

## Remembering Kelly Patterson on “Black Friday”

**A narrative of Navy Lieutenant Kelly Patterson’s shoot down on 19 May 1967 over the Tinh Hoa Binh (Banana Valley) area of Bac Phan, (North) Vietnam.**

**Introduction:** Dave Cable, friend and squadron-mate of Kelly’s, authors this narrative in an attempt to memorialize the tragic events surrounding his being shot down on 19 May 1967. Although written by Dave, this narrative has had several contributors and editors - Stuart Johnson, Bombardier/Navigator (B/N) and lifelong friend. Stuball and I shared the cockpit and flew 95 missions over North Viet Nam. Together we witnessed and participated in the action on this day ... thereafter to become known to naval aviators of the Vietnam era as “**Black Friday.**” Steve Owen and Nick Carpenter’s (KIA) written Navy accounts were official sources used to jog faded memories and Bob Miles made valuable comments and corrections of facts.

A memorial in the form of an A6A (“Intruder”) windscreen was dedicated to Kelly at Ernie’s Cafe at the Port of Friday Harbor Airport, San Juan Island, Washington - on 19 May 2015. (...and, yes, the Café is named for Ernie Gann, author of the “High and the Mighty.”)

**Background:** “Daylight Alpha Strikes are the bane of Intruder crews’ existence.” Dave Cable 1967

The purpose of this massive naval air attack (“Alpha Strike”), in which two aircraft carriers and their embarked aircraft participated, was to destroy the Van Dien military vehicle and SAM support depot on the outskirts of Hanoi. We recall that this strike was the closest that Naval air forces were allowed to penetrate around Hanoi from the time the air war began in April 1965. For its part, the USS ENTERPRISE strike group (“CLIMAX Strike Flight”) was comprised of six Intruders (A-6s) from VA-35, the main battery of the force (each A-6 was carrying 22 Mk 82 – 500 pound bombs – a total of about 12,000 pounds), approximately fifteen Skyhawks (A-4s) from two different ENTERPRISE squadrons, each carrying (if I recall correctly) less than 4,000 pounds of bombs, and about six Phantoms (F-4s) from the two ENTERPRISE fighter squadrons who were packing air-to-air missiles (AIM 9, Sidewinders and AIM 7 Sparrows) as well as CBU’s (cluster bomb units) for \*\*flak suppression.

Daytime ALPHA Strikes (in our humble opinion) were a holdover from tactics employed during WWII and the Korean air campaigns and a misapplication of the new A6A Intruder – a revolutionary innovation in naval attack aviation at this time. Alpha Strikes were designed to deliver many tons of ordinance on a target on a single strike and supposedly to provide mutual protection for the attacking group of aircraft. (This was prior to the advent of the A-6 and its ability to precisely deliver weapons to a selected target day or night and in any weather condition.)

That said, this day strike was also conditioned by the Rules of Engagement (ROE), which were ordered by Robert McNamara, then Secretary of Defense, and President, Lyndon Johnson. No doubt, they were loath to upset U.S. peace negotiations with the Soviets and the North Vietnamese (“NVM”) with a few misplaced bombs in the NVM’s beautiful Capitol.

### **We had to see the depot/target (visually) to bomb it!**

**Mission:** In the lead of the ENTERPRISE Strike Group was CDR Herman Turk who was also the leader of the flight of Intruders \*(“RAYGUNS”). Herm, and (B/N LTJG Keith Urbanek) were RAYGUN ONE. RAYGUN TWO and flying on Herm’s right wing was \*\*ENS Nick Carpenter with his B/N, ENS “Kilo” Slaasted. RAYGUN THREE: LCDR Red McDaniel and his B/N LT Kelly Patterson, flying on Herm’s left wing. RAYGUN FOUR: LT Steve Owen and LTJG Bruce Borchers (B/N), were flying on Red and Kelly’s left wing. RAYGUN FIVE: LCDR Bob Miles and LTJG Ken Vanlue (B/N), flying Carpenter’s right wing. RAYGUN SIX: LTJG Dave Cable and LTJG Stu Johnson (B/N), flying on Bob’s right wing.

Having successfully launched from ENTERPRISE and executed a rendezvous of about 24 aircraft, the Strike Group was feet dry (over land) proceeding towards the target. As we were climbing through about 12,000 feet, RAYGUN ONE kept the formation airspeed slow (to enable the slower A-4s to keep up) – so slow, that we Intruders were almost falling out of the sky! At such a low airspeed (250 kts) and reduced power, we could hardly maneuver, as we risked stalling and dropping out of the formation! We were sitting ducks!

The Vietnamese and their Fansong Surface to Air (SAM) RADAR’s must have sensed our vulnerability.



SAM lift-off.

Photo by Ken Van Lue

For just at that time (and not surprisingly), the red MISSILE warning light on the top rim of my instrument panel began to flash, and I heard RAYGUN ONE transmit over the radio: “blinking red!” Simultaneously, the sound of another familiar warning in our headphones began to scream – the blood curdling warbling of the missile tone that was alerting us to **missile(s) in the air!**



SAM hitting RAYGUN THREE Photo by Ken Van Lue

Within seconds of the missile alert, I saw an orange and yellow flash and felt the concussion (“**WARUMMP**”) of an exploding SAM as it hit Red and Kelly’s aircraft! They were at our 11:00 o’clock position and a little above us – about 200 feet away. As it exploded, the missile appeared to have sliced right through the Intruder. At the same instant, Stu was yelling at me over our intercom that a SAM had just detonated off our right wing!



SAM exploding - right of RAYGUN SIX Photo by Ken Van Lue  
I pushed forward on the stick to keep from stalling and watched as RAYGUN THREE (Red and Kelly) gradually banked to the left and began to descend. At first, I thought that they were okay and just gathering their senses, but in a few seconds we saw that they were on fire, and observed a stream of grey fuel coming from their starboard wing next to the fuselage.



RAYGUN THREE descending streaming fuel Photo by Ken Van Lue



Red and Kelly in their chutes

Photo by Paul Daley (RIO), VF-96 "SHOWTIME," F-4B

Soon after, we heard Kelly's \*\*\*radio transmission to Red: "Okay, uh, let's get out-a-here," and they ejected. We saw two chutes, and moments later the Intruder exploded in mid air! I said a prayer.



RAYGUN THREE explodes  
"SHOWTIME"

Photo by Paul Daley (RIO), VF-96

In the chaos of the melee, Owen (RAYGUN FOUR) radioed that they had been hit (probably by shrapnel from the missile that hit Kelly and Red. (RAYGUN FOUR) dropped out of what was left of the formation

and began (what had to have been) a nerve-racking flight to the ship. Fortunately, Owen and Borchers returned and trapped safely aboard Enterprise, and after a visual inspection of the aircraft, found no damage to their Intruder.

With two of the “main battery” now gone, Stu and I continued to the target area with Herm (RAYGUN ONE), Nick (RAYGUN TWO) and Bob (RAYGUN FIVE) in an attempt to complete at least some portion of the mission. Upon arrival in the target area we were in the clouds and in Instrument (IFR) conditions and even though Stu had a RADAR lock on the depot/target, we could not visually identify it. Herm announced that the “weather was not suitable,” due to poor visibility; therefore, we were not permitted to release our bombs! We were dumbfounded!

Consequently, having just lost Kelly and Red - and survived a SAM’s near miss, we were on edge, extremely disappointed (and admittedly quite angry) having been ordered to abort the attack. McNamara’s Rules of Engagement had denied us at least some success of the mission, but most of all we had to witness the loss of our two beloved squadron mates. Obeying Herm’s order to cancel the mission, we departed the target area heading south with Bob and Ken (RAYGUN FIVE) in the lead.

Immediately following their attempt to reach the target, Nick and Kilo (RAYGUN TWO) returned overhead the (RAYGUN THREE) crash site to provide the RESCAP (Rescue Combat Air Patrol) with information about Red and Kelly’s position and relay any communication from them to ENTERPRISE Operations. Nick stayed as long as possible, until they ran low on fuel and had to head back to the ship.

As the threat appeared to subside, Stu and I broke away from Bob and each of us (RAYGUN FIVE and SIX) proceeded to alternative targets. As we approached our target (a small bridge over a river on Route One - a few miles north of Vinh), we encountered little opposition, released our bombs on the bridge and returned to the ship without incident – not much vindication for the ultimate sacrifice made by Kelly or for Red (who spent five and a half years in the Hanoi Hilton as a POW).

Having trapped safely aboard ENTERPRISE, we hustled from the flight deck to the VA-35 Ready Room to follow the RESCAP operations minute by minute over the ship’s radio. We heard that radio contact had been made with Red (who had fallen out of a tree and injured his back),

and we learned that Kelly had a broken leg. At first we were optimistic, although very soon, as communications with Kelly seemingly were lost, we began to realize that the chances of their rescue were becoming slimmer and slimmer.

The next day radio contact was lost with Red, and we were pretty sure that he had been captured. Two days later and after receiving word of a USAF rescue operation having dropped a ground to air – “Fulton Recovery System” to Kelly, we at least had some hope of his rescue. Within several hours, the recovery system was reported to have been captured by the NVM. What a let down. Then came the tragic announcement that the USAF rescue was called off! We were stunned! Everyone in the squadron was devastated! For a squadron that had maintained relatively high morale, and until this point, had experienced great success over many months without a loss, we really hit rock bottom, emotionally!

We also came to the realization that if any us were shot down, we were most likely going to become POWs or worse (in Kelly’s case - Missing in Action (MIA)!

**Postscript:** 19 May 1967 was not a good day for the Navy in North Vietnam. In addition to the Enterprise and Kitty Hawk airmen who engaged in the Van Dien strike, the Bon Homme Richard had it’s hands full in an attack on the Hanoi Thermal Power Plant. In all, three carriers lost two aircraft each – a total of six jets - and ten crewmen.

In addition to Red and Kelly’s loss, the Enterprise strike group lost VF-96 (“Showtime”) pilot/CDR Dick Rich (KIA) and RIO/LCDR Bill Stark (POW) as they flew their Phantom ahead of the Intruder and Skyhawk bombers to provide fighter cover and flak suppression in the target area.

Red McDaniel (POW) spent five and one-half years in the Hanoi Hilton as did Bill Stark. Kelly Patterson continues MIA/KIA and he has never been heard from again. His remains have never been found.



Kelly Patterson and Red McDaniel

Photo by Dave Cable

From that day on, 19 May 1967 has been remembered by naval aviators of the Vietnam era as **“Black Friday.”**

Certainly for Kelly Patterson and his family it was and still is.

Article authored by Dave “Dobie” Cable: pilot RAYGUN SIX

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\*RAYGUN was the call sign for the VA-35 A-6 Intruders as was SHOWTIME for VF-96 F-4 Phantoms. “CLIMAX” was the call sign for the USS ENTERPRISE

\*\*Nick Carpenter was shot down on the second ENTERPRISE deployment in the fall of 1967 and is listed as KIA (Killed In Action).

\*\*\*In writing this narrative I had the opportunity to listen to a recording of the actual radio transmissions of the day’s events. Consequently the quotations herein are from the actual recording.