

The Final End to the Thanh Hóa Bridge

Gator Chewning

The Thanh Hóa bridge was originally built by the French during the colonial era in Vietnam. It was a grey metallic construction, resting on a central concrete pier, and on concrete abutments at each extremity. The bridge was sabotaged by the Viet Minh in 1945, with reconstruction starting in 1957. The rebuilt bridge was completed in 1964 and inaugurated by Ho Chi Minh himself. The final bridge was 540 feet (160 m) long, 56 feet (17 m) wide, and about 50 feet (15 m) above the river.



Figure 1 The Thanh Hóa bridge in 1972.

Allowing the passage of both road and rail traffic, it was a vital link between different regions of North Vietnam, and when the war started, became a strategic passage for supplies and reinforcements sent to the Viet Cong fighting in South Vietnam.

With the beginning of Operation Rolling Thunder (the bombing campaign against targets in North Vietnam), the decision was made in March 1965 to interdict the North Vietnamese rail system, including the Thanh Hóa bridge. The Vietnamese, realizing the importance of the bridge, had set up an impressive air defense network, stationing five air defense regiments in the area.

The first — and largest — strike package to be sent against the bridge was comprised of 79 aircraft. Launched on April 3, 1965, the attack saw all strike aircraft deliver their payload. After 32 Bullpup missiles and 1,200 bombs had decorated the bridge with numerous hits, charring every part, the bridge did not fall, though traffic was stopped for a few hours. The ineffective raid had cost two USAF aircraft shot down.

On the American side, the failure to drop any spans led to a new attack scheduled for the next day. The North Vietnamese Air Force made ground-based AAA sites the first line of defense, with fighters attacking after ground gunners ceased fire. During this engagement, the North Vietnamese MiG-17s scored their first confirmed aerial victories in jet-to-jet combat against supersonic fighters.

With the establishment of the Route Package system, the Thanh Hóa area was allocated to the US Navy. Between 1965 and 1968, until US President Lyndon B. Johnson temporarily called off air raids against North Vietnam, the bridge was a regular objective for navy Alpha strikes. Several times, traffic over the bridge was interrupted, but every time, the North Vietnamese dutifully repaired the damage.

With the communist invasion of South Vietnam in 1972, a new bombing campaign was instituted: Operation Linebacker. On 27 April, twelve USAF Phantoms attacked the Thanh Hóa Bridge. Eight of their number carried laser-guided bombs. The raid was

carried out without a hitch, and when the dust of the explosions had cleared it became apparent that the bridge had been dislodged from its western abutment, dropping one half into the river. To complete its destruction, a second attack was scheduled for the thirteenth of May when fourteen Phantoms were engaged, with LGBs of up to 2,000 pounds aimed at the central pillar supporting the bridge. Once again, the attack was successful, and the "Dragon's Jaw" was rendered completely unusable. The U.S. command, however, was not satisfied, and ordered a final attack on the sixth of October.

The task of eliminating the bridge from the target list was assigned to Carrier Air Wing EIGHT (CVW-8) embarked in USS America (CVA-66). The air wing was comprised of:

- VF -74, flying F-4s Phantoms
- VMFA-333, flying F-4 Phantoms
- VA-82, flying A-7 Corsairs
- VA-86, flying A7 Corsairs
- VA-35, flying A-6As/Cs/KA-6D Intruders
- VAQ 132, flying EA-6Bs (first ever deployment of the EA-6BProwler)
- VAW-124, flying E-2s,
- HS-3, flying SH-3s

The CAG was CDR Jewel, skipper of VA-35 was CDR Milt Beach, XO of VA-35 was CDR Jerry Hesse. The VA-35 flight lead for this strike was assigned to LCDR Bob "Spiro" Ferguson. VA-35 was also assigned the job of flak suppression at the north end of the bridge which was defended by multiple gun pits of various calibers. The first of two flak suppressor aircraft was an A-6C with the non-functional Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) pod removed, a drop tank on station 2, and MK-84 2,000 pound VT-fused general purpose bombs on stations 1,4, and 5. This jet was piloted by LT(JG) Rod Freed and his B/N was LT(JG) Craig (Gator) Chewning. The second flak suppressor aircraft was an A-6A with a centerline drop, and four VT-fused MK-83 general purpose bombs and was crewed by two Lieutenants, John (Munk Man) Yearick and Bill (Robi) Robinson. VT fuses were selected as they detonate the bomb in the air before it reaches the target; the damage mechanism is caused by spreading high speed bomb shrapnel across a wide area where lightly armored vehicles and people are located. This type of damage mechanism is perfect for widely spread out targets, like surface to air missile sites and AAA batteries.

My section was assigned the flak-suppression mission. The strike group approached the coast at about 15,000 feet at about 300 KTS indicated airspeed. My section of aircraft detached from the strike group and accelerated so as to attack the gun pits prior to the arrival of the main strike group and before they could be taken coming under fire.

The critical component of strike group was comprised of four VA-82 A-7s, two armed with 2,000 pound Walleyes and two with 2,000 pound Mk-84 general purpose bombs. Our two-plane flak-suppression section roll-in was accomplished, achieving a dive of about 45 degrees with all seven bombs released at about 6000' AGL in salvo (i.e., multiple bombs being release simultaneously). John Yearick recalled "being dispatched

from the flight, going to 100% descending toward the bridge and thinking that maybe the gunners would ignore us and wait for the main attack. Not so! As we approached the target, all hell broke loose, and the flak was very heavy. I vividly remember rolling in on target and seeing the flak coming over the wings and canopy and wondering why we were not dead. We pressed to drop and pulled off target to get the hell out of Dodge." We recovered from our dive in a right turn to the north, away from the major strike elements. I visually tracked all seven MK-84s until detonation directly over the gun pits at the north end of the bridge. All AAA fire from the north end of the bridge ceased and did not start again. We proceeded east as fast as possible and listened to the rest of the strike. The specifics of what was said on the radio were difficult to track, but it sounded like a Walleye II precision-guided munitions launched by the A-7s scored a direct hit on the center piling on the bridge's west side; the strike broke the span in half. After this, the Thanh Hóa Bridge was considered permanently destroyed and removed from the target list.

During the flight debrief in the Ready Room, I remember a very excited CAG coming in and saying "We got the Thanh Hóa bridge!" He asked LCDR Bob "Spiro" Ferguson what medals he wanted us put in for - Spiro's reply was "two points toward an Air Medal."

Aftermath

873 air sorties were expended against the bridge and it was hit by hundreds of bombs and missiles before finally being destroyed. It became something of a symbol of resistance for the North Vietnamese, and various legends of invincibility were attached to it. For the US planners it became an obsession, and many raids were planned against it despite their unpopularity with the pilots. The North Vietnamese made various claims as to how many planes they shot down, but the US only recognizes the loss of eleven aircraft during attacks against the bridge. However, the concentration of air defense assets also took its toll on passing aircraft and in total an estimated 104 American pilots were shot down over a 75-square-mile (190 km²) area around the bridge during the war.

The bridge was restored in 1973. As of 2016, the bridge still stands.

During the very first strike on the bridge in 1965, the North Vietnamese air force demonstrated the ability to engage modern U.S. fighters and, afterwards, recognized April 3 as Air Force Day. In North Vietnam, MiG-17 flight leader Tran Hanh, who led the North Vietnamese Air Force flight which downed two USAF jets, became a national hero. What in retrospect might seem to be tactical draw after losing all of their defending fighters and three pilots, the action was celebrated as a "glorious victory over US aircraft to ensure the flow of war supplies to the south." For their part, anti-aircraft gunners received the Victory Order and the Military Exploit Order. On the 45th anniversary of the battle in 2010, Vietnam celebrated the downing of 47 US aircraft of the 454 sorties over two days that dropped 350 bombs on and around the bridge, calling it "the symbol of the Vietnamese people's will to defend their country...the Great Spring Victory to liberate the South and reunify the country."

Back in the USA, years later, Munk Man stated “I still wonder why you BN’s were brave enough to ride into battle with us – sitting by our side, feeding us information, navigating, communicating, reading off altitudes in almost vertical dives with the aircraft jolting from flak concussions. You guys were nuts! “