission succeeded! Give the NAVY guy the AIR FORCE CROSS! The colonel wasn't a fighter pilot. He didn't get it.

General George Simler flew in from headquarters to have a beer with the guys on the mission. Sitting at the sorry-no-ice-today, O'Club bar, Simler and I were hangar flying like two young cadets. He was that kind of General.

I passionately pitched Simler on awarding the Air Force Cross to Powers. He loved it, instantly. Turned and said dismissively to the Base Commander: "take care of that, Colonel".

Navy LtCmdr Powers received the Air Force Cross. Posthumously.

A DFC awarded that day could have described any of the pilots on the mission: Thunderchiefs...Hunter-Killer mission...against Surface to Air Missiles...deep within hostile territory...low level high speed run...encounter withering ground fire...pressed the attack...dropped bombs in heart of target complex...remarkable mission...overwhelming odds...skill...aggressiveness...

An old man who served in WWII told his grandson, "I was never a hero, but I served with many who were." That's how I feel. The most remarkable characters in my life were the heroes I was honored to fly with in 1965. They didn't all come home. Nam was not a very glamorous or patriotic war, but every fighter pilot I knew put his life on the line as if it were.