

NIGHT STRIKE ON KEP

Ted Been (former VA-85)

VA-85, a bomber squadron flying the then new A6-A Intruder was on its second combat tour in Air Wing 11 on board the USS Kittyhawk in 1967. On 24 April, 1967 VA-85 participated in an afternoon "ALPHA STRIKE" on Kep Airfield located northwest of Haiphong. The large formation was led by the Executive Officer of VA-85, CDR Jerry Patterson. Kep was well defended by triple protection -- AAA, missiles, and MIGs.

Daylight missions were not the first choice among all weather Intruder crews due to the higher risk of daylight operations compared to the greatly reduced effectiveness of enemy defenses at night. The combination of darkness and low level penetrations are factors in survival. The severity of the daytime risk took its toll when AAA fire brought down an A-6A crewed by pilot LtJG Irv Williams and LTJG Mike Christian, bombardier/navigator (B/N). Structural damage and a wing fire required ejection of the crew, both of whom executed successfully. Notably, LTJG Williams with his emergency radio alerted the strike formation of approaching MIGs during his parachute descent.

As darkness approached, all communications with the two were lost. Nevertheless, plans were promptly initiated to launch a rescue mission during the early morning hours the next day, if radio communications could be reestablished. Of course, the task was assigned to VA-85. Since it would be necessary to be in the vicinity of Kep to confirm radio contact, the suggestion was made, "Why not hammer Kep Airfield in the process with the A-6A unique (at that time) night and all weather bombing system?"

The proposed plan included four A-6As to bomb, two A-6As SAM Suppressers, and four F-4s aircraft for fighter protection. Crews were designated and planning got under way. The bomber flight crews were CDR Ron Hays, pilot, (Squadron Commanding Officer) and myself, Lt Ted Been, B/N, as flight lead. LTJG Roger Brodt (pilot) and LT Erv Stahel (B/N) crewed the second airplane. The second section was led by LCDR Ron Waters (pilot) and his B/N with LT Byron Hodge (pilot) and LT Fred Schrupp (B/N) as #2 in the second section.

The tactics planned for the strike were to have the four strike aircraft stream the target at thirty second intervals, each armed with a bomb load of twenty-eight Snake-Eye configured MK-82 five hundred lb bombs. The main targets were MIG revetments lined up alongside the runways. The 30 second interval was used so each aircraft could attack the target independently without having to worry about a mid-air collision with a wingman. To our knowledge, the Snake-Eye retarding device had not yet been used in North Vietnam. With Snake Eye fins, which open on release to reduce the bomb's forward travel, we could release at under 500 feet and still avoid the fragmentation from the exploding bombs. Normally during night attacks with normal or "slick" bombs, we would penetrate at less than 500 feet and on approaching target pull up to 1500 feet for release to avoid the bomb's frag envelope. It did not take the North Vietnam very long to realize this tactic and they began setting AAA fuses for detonation at that altitude. This change in their defensive tactics became a major factor during the Kep attack.

The over water portion of the flight was about 80 miles. Every few miles we were to broadcast on the emergency radio frequency in the effort to contact our downed squadron mates. The coast-in point was east of Haiphong and ingress followed a tract just south of the Chinese border. The plan was to fly low over the terrain to a point about 30 miles NE of Kep and then fly to the SW down a valley that roughly paralleled the main runway orientation.

The target area had very few radar significant aimpoints, but runways showed up fine on the A-6A radar. Expectations were for the B/N to acquire the runway and then the pilot would swing to the runway orientation and visually drop on the revetments. We were counting on moonlight, but as it turned out it wasn't needed. Retirement was to be along the reciprocal course of the run-in.

The night launch was under EMCON conditions as usual. Number 3 aircraft developed mechanical problems, as happened too often at this stage of A-6A operations, and returned to the carrier. Number 4 closed up the interval and continued as #3. The ingress was successful up to the point where we turned

down the valley about 30 miles to the NE of Kep. Then things started happening. The radar homing and warning gear started incessant beeping and flashing. Obviously this was not going to be a "piece of cake." We had stirred up a hornet's nest during the daylight raid and they were on the alert. The next thing that happened was the one and only time I ever experienced this enemy tactic in over 160 missions. A high-powered search light illuminated the aircraft without searching the sky – suddenly turning night into day at high noon. The skipper with a partial loss of night vision jinked sharply to evade the beam. Aircraft #2 and #3 had the same experience. Unfortunately, aircraft #3, while jinking to evade the beam, flew through the top of a pine tree, collecting branches and pine needles along the way, but with no structural damage, a tribute to the Grumman Iron Works. Number 3 then aborted and returned to the Kitty Hawk.

Off to the right we could see the muzzle flashes of 85 mm heavy AAA and, about 10 seconds after the flashes, we were jolted by exploding projectiles. The experience suggested a severe thunder storm. At about 8 miles I picked up the runways and we swung into position to run down the line of revetments. The AAA was already heavy and ahead we could see them firing a barrage fire around the base. There was enough AAA fire that made moonlight unnecessary. Heavy fire with many tracers were coming up from both sides of the runways to the point that it looked like an open tunnel just over the runway. We flew down that tunnel over the runway releasing our 28 500 lb bombs. To my amazement, I could clearly see the MIG filled revetments. Imagine the anticipation of releasing 28 500-pounders on so many targets! It looked like a Fourth of July celebration. However, our low-level Snake Eye tactic surprised them. Most of the AAA was exploding about 1,000 feet over our heads.

I set up the ordnance switches and turned on the master arm switch. As we swung down the revetments, CDR Hays took over visually and manually released the bombs. The intervalometer was set to drop a 2000 foot string of bombs. As we pulled off to the right of the target, I looked over my right shoulder and saw fires burning and a couple of large secondary explosions. Since Roger and Erv were on their run at this time and I could not see how anyone could possibly have made it through all this mess, I was concerned that one of the explosions was Roger's aircraft. This fear was intensified when Roger failed to call off target. As it turned out, Roger and Erv were rather busy with other things at this time. When they finally made the "Off target" call, we both breathed a sigh of relief and began lowering the level of adrenaline flow.

When Roger and Erv started their bombing run, Roger was still experiencing some loss of night vision. Using visual cues, Erv on the intercom coolly coached Roger back to the correct heading and then gave him the signal to pickle bombs. During the bombing run Roger and Erv's aircraft was severely shot up. They had shrapnel holes running from the cockpit back to the tail. The number 2 weapons pylon was severely damaged. Nevertheless, the aircraft made it back to the ship safely. It took over a month to make repairs.

This mission again demonstrated the advantage of being first on target. The combination of moonlight and gunfire provided enough visibility to identify our targets visually, but good visibility works both ways. After the first attack, the Vietnamese gunners knew where to look and what to do when #2 showed up. Number 1 received no hits while #2 got hosed down.

LTJGs Williams and Christian had already been captured and were enroute to Hanoi at the time Kep was struck the second time. Both served honorably as prisoners of war for almost seven years.