

THE A-6 INTRUDER, AN AIRCRAFT FOR ITS TIME

One of the Korean War's 'lessons learned', was that the Navy needed a long-range strike aircraft. The A-1 Skyraider was a real workhorse, but could not go out in the hours of darkness, or in all-weather conditions, and it was slow. A replacement was desired for the next war.

The Aviation Industry was put to work, and out of the Navy Requirements Documents came the Grumman Aircraft Corporation's A2F-1 / Grumman Model 128. Later re-designated the A-6A Intruder, it was accepted into the Navy Department on April 19, 1960. The A-6A generated six derivatives during its history (the A-6B, A-6C, KA-6D, A-6E, EA-6A, and EA-6B). It certainly demonstrated the tactical value of a versatile all-weather weapons delivery system.

French colonialism beginning in 1877 begat Uncle Ho (Ho Chi Minh). In 1945 Ho declared independence from France, just hours after Japan surrendered in WW-II. Ironically, Ho used the U.S. Declaration of Independence as a model for his Proclamation of the Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. France immediately strapped-on Uncle Ho and his Viet Minh forces. The First Indochina War did not end well for France, with General Giap showing France the door at a place in NW Vietnam called Dien Bien Phu in May of 1954.

The 1954 Geneva Accords then divided Vietnam into the North and the South at the 17th Parallel, later known as the DMZ. An election was scheduled two years hence, but America, fearing this national election would lead to communist rule, ensured that it never took place.

With the words, “hold my beer, and watch this”, the U.S. then inserted itself right smack dab into the middle of this Ill-Fated Play. President Eisenhower had put forth the Domino Theory, that a communist victory in Vietnam would create a domino effect throughout SE Asia, and that it must be prevented at all costs.

President Kennedy was also a believer in the Domino Theory of countries falling to Communism, and he wanted to ensure that Vietnam did not become another Bay of Pigs fiasco. Sadly, JFK was assassinated on Nov. 21, 1963. Three weeks earlier there had been another assassination, in a country half-way around the world called South Vietnam. President Diem and his brother were murdered by factions of the South Vietnamese government. And it had been done with the covert approval of the CIA. Diem had succeeded Emperor Bao Dai. Diem was succeeded by 12 different governments between 1963 and 1965. The quid pro quo was “South Vietnam, if you get rid of Diem, we will continue to support you”. How did that work out, you might ask?

LBJ became President, and by way of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, we were In It, but NOT To Win It. As Secretary of Defense Robert Strange McNamara said to the aircrews aboard USS Oriskany in the summer of 1965, “be prepared to endure unlimited losses in pursuit of limited goals”. With those cheery words we were off to the races.

In 1984 testimony, McNamara and John McNaughton (Asst. SecDef for International Security Affairs) had concluded in December 1965 that the war could not be won militarily, and that Rolling Thunder, as it was being conducted, was not having any effect on North Vietnam. At the same time, he would not permit those fighting the war to do more in order to be more effective. How this 'Whiz Kid' remained in office for another 2 ½ years is beyond belief. He fought against any and all proposals for escalation until his last day in office.

The North Vietnamese on the other hand, were not in a limited war. They were a tough and tenacious foe. The motto of the North Vietnamese soldier on his long trek down the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos was, “born in the north, to die in the south”. We got into a war of attrition with the wrong guy, and then compounded things by fighting it the wrong way.

There were intermittent “bombing halts”, to see if Hanoi was ready to come to the peace table. We were sent on missions, without ordnance, to count the numbers of trucks running south during these halts. We had to fly past the British and Russian ships unloading war materials in Haiphong Harbor; shipping which supplied 2/3 of Hanoi's needs. The other 1/3 came by way of the NE Rail Line out of China. We had to fly past the Russian-trained GCI sites. We had to fly past the North Vietnamese airfields with MIGs parked on them, their pilots trained by Russia & China. We had to fly past the AAA sites mounted on the dikes throughout the country, because the dikes were also on the Do Not Bomb list.

You could not bomb the SAM sites in the early days, unless fired upon. These Rules of Engagement were conducive to getting one killed in the skies over North Vietnam. The weekly Targets List was approved by the President's “Tuesday Cabinet”, largely without military presence in the room. There was a 30-mile forbidden zone around Hanoi, a 10-mile zone around Haiphong, and a 30-mile buffer-zone along the Chinese border. 111 SAMs were once counted on rail cars, but an attack on them was not allowed at the time. The SAMs sites had to be fought one at a time, once you were fired on. 80% of US losses over the North were due to AAA, and by 1967 the North Vietnamese were firing 27,000 tons of ammo per month.

Targets on the JCS / CINCPAC High Priority Top-94 Target List were off-limits to being attacked for two years. By October 1967 the Paul Doumer RR & Highway Bridge in Hanoi was allowed to be struck for the first time. The defenses in an 8-NM radius

around this bridge were: 60- fire-control radars; 455- 37/57mm guns; 300- 85mm guns; and 13- active SAM sites. Seven (7) F-105 Thuds went down over this target on Oct. 6, 1967.

From March 1965 to November 1968 the USAF put 154,000 attack sorties over the North, the Navy/Marines putting up another 152,000 sorties. The Air Force lost 506 aircraft, the Navy 397 and the Marines 19, for a total of 922 aircraft. The Air Force had 745 aircrew shot down; 145 rescued, 255 KIA, 222 captured and 123 MIA. The Navy and Marines had some 454 KIA, MIA and captured in that 44-month time frame. The Air Force F-105 Thuds flying out of Thailand had a saying, “by your 66th mission, you will have been shot down twice and picked up once”. Almost half of the Thuds built were lost over the North.

It is said that North Vietnam was the most heavily defended real estate in the history of warfare. It is about 80% the size of California. In 1968 it had 400 air-defense radars, 8,050 AAA guns, 200 SA-2 Guideline SAM sites, and 150 fighter aircraft. They knew we would be coming back tomorrow, the next day, and the day after that. Documents show that NVN had a 30-45 minute warning time on approximately 80-90% of our Rolling Thunder missions.

The following pages detail the Navy and Marine Corps A-6 losses in the Air Campaign against North Vietnam. One might note that we kept going after the same targets, cruise after cruise, and year after year. When we finally got our wish to go after the “High Value” targets, that had long been on the Restricted / No Bomb List, the loss rates went up accordingly. Be careful what you wish for. VA-75 went first and lost four aircraft. VA-85 went next and lost seven aircraft. VA-65 went third, and it was known that the fate of the A-6 program was in the hands of that squadron. The Powers that Be cut back on using it as a day / VFR iron bomber, and started using it for the night, all-weather mission that it had been designed for. It ultimately came to pass that during the Monsoon seasons, from late Sept to early May (8 months of rain and fog concealing targets), it was primarily the A-6 Intruder carrying the fight to the enemy.

Ponder the bravery of the crews who flew these missions, and the hard-working Maintenance crews and Tech Reps who kept them flying, with their around-the-clock efforts to get the birds in an Up and Up status. Nobody said it was going to be easy, and it wasn't.

It might not have been much, but it was the only war we had. And to quote one of the Legends of the Intruder community, “we were winning when I left, and we made history”. That we did Sir, that we did. And it was an honor to have flown with you all, in that damn war.

