

In the late afternoon of Dec. 26, 1972, Maj. William F. Stocker taxied his aging B-52D Stratofortress onto the runway at Guam's Andersen Air Force Base and stopped. Normally he and his fellow BUFF pilots made rolling takeoffs, turning the corner from the taxiway and roaring off into the tropical skies, but this time was different. Thousands of personnel had gathered to watch the launch. Stocker had asked for, and received, permission to taxi into place and hold for a moment.

As he sat there, seconds ticking away, Stocker and his fellow crew members looked out on perhaps the greatest armada of airpower assembled in any one place since the end of World War II. Other B-52s were stacked up nose-to-tail as far as he could see, waiting to follow him into combat. "It's difficult to describe the feeling of leading such an array of power," he later told an interviewer.

The last phase of Operation Linebacker II was about to begin. Days of intensive bombing had already inflicted heavy damage on North Vietnam. Rail yards and other transportation infrastructure had been devastated. Petroleum storage areas had been hard-hit, as had North Vietnamese airfields.

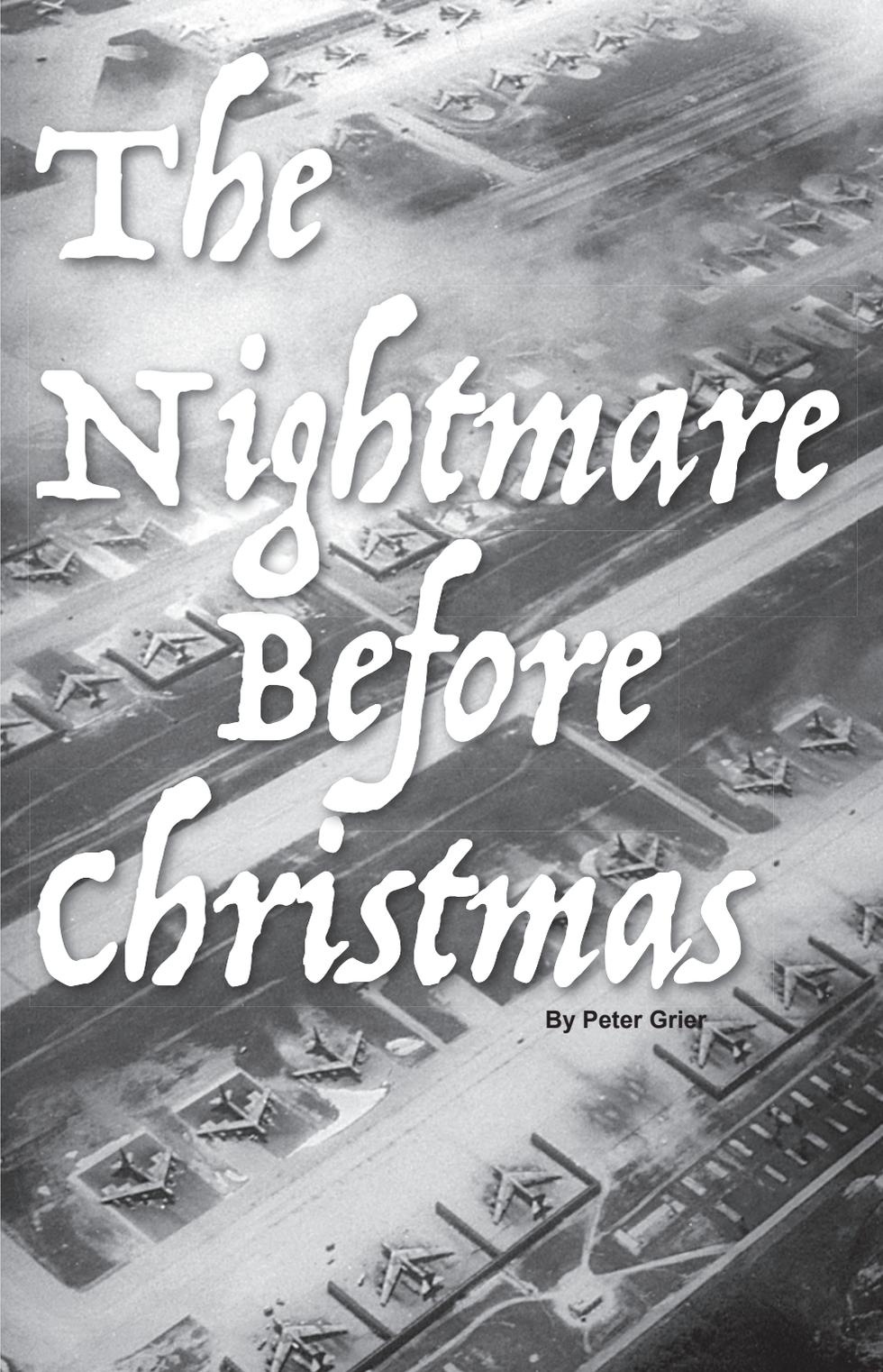
DEADLY ATTRITION

The campaign, though, had not yet achieved its central purpose of driving Hanoi back to the negotiating table—and the Air Force had suffered devastating losses getting to that point.

The problem was the deadly network of SA-2 surface-to-air missiles that webbed the landscape around Hanoi and Haiphong. In a toll almost defying comprehension today—with B-52s still in regular front-line service—SA-2s downed 11 BUFFs and their crews in the first four nights of Linebacker II.

Air Force planners had predicted the possibility of such attrition, but its reality shocked everyone from the Oval Office to the flight lines of Southeast Asia. Something had to be done. The B-52 force was about to try something new: hitting North Vietnamese targets from different directions all at once, like a swarm of giant, angry hornets.

Near Hanoi, SA-2 units waited. The North Vietnamese had used a USAF bombing break over Christmas to stockpile missiles and compare methods of overcoming US jamming of their air defense radars. "Both sides knew that this night would be a test of wills," wrote Brig. Gen. James R. McCarthy, airborne mission commander for the Dec. 26 raid, and Lt. Col. George



The Nightmare Before Christmas

By Peter Grier

B. Allison, in the Air Force History Office monograph *Linebacker II*. At 4:18 p.m. local time, Stocker advanced the aircraft's throttles and rolled B-52, call sign Opal 1, down the runway. More than two hours later, the last of the line of 78 BUFFs from Andersen followed him into the air. Forty-two B-52Ds from U Tapao Royal Thai Air Base joined them in their attack.

Linebacker II was perhaps the most unique Air Force and Navy air campaign of the Vietnam War.

First, it was short. Its predecessor Linebacker I was the bombing of infrastructure around Hanoi and Haiphong from May

to October of 1972. Linebacker II lasted only 11 days, however, from Dec. 18 to Dec. 29, 1972.

Second, it had a specific, political objective. The North Vietnamese had broken off peace talks in Paris. They appeared to be waiting for a new, more anti-war US Congress to take office in January; it might increase their negotiating leverage. President Richard M. Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry A. Kissinger, wanted a show of force to convince Hanoi to resume negotiations and sign a peace agreement close to the terms previously discussed.

B-52s at Andersen AFB, Guam, during the runup to Operation Linebacker II. USAF photo



The disastrous early days of Linebacker II forced the Air Force to find a new approach for B-52s against Hanoi.

Third, it had few operational restrictions. Linebacker II was intended to exert maximum pressure by destroying major targets near Hanoi and the port city of Haiphong. That meant extended use of the biggest available stick in the Air Force arsenal: the B-52.

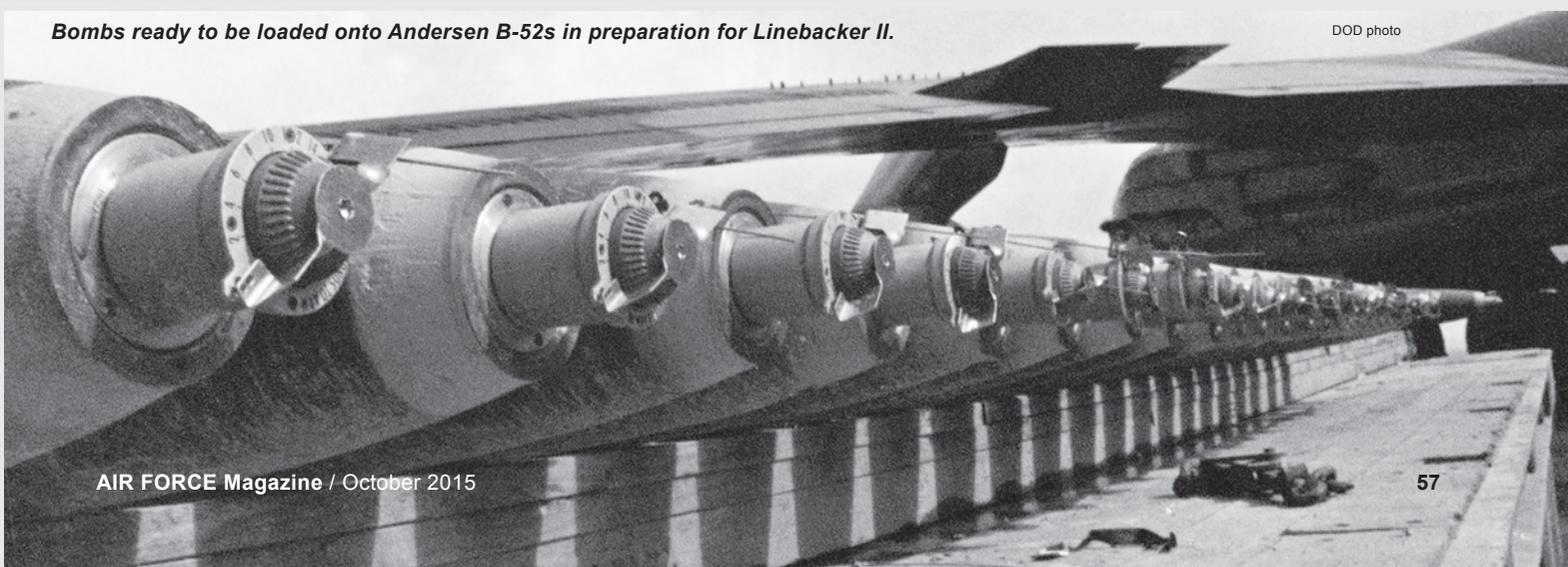
“The use of B-52s in large numbers was unprecedented, and the large-scale attacks on targets within 10 nautical miles of Hanoi represented a dynamic change in the employment of air resources,” wrote Herman L. Gilster, a retired Air Force colonel and operations expert, in a 1991 Air University report. Some Air Force officials were eager to show what the B-52 could do in such a situation.

Nixon chose to unleash the B-52 force because he wanted to send a message to North Vietnam about US resolve. He believed the psychological impact of the big bomber was as important as its physical destructiveness. Since the BUFFs flew at more than 30,000 feet, those under attack typically couldn’t see or hear the aircraft before bombs began exploding. Suddenly, the world around them would erupt as the carpet of high-explosives pummeled the earth. One high-ranking Viet Cong official who experienced a B-52 raid said he thought he’d been caught in the Apocalypse. “The terror was complete,” said Truong Nhu Tang, who served as provisional justice minister during the war. “One lost control of bodily functions as the mind screamed incomprehensible orders to get out.” Nixon wanted North Vietnamese civilians to understand that the US could unleash this power when it wanted.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff were “stunned” by the President’s decision, wrote William P. Head, chief of the Warner Robins Air Logistics Center Office of History, in his 2002 book *War From Above the Clouds*. For years, air operations over Vietnam were hobbled by White House constraints on what targets

Bombs ready to be loaded onto Andersen B-52s in preparation for Linebacker II.

DOD photo



could be hit with what sort of weapons. Nixon was blunt about the implications of his choice. He told JCS Chairman Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, "This is your chance to use military power effectively to win this war, and if you don't, I'll consider you personally responsible."

As first envisioned by Nixon and the nation's military leaders, Linebacker II would be an all-out three-day effort to break Hanoi's will. A-7 attack aircraft and F-4 fighter-bombers would carry out daytime raids. B-52s, accompanied by F-111 strike aircraft and Air Force and Navy tactical air defenders, would fly the heavier nighttime operations.

How the Air Force would use the B-52s in conventional bombing runs remained an open question in mid-to-late 1972. The big bombers were assigned to Strategic Air Command as part of the US nuclear deterrent, and tactics and training were

geared to this mission. The Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) for war with the Soviet Union called for B-52s to penetrate Soviet airspace at low level, after US missiles had degraded Soviet air defenses. Given the awesome power of nuclear weapons, the crews were not called on to perform precision attack. All they needed to do was lob one bomb in the general area of a target, and the USSR was a large landmass with many military targets.

The situation in North Vietnam was very different. The B-52s would fly at high altitudes and use radar guided systems to drop conventional munitions. Destruction of a rail yard or power plant would entail placing weapons directly on target. Point defenses around the targets were formidable, including relatively modern Soviet-provided SA-2 SAMs. The defenders would also know the US airplanes

were coming, as North Vietnam's lack of infrastructure meant there were not many B-52-worthy targets.

Eighth Air Force, headquartered on Guam, was in charge of bombing and refueling operations for Southeast Asia. In August 1972, anticipating more intense use of the B-52s over Vietnam, SAC commander Gen. John C. Meyer asked the 8th for ideas. In November, the 8th Air Force commander, Lt. Gen. Gerald W. Johnson, sent a draft plan for B-52 raids to SAC headquarters for final approval.

LIMITING COLLATERAL DAMAGE

The plan called for simultaneous attacks against multiple targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area. Waves of B-52s would come in from different directions in an attempt to confuse and defeat target defenses. SAC's Meyer rejected

B-52 Crews Lost Over North Vietnam in Linebacker II

Date	Aircraft	Call Sign	Crew Members	Position	Status
12/18/72	B-52G 58-0201	Charcoal 1	Lt. Col. Donald Riis 1st Lt. Robert Thomas Maj. Richard Johnson Capt. Robert Certain Capt. Richard Simpson MSgt. Walter Ferguson	Pilot Copilot Radar Navigator Navigator EWO Gunner	KIA KIA POW, returned POW, returned POW, returned KIA
12/19/72	B-52D 56-0608	Rose 1	Capt. Hal Wilson Capt. Charles Brown Maj. Fernando Alexander Capt. Richard Cooper Capt. Harry Barrows SMSgt. Charlie Poole	Pilot Copilot Radar Navigator Navigator EWO Gunner	POW, returned POW, returned POW, returned KIA POW, returned KIA
12/20/72	B-52D 56-0622	Orange 3	Maj. John Stuart 1st Lt. Paul Granger Maj. Randolph Perry Capt. Thomas Klomann Capt. Irwin Lerner MSgt. Arthur McLaughlin	Pilot Copilot Radar Navigator Navigator EWO Gunner	Presumed dead POW, returned KIA POW, returned KIA Presumed dead
12/20/72	B52-G 57-6496	Quilt 3	Capt. Terry Geloneck 1st Lt. William Arcuri Capt. Warren Spencer 1st Lt. Michael Martini Capt. Craig Paul SSgt. Roy Madden	Pilot Copilot Radar Navigator Navigator EWO Gunner	POW, returned POW, returned KIA POW, returned KIA POW, returned
12/21/72	B-52G 58-0198	Olive 1	Lt. Col. Keith Heggen Lt. Col. James Nagahiro Capt. Donald Walters Maj. Edward Johnson Capt. Lynn Beens Capt. Robert Lynn A1C Charles Bebus	Deputy Mission CO Pilot Copilot Radar Navigator Navigator EWO Gunner	POW, died in captivity POW, returned KIA KIA POW, returned KIA KIA

this approach. His main concern was the possible, inadvertent bombing of civilians and collateral damage.

Back in Washington, the Nixon White House worried that such deaths would be used as propaganda against the US war effort, affecting public attitudes even in the United States itself. Meyer directed SAC planners to come up with their own approach.

In Omaha, they faced a tight deadline and drew up a simple, rigid plan. It entailed three waves of bombers traveling the same route each day, at the same altitude. To ensure accurate bombing, avoid midair collisions, and provide overlapping electronic countermeasures coverage, bombers would have to stabilize flight four minutes before bomb release. After release all aircraft would make the same turn exiting the target area and avoid further SAM exposure.



North Vietnamese soldiers and members of the press crawl over the wreckage of a B-52 shot down northwest of Hanoi during Linebacker II.

Date	Aircraft	Call Sign	Crew Members	Position	Status
12/21/72	B-52G 58-0169	Tan 3	Capt. Randall Craddock Capt. George Lockart Maj. Bobby Kirby 1st Lt. Charles Darr Capt. Ronald Perry SSgt. James Lollar	Pilot Copilot Radar Navigator Navigator EWO Gunner	KIA KIA KIA KIA KIA POW, returned
12/22/72	B-52D 55-0050	Blue 1	Lt. Colonel John Yuill Capt. David Drummond Lt. Colonel Lou Bernasconi 1st Lt. William Maguire II Lt. Colonel William Conlee SSgt. Gary Morgan	Pilot Copilot Radar Navigator Navigator EWO Gunner	POW, returned POW, returned POW, returned POW, returned POW, returned POW, returned
12/22/72	B-52D 56-0061	Scarlet 3/1	Capt. Peter Giroux Capt. Thomas Bennett Lt. Colonel Gerald Alley 1st Lt. Joseph Copack Capt. Peter Camerota MSGT. Louis LeBlanc	Pilot Copilot Radar Navigator Navigator EWO Gunner	POW, returned Presumed dead KIA KIA POW, returned POW, returned
12/26/72	B-52D 56-0674	Ebony 2	Capt. Robert Morris 1st Lt. Robert Hudson Capt. Michael LaBeau 1st Lt. Duane Varoch Capt. Nutter Wimbrow TSgt. James Cook	Pilot Copilot Radar Navigator Navigator EWO Gunner	KIA POW, returned POW, returned POW, returned KIA POW, returned
12/28/72	B-52D 56-0605	Cobalt 2/1	Capt. Frank Lewis Capt. Samuel Cuisinano Maj. James Condon 1st Lt. Bennie Fryer Maj. Allen Johnson MSGT. James Gough	Pilot Copilot Radar Navigator Navigator EWO Gunner	POW, returned POW, returned POW, returned KIA KIA POW, returned

Source: *B-52 Stratofortress Units in Combat, 1955-73*, by John Lake (with updates)

Staffers at 8th Air Force were “alarmed by this repetitive routing,” according to historian Head. Some predicted the casualty rate could run as high as 18 percent. SAC estimated losses would be much lower—possibly three percent, using data derived from its SIOP-based predictive models.

The Linebacker II campaign began somewhat auspiciously. On the night of Dec. 18, 129 B-52D and B-52Gs hit North Vietnam (87 bombers flying from Andersen alone), flying more than 3,000 miles before reaching their targets. The rest came from U Tapao. Thirty-nine joint service aircraft provided fighter escorts, radar jamming and countermeasures, and Wild Weasel SAM suppression.

The first wave of B-52s struck at 7:45 p.m. Pilots flew a route west to east near the China-Vietnam border and turned southeast for their bombing runs. They approached targets in three-bomber cells, separated by about 10 minutes—a procession dubbed the “elephant walk.” Four minutes prior to bomb release they flew straight and level as required, turning west after release in an attempt to avoid SAM sites.

The second wave attacked at midnight along the same general route, employing the same tactics. The third wave came at 5 a.m. The first-night forces slammed seven carefully selected targets: three fighter bases, the railway yards at Yen Vien, a vehicle repair and warehouse facility at Kinh No, a railway repair facility in Hanoi, and propaganda broadcaster Radio Hanoi.

Initial damage assessment reports were encouraging, with 94 percent of aircraft hitting their assigned targets.

Counting against this success was the loss of three bombers—one aircraft was shot down in each wave—to North Vietnamese SAMs. Five crew members were killed in action, seven became prisoners of war, and one seven-man crew was recovered. US officials blamed high winds in the target area for some of the B-52

vulnerability. The headwind greatly slowed the bomber’s egress flights and dispersed the BUFF’s radar-confusing metallic chaff.

The second night of bombing was more successful. Ninety-three B-52s hit targets near Hanoi using the same approach and tactics. Two were damaged but none were downed.

Still, the ferocity of SAM launches near the targets shocked aircrews. Hundreds of “flying telephone poles” peppered the skies each night, but the loss rate was acceptable and the tactics seemed to be working.

“A false sense of security set in,” Earl Tilford Jr. wrote in his book *Crosswinds*. That false sense exploded on the third day of the campaign.

On Dec. 20, six B-52s were shot down and another was severely damaged, within nine hours, resulting in 16 airmen killed in action and nine becoming POWs. The repercussions were felt in theater, at SAC headquarters, and at the White House itself.

Before the day’s mission, worries about the inflexibility and repetitiveness of the flight routes had trickled through the B-52 force. Aircrew were unhappy about the post-target turn for a similar reason: SAM sites could reasonably anticipate the maneuver and adjust their aim accordingly. Staff from 8th Air Force asked SAC to allow crews to maneuver until just prior to weapon release and alter ingress and egress routes to avoid establishing patterns.

DAY THREE

SAC officials were well-aware by this point that small changes in course, speed, and timing made a difference in vulnerability to SA-2s, and accordingly shortened the period B-52s were required to fly steady prior to weapons release. Given the relative success of Linebacker II to this point and the lag in instituting tactical changes, SAC essentially opted to go with the existing plan. “Day Three’s missions could best be described as a composite of

routes, targets, and tactics from Days One and Two,” wrote McCarthy and Allison.

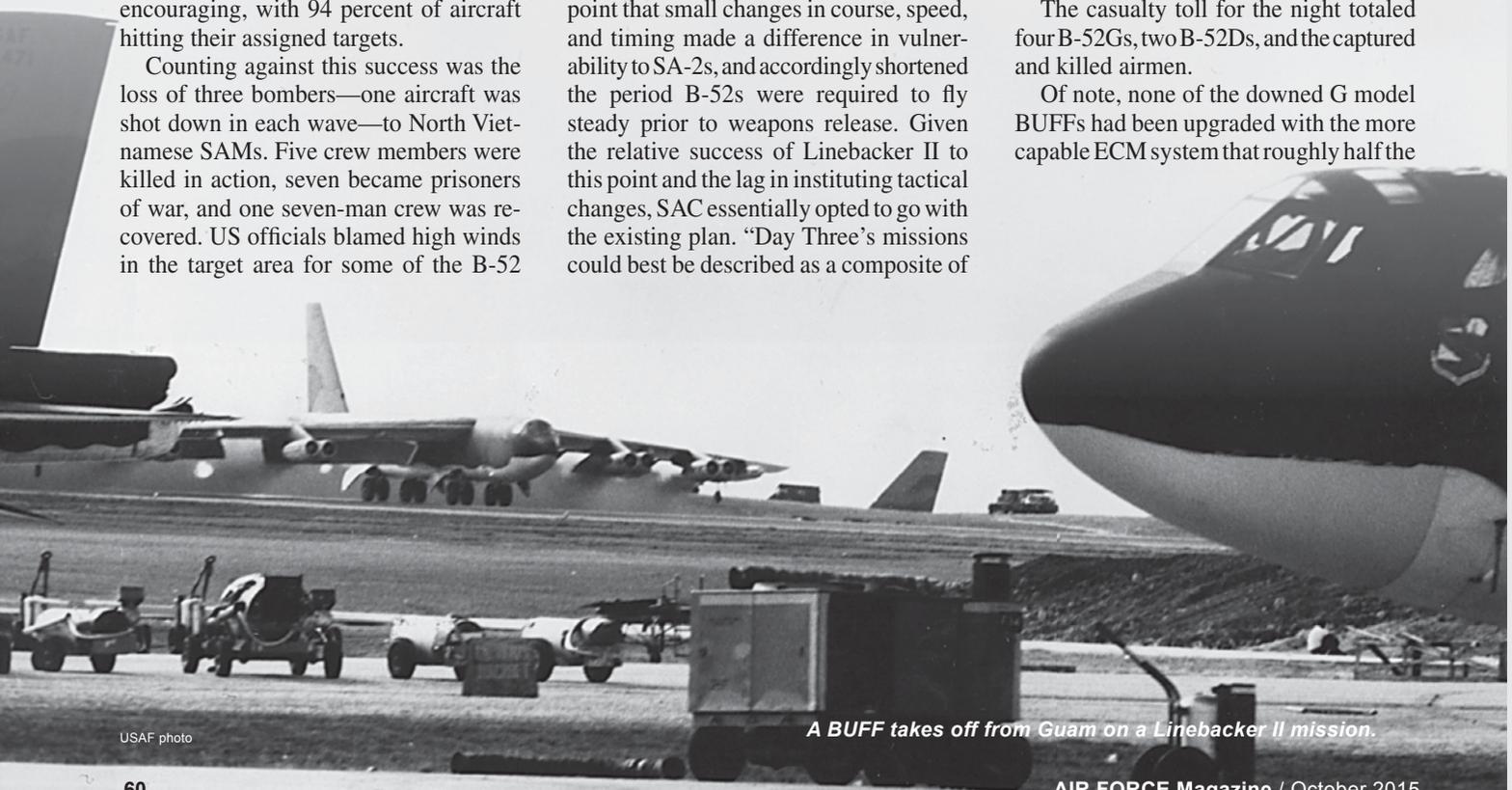
The first wave of Day Three B-52s again approached the Hanoi area from a narrow northwest window. Of the 11 three-ship cells in the wave, nine were directed against a target that had been attacked previously, the Yen Vien railroad yards and surrounding area. SAM activity in the area had been muted the previous night but not on Dec. 20. The first cell, call sign Quilt, lost Quilt 3 to an SA-2 that struck the bomber on its post-target turn. Two cells made it through safely. A second B-52—Brass 2—was hit and heavily damaged making the same turn, and its crew abandoned ship on reaching Thai airspace. Two more cells dropped their bombs without loss. Then two missiles hit Orange 3. It exploded just before bomb release.

The second wave hours later was more fortunate. No aircraft were shot down and none received heavy damage.

Then came wave three, “the second half of the nightmare,” according to McCarthy and Allison. A SAM hit Straw 2, the fifth aircraft of the wave, on the turn. It was abandoned over Laos, and most of its crew was rescued. Only a few minutes later Olive 1 went down, destroyed after bomb release. The majority of its crew became POWs. Tan 3 lost its bombing and navigation radar and struggled to keep up with its cell. Several SAMs hit the airplane as it neared the target. Only the gunner managed to bail out before the bomber exploded.

The casualty toll for the night totaled four B-52Gs, two B-52Ds, and the captured and killed airmen.

Of note, none of the downed G model BUFFs had been upgraded with the more capable ECM system that roughly half the



A BUFF takes off from Guam on a Linebacker II mission.

Gs in the region had received. Four of the losses and the one damaged aircraft were hit in the post-target turn.

By now Nixon had already extended Linebacker II indefinitely. If the B-52s were going to continue “going downtown” and attacking Hanoi, a change of tactics was clearly needed. The bomber losses were weighing on Nixon himself. In his diary, White House Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman recorded the “P’s” anguish over the rate that B-52s were being destroyed.

“The P is obviously very concerned about the reaction on the B-52s,” wrote Haldeman in his diary entry for Dec. 20, 1972.

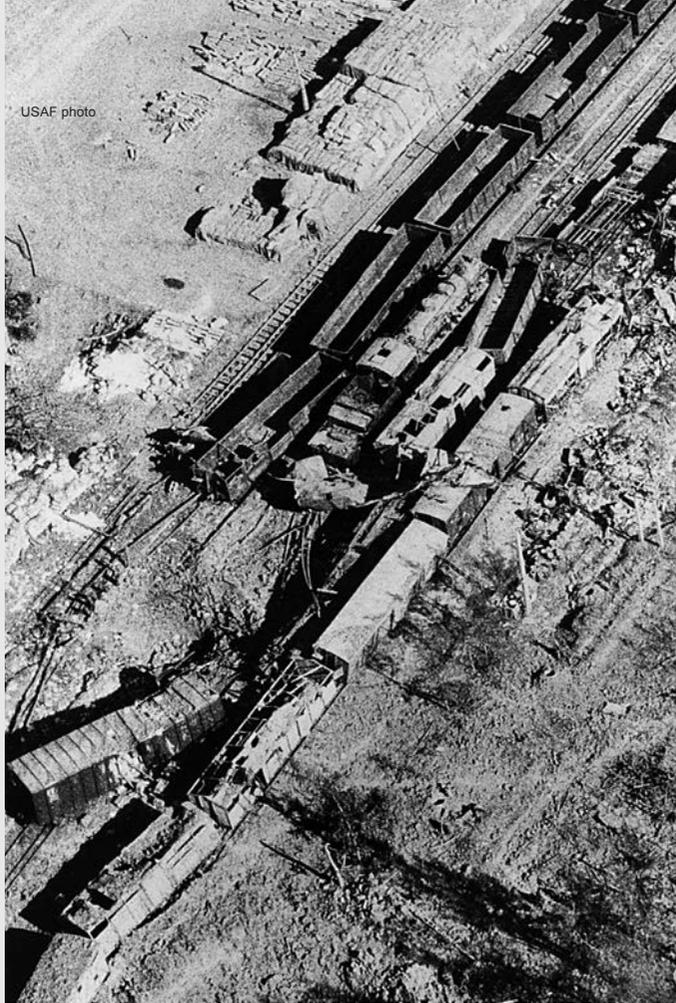
The B-52 commander at U Tapao, Brig. Gen. Glenn R. Sullivan, was unhappy with the casualties his force was incurring and decided to pressure higher headquarters for changes. He polled seven or eight crews to get their ideas on how to improve

tactics. They quickly coalesced around a few general recommendations: Change the inbound routes, change the attack altitudes, get rid of the post-target turn, egress out to the Gulf of Tonkin, and increase the use of chaff. Sullivan sent a message directly to SAC commander Meyer, bypassing his boss, the head of 8th Air Force, Johnson.

Johnson eventually received a copy of the recommendations, passed it to the wing commanders, and sent a note to SAC agreeing with the proposed changes. “If there was a single hero of ... Linebacker II it was General Sullivan, a man who exhibited real moral courage—the willingness to express unpopular views and say what needs to be said,” wrote historian Marshall L. Michel III in his book *The Eleven Days of Christmas*. JCS Chairman Moorer also called SAC to ask what they would do to stem the carnage.

Linebacker II continued, but at a reduced pace, on Dec. 21. Only 30 B-52Ds from U Tapao, older models, all carrying upgraded ECM equipment, conducted strikes. Two more BUFFs were lost—one at bomb release, another after its bombing radar failed and it became separated from its cell.

The Air Force had now lost 11 B-52s in less than a week. US Air Force leaders, including SAC’s Meyer, recognized that this erosion of a central part of the US



USAF photo

A supply train lies in ruins seven miles north of Hanoi after a B-52 strike on Dec. 27, 1972.

unleash it in 15 minutes instead of eight hours.

On the day after Christmas, 120 B-52s hit a variety of targets almost simultaneously. Four waves of 72 bombers each penetrated Hanoi’s airspace from four directions, striking four targets. At the same time, two waves of 15 bombers attacked Haiphong, each approaching from a different point on the compass. Other waves hit rail yards north of Hanoi proper.

The North Vietnamese had used the 36-hour break to stockpile more SAMs. Resistance was intense. McCarthy, aboard Stocker’s aircraft, said that from his vantage point, it appeared the defenders were barraging SA-2s into the air as if they were anti-aircraft shells, trying to create a curtain of metal and high explosives to force the B-52s off course.

“After 26 SAMs, I stopped counting. They were coming up too fast. ... At bombs away, it

looked like we were right in the middle of a fireworks factory that was in the process of blowing up,” he recounted in his monograph.

Two more B-52s went down, but the swarm of bombers overwhelmed the North Vietnamese defense system.

From a political point of view, the mission was a complete success: Before the end of the night on the 26th, Washington received a message from Hanoi condemning the “extermination bombing” and offering to resume peace talks on Jan. 8. Strikes continued for three more days.

Nixon ordered an end to the bombing after Hanoi agreed to a final demand to begin preliminary talks on Jan. 2.

On Jan. 27, 1973, Secretary of State William P. Rogers signed a peace deal with the North Vietnamese. The release of US prisoners of war began on Feb. 12.

“When the history of airpower in Southeast Asia is finally written, the raid flown on 26 December 1972 by the B-52s and their support forces will, I suspect, be judged one of the most successful bombing missions of the war,” wrote McCarthy after Linebacker II’s end. ✪

strategic force could not continue. “On the 22nd, Meyer directed planners to change tactics and create plans for a new kind of raid for the 26th,” wrote Head in *War From Above the Clouds*.

Stocker had been the first Andersen B-52 pilot into the air on Linebacker II’s first day. On Dec. 26, he led Andersen’s force into the air again. It was the day on which the airpower campaign, and perhaps the future of the US in Vietnam, depended. Nixon had ordered a 36-hour bombing respite over the Christmas holiday. He added a guarantee to North Vietnam: He’d halt the bombing over the 20th parallel for good if they agreed to resume peace negotiations.

To try to convince Hanoi this was the wisest course, SAC and 8th Air Force drew up a new plan of action for the day bombing resumed. After a frenzy of cross-communication and discussions and planning and replanning, officials agreed to shake up tactics while compressing the entire operation. They were going to take a package of bombing attacks as intense as that of Linebacker II’s first night—and

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