

THE HANOI MARCH

American POWs in
North Vietnam's Crucible

GARY WAYNE FOSTER



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THE HANOI MARCH: AMERICAN POWs IN NORTH VIETNAM'S
CRUCIBLE

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By the end of June 1966, two years into the Vietnam air war that would last for another six and a half years, the North Vietnamese shot down and captured one hundred American airmen. Of these, fifty were paraded through the streets of Hanoi during the evening of 6 July 1966. This is a true account of that event.

Dedicated to and in Honor of Those Fifty Americans

Everett Alvarez, Jr.
Thomas Joseph Barrett
James Franklin Bell
Kile Dag "Red" Berg
Cole Black
Charles Graham "Chuck" Boyd
Edward Alan Brudno
Richard Marvin "Skip" Brunhaver
Alan Leslie Brunstrom
Arthur William Burer
Phillip Neal Butler
Ronald Edward Byrne, Jr.
Gerald Leonard "Jerry" Coffee
Arthur Cormier
Render Crayton
Edward A. Davis
Jeremiah Andrew "Jery" Denton, Jr.
Robert Bartsch Doremus
Jerry Donald Driscoll
John Howard "Howie" Dunn
Leonard Corbett Eastman
Ralph Ellis Gaither, Jr.
Paul Edward Galanti
Lawrence Nicholas "Larry" Guarino
Porter Alexander Halyburton

Carlyle Smith "Smitty" Harris
David Burnett Hatcher
James Otis Hivner
James Leo "Duffy" Hutton
Paul Anthony Kari
Richard Paul "Pop" Keirn
Hayden James Lockhart, Jr.
Alan Pierce Lurie
John Bryan "JB" McKamey
Raymond James Merritt
Robert Delayney Peel
Robert Baldwin "Percy" Purcell
Darrel Edwin Pyle
Richard Raymond "Dick" Ratzlaff
Jon A. Reynolds
James Robinson "Robbie" Risner
Wendell Burke "Wendy" Rivers
Wesley Duane Schierman
Bruce Gibson Seeber
William Leonard Shankel
Robert Harper Shumaker
Jerry Allen Singleton
Larry Howard Spencer
Ronald Edward Storz
William Michael Tschudy
And also, Murphy Neal Jones

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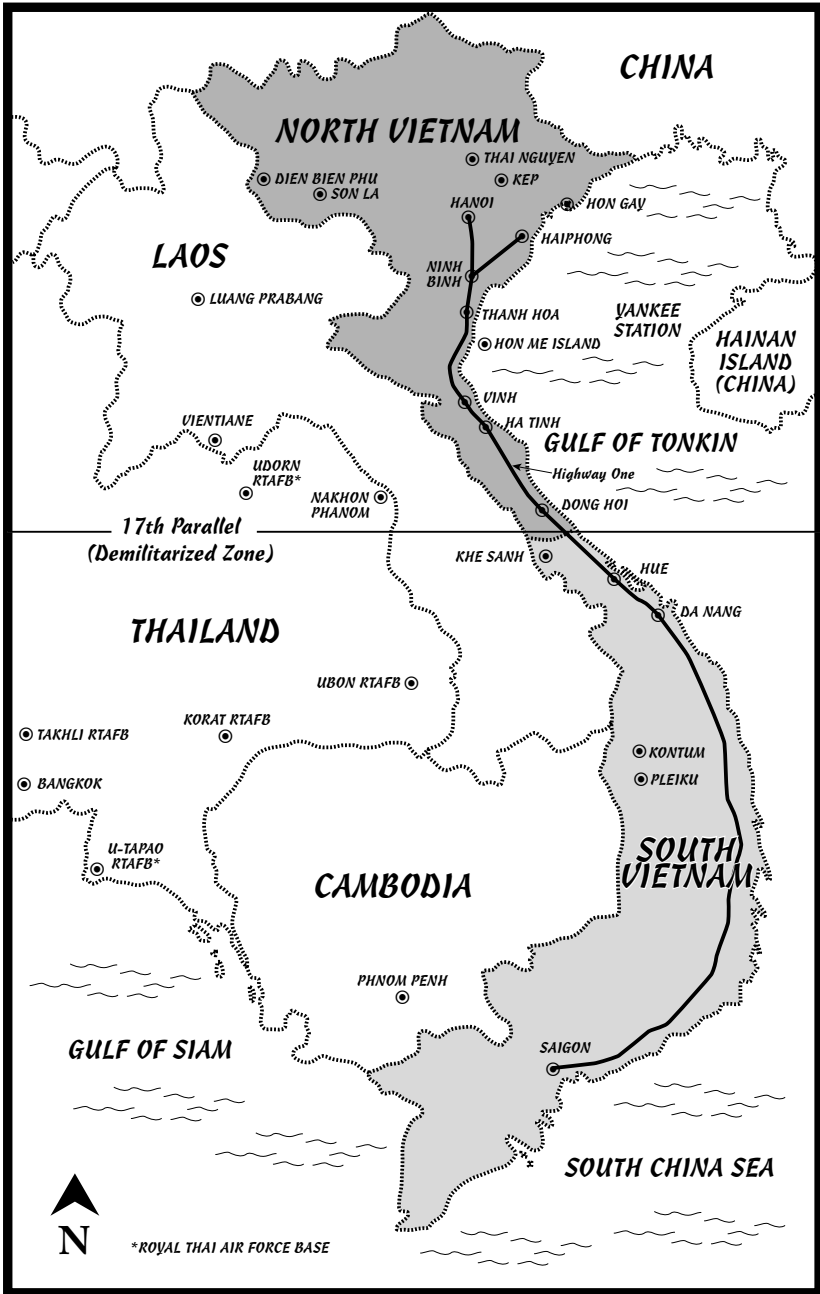
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General Map of the Southeast Asia Theater, 1966

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ABBREVIATIONS AND INFORMATION

AAA – Anti-Aircraft Artillery (Triple- A)
BARCAP – Barrier Combat Air Patrol (air protection)
BN – Bombardier/Navigator
CAG – Airwing Commander (Navy)
CAP – Combat Air Patrol (covering protection)
CV/CVA/CVN – Aircraft Carrier Designation (Navy)
CVW – Airwing Designation (Navy)
DMZ – Demilitarized Zone (marked by the Ben Hai River)
KIA – Killed in Action
MIA – Missing in Action
MIGCAP – MiG Combat Air Patrol (enemy aircraft protection)
MiG – Russian Fighter Jet
NFO – Naval Flight Officer
NVA – North Vietnamese Army
NVN – North Vietnam
POL – Petroleum, Oil, Lubricants
POW – Prisoner of War
PSO – Pilot/Systems Officer (precursor to the WSO - Air Force)
RAG – Replacement Air Group (Navy)
RIO – Radio Intercept Officer (F-4B, Navy)
RTAFB – Royal Thai Air Force Base
RVAH – Heavy Reconnaissance Attack Squadron (Navy)
SAM – Surface-to-Air Missile.
SRO – Senior Ranking Officer
SVN – South Vietnam
TFS – Tactical Fighter Squadron (Air Force)
VA – Attack Squadron (Navy)
VF – Fighter Squadron (Navy)
WSO – Weapons Systems Officer (F-4C)

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U.S. Fixed-wing Aircraft (Fighters, Bombers, Fighter-Bombers and Reconnaissance Aircraft)

Navy

A-1	Skyraider
A-3	Skywarrior
A-4	Skyhawk
A-6	Intruder
F-8/RF-8	Crusader
RA-5C	Vigilante

Air Force

F-100	Supersabre
F-101	Voodoo
F-105	Thunderchief
O-1	Birdog (spotter plane)

Common to Air Force, Navy and Marines

F-4	Phantom
-----	---------

North Vietnam Fixed-wing Aircraft

MiG-17	Fresco
MiG-21	Fishbed

Translation

Pho is Vietnamese for street. In this account, each word is interchangeable with the other. *Pho Trang Tien* is the same as Trang Tien Street. *Pho* is also the name of a noodle soup. It is pronounced “Phuh.” Diacritic and tonal marks have been omitted from Vietnamese words for ease of reading.

PART ONE

SETTINGS AND PLAYERS

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CHAPTER 1

HON GAY

On his second tour with the fleet, both on the USS *Constellation* (CV-64), Lieutenant (j.g.) Everett Alvarez, a twenty-six-year-old native of Salinas, California, and other pilots in a flight of ten A-4C Skyhawks launched from the aircraft carrier at 2:30 p.m. on the fifth of August 1964. The A-4s of attack squadron VA-144, commonly called the Roadrunners, rendezvoused over the carrier above the Gulf of Tonkin and flew in a northerly direction toward the coast of North Vietnam.

At thirty thousand feet, the single-engine jets caught up with a flight of propeller-driven A-1 Skyraider attack planes, also from *Constellation*, flying at a lower altitude. Due to their slower speed, the A-1s launched well before the A-4s.

In reprisal for what came to be called the Gulf of Tonkin incident, *Constellation's* A-4s and A-1s attacked a North Vietnamese naval base at Hon Gay northwest of Haiphong.

Alvarez participated in a previous mission the night before to protect two U.S. destroyers from threats made by the North Vietnamese navy. He carried flares for illumination. Due to low cloud cover, the flight proved hazardous, but all planes recovered on *Constellation*.

Now, on his second mission in as many days, as he neared the target, Alvarez rolled in and fired rockets in a salvo. Other A-4s followed. They destroyed several torpedo boats. Alvarez made a

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pass with his 20mm cannon aimed at a larger ship. The Skyhawk's bullets hit the water, marched up the side of the ship and smashed through the bridge area. Chunks of metal flew off the ship.

During the air attack, North Vietnamese gun crews zeroed in on the lone A-4. Machine-gun fire, more intense than Alvarez anticipated, swept past his cockpit. Exploding projectiles from heavy anti-aircraft artillery rocked his plane. Then, finding their mark, enemy shells ripped the guts from beneath Alvarez's plane.

"I've been hit," Alvarez said into his microphone as he jettisoned the ordnance racks under his wings to reduce drag.

The Skyhawk banked to the left. Alvarez spoke into his mic.

"I'm on fire. No control."

And, not even a few seconds later, "I'm getting out!"

Alvarez had no option but to eject. He was over water but unfortunately, near the coastline.

As soon as he splashed down, Alvarez heard rifle shots and was nicked by a bullet. Soon captured, he was hauled aboard a North Vietnamese fishing vessel.

Alvarez was transferred to a much larger boat that drew alongside. The crew members asked if he was Vietnamese (from South Vietnam). Alvarez, responding in Spanish, said he didn't understand. Through further questioning and after having looked at his identification card and equipment stenciled with the name of the aircraft carrier, a man asked Alvarez if he was *My* (pronounced "me"). Alvarez indicated again his lack of comprehension. The man wrote the word *My* on a piece of paper and next to it, USA. With an inquiring face, the man pointed at the letters, then at Alvarez. He opened his hand, gesturing a question.

Alvarez, knowing they had the goods on him, admitted who he was.

The North Vietnamese, wide-eyed, stepped back in shock. They had just captured a *Phi Cong My*, an American pilot!

Alvarez was quarantined in a cell near Hon Gay for several days where he was treated relatively well. He met a pleasant, helpful

man who spoke English. He was given bowls of soup consisting of chicken heads and buffalo hooves in boiling brown water, but so disgusting, Alvarez couldn't stomach the food.

The next day, Alvarez, worried about what may happen to him, met an officer who would soon be referred to as Owl due to his resemblance with the nocturnal bird. The questioning began: What was the mission? Will there be more attacks? When? Where?

The young U.S. Navy pilot didn't answer.

Alvarez spent a couple of nights in various locations before he was driven to Hanoi. Several days later, bound and blindfolded, he entered the main gate of a prison called Hoa Lo located on a street with the same name.

Five months after the Hon Gay attack, in January 1965, *Constellation*, leaving Alvarez behind, departed the Gulf of Tonkin and sailed for San Diego.

* * * *

Everett Alvarez was the first American pilot captured in North Vietnam and incarcerated in its main prison during what came to be called the Vietnam War.*

Within six weeks after Alvarez was shot down, U.S. combat aircraft began deploying to airbases in South Vietnam, Thailand, Guam, the Philippines and on aircraft carriers sent to an area referred to as Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin.

The downing of Alvarez over Hon Gay in 1964 marked the beginning of a long line of captured American airmen. By late June 1966, America had lost hundreds of planes and many of its best pilots. The American prisoner-of-war ranks in North Vietnam were being filled by established, well-educated career officers with many years of flight training and experience. Whereas the average age of American fighting men in South Vietnam was twenty, the

*During WWII, America lost over 400 airmen in Vietnam while fighting military forces from Japan. Many of these airmen were held captive by the Japanese.

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average age of incarcerated American airmen, some having served in World War II and Korea, was thirty-two.

Flying high, brought low, a certain mawkishness among airmen shot down over North Vietnam, was common. God-like in their airplanes while slipping through the clouds, the

Every shootdown was different as were the locations where the airmen, if they survived, were captured. Downed airmen made attempts to hide and escape. Some evaded capture and were rescued, but many weren't. Restricted by the terrain or overwhelmed by their pursuers, those not rescued could not last long.

Flying into combat was nerve wracking enough. Ejecting at night from a flaming aircraft over dark, unknown terrain was terrifying. The impulse of the explosion of the ejection propellant under their seats, then the immediate impact of wind at several hundred miles per hour left aviators stunned or unconscious. Many experienced incapacitating spine, shoulder and arm injuries due to the immediate thrust of the seat ejection system. Yet, more bodily harm awaited them.

Once captured on the ground in North Vietnam, mostly in the jungles, Americans tasted the shocking, disorienting reality of a hostile environment in an alien land.

As with Everett Alvarez, some pilots who found themselves in the hands of the North Vietnamese became household names. They came to the forefront of America's consciousness and embodied the American prisoners' struggle to survive and return home.

The early names carried the banner and fame of the prisoners' plight to the end. The Americans incarcerated in Hanoi and elsewhere in North Vietnam assumed the descriptor of POW for the rest of the war and the rest of their lives.

CHAPTER 2

INSIDE THE RED RIVER

Situated in the flood plain of the Red River delta, the area that would become Ha Noi was described in 1010 as being on a high, flat plain.

Modern day archaeological digs unearthed pottery, bronze tools, stone axes and other artifacts which confirmed that as early as 2000 BC, primitive communities occupied the area. Residents lived in loosely connected clusters of huts.

Other ancient findings suggest the area may have been inhabited as early as twenty thousand years ago.

In 218 BC, Thuc Phan built a fortified settlement along the banks of the Red River but lost control of the area to invading Chinese who ruled it for centuries.

In the ninth century AD, a formidable citadel named Dai La was completed by Gao Pian.

Emperor Ly Thai To, the ruler of Hue, several hundred miles south, invoking Thuc Phan's proud history of local resistance, marched his troops north and captured Dai La. He renamed the citadel Thang Long, meaning the dragon that soars.

Ly Thai To's rule and that of the subsequent Ly dynasty lasted several hundred years.

In the seventeenth century, Thang Long, now a thriving city under the new Le dynasty, became Dong Kinh, from which the rhyming word Tonkin was derived.

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After several regime changes, Gia Long, emperor of the later ruling Nguyen dynasty, designated Dong Kinh as Thang Tinh. Further, the emperor gave the country its current name. He wanted to call the land Nam Viet but instead, named it Viet Nam.

In 1831, Minh Mang, a subsequent emperor of the continuing Nguyen dynasty, gave a new name to Thang Tinh. He named it Ha Noi, which, like Viet Nam, was two words in the Vietnamese language.

Ha Noi, as with the same city with prior names, sits just west of the Song Hong on the side farthest from the Gulf of Tonkin, literally, as the city's new name translates, inside the Red River.

The eventual sweep of European exploration in the 1800s resulted in conquests of foreign regions in faraway places. As a result, a new people the Vietnamese called *Nguoi Phap* came to the eastern coast of Southeast Asia. They were of course the French. Their early explorations along the Red River in the north and the Mekong River in the south congealed France's interest in a land that held vast natural resources.

In 1859, the French occupied the southern city of Saigon. Over the next few years, France, its representatives now assuming more authority, seized additional regions in the south. However, Ha Noi and the Red River area remained beyond their grasp. In November 1873, French expeditionary forces under the leadership of Francis Garnier captured the citadel at Ha Noi.

The Vietnamese enlisted support from the so-called Black Flag army, a gang of ruthless bandits of Chinese origin, to fight the French intrusion.

A month after Francis Garnier defeated the citadel's forces, the fort was attacked by Black Flag. Garnier was killed in battle, his head severed not far from the fortress walls.

Vietnamese leaders, realizing the Europeans were not going to leave Tonkin, agreed to a treaty with the French in 1874. As a result, France gained limited access to the Ha Noi region, securing a tenuous foothold on Indochina's northern waterway.

Almost a decade later in April 1882, the French stormed the

walls of Ha Noi's ancient citadel again. Henri Riviere, the commander, captured it within an hour. Later, in May 1883, Riviere met his death at the battle of Cau Giay (Paper Bridge) just outside Ha Noi.

On the sixth of June 1884, France and Viet Nam signed the more binding *Traité de Patenotre*. Named after France's Minister to China Jules Patenotre, the treaty gave France control of Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin. Ha Noi would be the capital of *Indochine du temps des Français*.

The importance of controlling Ha Noi was always of paramount, if not paranoid concern for the Vietnamese, but even more so now for French colonialists. Nonetheless, France's particular interest in the Red River as a trading corridor and medium with northern Viet Nam grew.

Suspicion and hostility toward the French seethed but France wasted no time. Ships flying *le drapeau tricolore*, the bold red, white and blue flag of France, arrived in increasing numbers carrying abundant resources. Much to the chagrin of the Vietnamese, France also sent thousands of soldiers, merchants and administrators to Indochina. The French, importing their cultural values and technical and administrative skills, created a seemingly viable government and a vibrant social fabric for themselves.

Accelerated development plans served the needs of the French who desired to make Vietnam, now one word, albeit all of Indochina, an enduring colony for the benefit and glory of the metropole of France . . . forever.

Hanoi, also becoming one word, experienced a significant reformation. Under the guiding hand of planners and architects, the French constructed railroads, streets and highways, canals and irrigation and drainage networks. They built communication, commercial and administrative systems, ports, industrial areas, sanitation facilities, schools and hospitals.

The French were intent to bring the majesty of Paris to Hanoi through an unspoken *politique de prestige*. Imposing buildings

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with stylish French doors and big, prestigious porte-cochere entrances to inviting courtyards, became prevalent.

Villas followed the French concept of large front yards, not to be used so much as admired, and small backyards with outhouses and servant quarters. Spacious and airy, elegant homes with verandas, grand foyers, intricate inlay and tile-work and sweeping staircases elicited the grandeur and importance of their French inhabitants.

The French saw a rare opportunity of working in an unexploited laboratory ripe for architectural experimentation. The designers' blending of French neo-classical styles, emerging at the beginning of the 1900s, was uniquely refined for Vietnam and worked to produce a cosmopolitan aura of sophistication and elan.

Paul Doumer pushed the city further. Under his direction, l'hotel de ville (city hall), la mairie (city court house), the university and government ministries, unique in their style, exhibited indisputable French authority and permanence.

The shock of the city's ochre-colored administration buildings, not high in elevation but built with large shuttered windows and ceiling fans in each room, exuded an exotic, tropical drama. The same strange, even nauseating paint characterized the façade of the governor-general's mansion that marked a prominent corner of what would become Ba Dinh Square. The color of the stately building, designed by Henri Vildieu, surrounded by lush vegetation of the botanical gardens, soon came to define the city's welcoming grace.

The Hanoi Opera House, a majestic edifice built between 1902 and 1911, provided tangible proof of the French perpetuating their influence through *la culture Française*.

A nineteen-span, steel lattice bridge, French Indochina's response to the Eiffel Tower, spanned the muddy Red River. Appropriately, it was given the name Le Pont Paul Doumer (Paul Doumer Bridge) which Doumer himself described as the most significant structure ever built in Asia.

Unfortunately, Hanoi and its environs suffered from the effects of hundreds of stagnant lakes and ponds and disease-infested marshes abandoned by the millennial meanderings of the Red River. During the late 1800s, thousands of workers, called coolies, each using *quang ganh*, a pole over the shoulder from which at each end a basket of dirt hung, formed a continuous line of human dump trucks and filled in the lakes and ponds. The French eradicated the malaria-ridden swamps and much of the health menace.

Ancient and colonial Hanoi developed around an oblong body of water the French called La Petit Lac. Known locally as the lake of the rising sword and home to giant, three-hundred-year-old turtles, the fetid lake was drained, cleaned and allowed to refill. The lake's celebrated turtles were spared.

Large, verdant gardens and public parks radiated a leisurely colonial lifestyle at its elegant, cultural best.

Svelte, silky-haired Vietnamese women dressed in sensuous *Ao Dai*, wearing conical hats and carrying *quang ganh* with ripe fruit or colorful tropical flowers in its baskets, captured the imagination of every European artist.

Not surprisingly, the French considered Hanoi to be *le Paris de l'est*, a description also, but less formally ascribed to its rival city Saigon, a thousand miles south.

Incomparable in size to Paris, Hanoi never reached the significance of Singapore, Hong Kong or Shanghai. But with its special charm, as depicted in early postcards, the city lured scientists, romantics, writers, and the adventurous. Hanoi, the capital of Tonkin and the larger *Indochine*, became a paradise in Asia.

But all was not well in paradise.

Revenue from agricultural exports, especially opium, wasn't enough. France was obliged to cough up additional funding, causing officials to ask the question: What do the buggers do out there?

To authorities back home in France, Hanoi was too pretentious, especially for an upstart colony located so far away.

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In contrast, the indigenous people thought the French and their developments were arrogant, intrusive and insulting. Discontent among the Vietnamese spread. The embers of self-rule burned intensely.

Although generations of French grew up in Hanoi with the guarantee of a continuing colonial lifestyle *outré-mer*, France's dominance in Hanoi and its rule over Vietnam would last less than one hundred years.

CHAPTER 3

USAF 67TH TACTICAL FIGHTER SQUADRON – KORAT, THAILAND

During its two temporary deployments to Korat Royal Thai Air Base in 1965, the United States Air Force 67th Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS), the proud Fighting Cocks, suffered the effects of combat in North Vietnam. Created in 1943, the squadron, equipped now with F-105 Thunderchief fighter jets, was home-based at Kadena on Okinawa to where it would return after each deployment.

On 2 March 1965, just days after the first deployment of the 67th TFS to Korat, the U.S. Air Force launched its first Rolling Thunder strike against North Vietnam. The Fighting Cocks lost three F-105s in the space of two hours. The pilots parachuted and were rescued.

On 22 March, Lieutenant Colonel Robinson “Robbie” Risner, the squadron commander, flew a mission against a radar site near the coastal city of Vinh.

Robbie Risner was born in 1925 and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He joined the Air Force in 1943. Risner flew the P-38, P-39, P-40 and P-51 fighters in World War II and the F-86 in Korea where in

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one incident he chased a MiG at near supersonic speed between two hangers before shooting it down. Risner downed eight MiGs, becoming an Ace after five.

Now, over North Vietnam, Risner's F-105 was hit by anti-aircraft fire. He flew his crippled Thunderchief over the Gulf of Tonkin and ejected. He was rescued and flown back to Korat to rejoin his unit.

Although suffering no casualties so far, the downing of Risner's aircraft resulted in the squadron's fourth aircraft loss in North Vietnam.

On 3 April 1965, the squadron attacked the Ham Rong Bridge at Thanh Hoa for the first time. Although the bridge sustained significant damage, it was still useable. On that mission, Risner's F-105 was hit again. He flew the aircraft to Da Nang, South Vietnam where he made an emergency landing. For the second time, Risner was immediately flown back to Thailand.

Next day, on the fourth of April 1965, Captain Carlyle "Smitty" Harris, born on 11 April 1929 in Tupelo, Mississippi, lifted off from Korat. Harris was part of a second-strike effort again to destroy the Ham Rong Bridge. The attack was led by Robbie Risner, the same pilot shot down and rescued two weeks earlier and who made an emergency landing at Da Nang the day before.

Harris and his wingman took the lead and dove for the bridge. They attacked first so the flight leader could spot the bombs. As Harris rolled into his dive, the dark steel truss of the Ham Rong Bridge filled the front of his windscreen. Harris's sight picture was clear, his attack angle good, the target dead ahead. Harris checked his airspeed and, at the right altitude, released his bombs. Harris, his plane free of its load, bottomed out of the dive. As he climbed away, his F-105 was hit in the engine by an explosive 37mm shell, the size of a lemon. The plane streamed a long tongue of bright red-orange flames.

Others in the flight warned Harris.

"Smitty, you're on fire, you're on fire!"

Harris headed east, but never made the Gulf of Tonkin. He jettisoned the canopy and fired the ejection seat. The ejection was

so quick, it broke his left shoulder, but the pain didn't register in Harris's mind. He landed near a village not far from Thanh Hoa.

The villagers completely stripped him of his flight suit, boots and all his survival gear. Harris refused to give up his wedding band. Two men wrenched it from Harris's finger while acute pain from his shoulder injury shot through his entire body.

Captain Harris, now tied up, became a public spectacle. He eventually arrived in Hanoi.

Smitty Harris brought with him the Tap Code, a simple method of non-verbal communication that revolutionized the way American prisoners in Hanoi would communicate with each other.

The first deployment of the 67th TFS ended on 26 April 1965. The squadron rotated back to Kadena, but four months later, on 16 August, its planes and men re-deployed to Korat.

* * * *

A Washington native from St. John, Captain Wesley Duane Schierman was born on 21 July 1935. He was awarded his aviator wings at the end of flight training in 1956. In 1959, he received a B.S. degree in psychology from Washington State University. Schierman met his wife at university and they soon married. They had two children.

An ingratiating man with an enormous sense of humor, Wes Schierman was loyal to his country, proud of his family and equally proud of his military service.

He served with the Washington Air National Guard from 1956 to 1962. He was also a co-pilot for Northwest Airlines. In September 1962, he returned to active duty in the USAF on a three-year contract.

In early 1965, Schierman flew with the 67th Tactical Fighter Squadron during its first deployment to Korat. Upon turning twenty-nine in July 1965, Schierman agreed to a second three-month temporary duty assignment again with the 67th TFS on its second deployment to Thailand.

In late August, Wes Schierman was tasked with planning a mission to bomb military barracks near Son La, one hundred twenty-five

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miles west of Hanoi. Each F-105 was to carry five-hundred-pound MK-82 "Snakeye" bombs which have four square, flat metal fins designed to pop out when released. Dropped from low level, the extended fins, now perpendicular to the bomb's body, retard its descent thereby allowing the plane to depart the area prior to the bomb blast. This was to be the first mission for the F-105 using this type of bomb.

Due to the configuration of the large fins, the aerodynamics tended to cause the bombs to roll into the fuselage once released, especially if they were attached to the plane's centerline hardpoints.

During the evening of 27 August, Schierman, confident of his planning, fell into his bunk.

Up early on the twenty-eighth, the day of the raid, Schierman received weather information and briefed the mission pilots. Take off was scheduled for 0900. Schierman would be flying a two-seat F-105F.

After refueling over Laos, Schierman closed up the formation. The flight descended through cloud cover and navigated to a point just west of the airfield at Na San.

Flying at four hundred feet above ground in rough mountain terrain, at four hundred-fifty miles per hour, Schierman saw the target off his left wing about one mile south of a highway.

The second element leader dropped first, then Schierman and his wingman made their drop. They came back around on a strafing pass.

Schierman's gun jammed. He heard a heavy metallic sound to his left, followed almost immediately by a loud explosion in the aft section of the airplane. He depressed the transmit button on his radio.

"Elm lead's got problems."

The flight's number four pilot called, "Hey lead, you've got fire coming out the back. Man, it's burning."

"Yeah, I know."

Schierman ejected.

A sharp pain darted through his lower back. Simultaneously, the

force of the wind hit him like a wall. Seconds later, he felt the opening of the parachute.

Schierman hit the ground hard on his back near the top of a small, denuded hill. Regaining his breath, Schierman discovered he was cut and bleeding profusely. His knees were already swelling. He made survival-radio contact with his flight and was advised a helicopter was on its way. The flight would stay with him as long as the planes had fuel. Schierman knew the flight would have to leave soon.

Schierman heard Vietnamese coming up the hill and was soon surrounded by a platoon of soldiers carrying automatic weapons. The soldiers took Schierman's boots and stripped off his gear just as the rescue helicopter appeared on the horizon.

The Vietnamese tied Schierman's arms behind him and started running him downhill through the brush. He tripped and fell several times before reaching cover in the dense jungle.

The captured airman was bound and kept in a small cave for the next seventy-two hours without food or water. Then, tied up in the back of a truck, he spent the next three nights on the road. Wes Schierman arrived in downtown Hanoi on 3 September 1965 where he entered Hanoi's prison system.

Schierman's downing was the first aircraft loss for the 67th TFS during its second deployment. Two of the squadron's pilots were now incarcerated in North Vietnam.

* * * *

Born on 19 November 1928 in Brooklyn but raised in Great Neck, New York, Ronald Edward Byrne, Jr. graduated from public high school and entered the Merchant Marine Academy. He left after three years to study law. The Korean War draft caused him to enlist in the U.S. Air Force. He received his wings and commission as a second lieutenant in 1952.

During the Korean conflict, Byrne flew seventy-five combat missions in the F-86 Sabre. After Korea, he was stationed at,

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among other bases, England Air Force Base where his wife gave birth to twin sons, his and his wife's first children.

Byrne received a B.S. degree in mechanical engineering from Oklahoma State University where his family was blessed with a third son.

Beginning in 1961, Ron Byrne served on the Titan missile program in California for two years. His family grew to include a fourth son. In 1964, Ron Byrne checked out in a trainer version of the F-105 and was assigned to the 67th Tactical Fighter Squadron.

On 29 August 1965, one day after Wes Schierman was shot down and captured, Major Byrne and three other pilots took off from Korat in their Thunderchiefs on their way to North Vietnam. The combat mission, Byrne's twenty-seventh, would not go entirely as planned or hoped.

In the air headed north, the flight refueled over Laos, then proceeded toward an area eighty miles northwest of Hanoi. Thirty minutes later, the four F-105s rolled in on their target, an ammunition depot at Yen Bai.

Major Byrne's fighter-bomber sustained damage from anti-aircraft fire. Flames began to shoot from the plane. Byrne continued on and delivered his bombs on target. By then, ammunition for the Thunderchief's nose-mounted machine gun was exploding. White fire and toxic fumes quickly swept into the cockpit. Byrne's plane began to plummet.

Having achieved one-third of the coveted goal of one hundred combat missions over North Vietnam, which added to his seventy-five Korea missions, Byrne reached for the ejection handle and triggered it.

The ejection system's parachute deployed rapidly with a loud clap. Byrne landed in a bamboo forest and, like a sugar cube dropped on an anthill, among swarming villagers and militia.

Ron Byrne, thirty-six years old, ended up in Hanoi to join his squadron mates Smitty Harris and Wes Schierman.

* * * *

The Fighting Cocks were plagued with two more shootdowns, one each on 31 August and 6 September for a total of four aircraft lost in combat so far during the second deployment. The two pilots were rescued.

Days later, the squadron suffered a major setback that simultaneously benefitted the North Vietnamese. A trophy unexpectedly landed in their laps.

On 16 September 1965, during his second deployment to Korat, Robbie Risner's luck ran out. His F-105 was stricken for a third time while attacking a surface-to-air missile site. Robbie Risner, an experienced horseman, still the squadron commander, ejected northeast of Thanh Hoa. Upon landing, he tore the ligaments in his knee and was disabled.

Risner's capture was cause for celebration among North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun crews and a prize possession of North Vietnam's Air Defense Command. Since they had access to *Time* magazine depicting Risner on the cover of the April 23, 1965 issue, five months before, he became a much sought-after prize: *We've been expecting you, Mr. Risner.*

Now, they got him!

* * * *

Raymond Merritt, born on 7 October 1929 and raised in the San Gabriel Valley, attended Pasadena City College. Merritt joined the U.S. Air Force and rose to become an officer through the cadet program. He earned his wings soon thereafter. Merritt served his country in Korea where he flew one hundred missions in a Republic F-84 jet.

Ray Merritt went to Vietnam with Robbie Risner and the 67th Tactical Fighter Squadron in August 1965.

On the same raid as Robbie Risner near Thanh Hoa, and not even thirty seconds after Risner was downed, Merritt's F-105 was in trouble. On his fortieth combat mission in Vietnam, Merritt didn't

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hear or feel anything abnormal, but his Thunderchief was suddenly pointing to the ground. Major Merritt ejected and parachuted to earth and was immediately captured.

The 67th TFS lost two more F-105s within four days of Risner and Merritt's shootdowns. The pilots were killed.

The squadron returned to its home base of Kadena on 23 October 1965. The Fighting Cocks never returned to Vietnam.

A heavy price to pay, the 67th Tactical Fighter Squadron lost thirteen F-105 Thunderchiefs, five on the first deployment, eight on the second; and two pilots killed in action. The squadron also left five men behind in Hanoi.