



H-Gram 070: The Easter Offensive—Vietnam 1972

27 April 2022

Overview

This H-gram covers the massive 1972 North Vietnamese “Easter Offensive” into South Vietnam, during which aircraft from six U.S. Navy aircraft carriers, along with naval gunfire support, played a critical role in beating back the attack and preventing the collapse of the South Vietnamese government. It also details the initiation of Operation Pocket Money, the extensive Navy aerial mining campaign to shut down Haiphong and North Vietnamese ports from Soviet and Chinese supply. Finally, it covers the initiation of an extensive bombing campaign of North Vietnam, Operation Linebacker, which had been suspended since the end of Operation Rolling Thunder in 1968. The first day of Linebacker resulted in the largest air-to-air battle of the war, and the first U.S. aces of the war.



A collapsed bridge near Duong Phuong Thuong, North Vietnam. The bridge was bombed by aircraft from USS *Hancock* (CVA-19) on 27 April 1972 (USN 1151526).

50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War

On Good Friday, 30 March 1972, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) launched a major conventional attack across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) into South Vietnam. Within the next two weeks, two more NVA offensive thrusts materialized from Cambodia into South Vietnam. One threatened the capital of Saigon and the other, into the Central Highlands, was intended to cut South Vietnam in two. The NVA offensive would ultimately involve about 140,000 men and 600 tanks and

armored vehicles, along with greatly improved mobile air defense capability such as new shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles (SAMs).

The North Vietnamese planned and prepared for the offensive while they were ostensibly negotiating at the Paris "peace talks," succeeding in surreptitiously transporting extensive quantities of ammunition, fuel and other supply along the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos into Cambodia despite intensive U.S. Air Force and Navy bombing. By this time, virtually all U.S. ground combat capability had been withdrawn from Vietnam, along with most in-country Air Force and Marine Corps aircraft, leaving U.S. carrier aircraft as the primary combat force.

Despite atrocious monsoon weather conditions (which was no coincidence), the two U.S. carriers on Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin, Hancock (CVA-19) and Coral Sea (CVA-43), immediately responded with strikes against the first NVA thrust across the DMZ toward the provincial capital of Quang Tri. Navy surface ships also responded immediately, slowing the North Vietnamese advance down the coast. Within a week, Kitty Hawk (CVA-63) and Constellation (CVA-64) arrived at Yankee Station, and as the weather slowly began to improve, the four carriers inflicted ever-greater casualties on the NVA.

As the gravity of the second and third NVA thrusts became apparent, Hancock and Constellation were shifted to Dixie Station in the South China Sea off South Vietnam to shorten the flight time to the beleaguered provincial capitals of An Loc (65 miles from Saigon) and Kontum (in the Central Highlands). Despite U.S. air attacks, Quang Tri in the north fell, but further NVA advance toward Hue City was slowed and then halted.

In desperate battles around An Loc and Kontum, Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) troops barely hung on to the two cities, which would definitely have fallen without carrier air strikes and B-52 "Arc Light" missions, some flown from Thailand and many all the way from Guam.

As the situation in South Vietnam continued to deteriorate, carrier Midway (CVA-41) arrived in mid-April and Saratoga (CV-60), deploying on 72-hours notice from Norfolk, arrived in mid-May. The force of six carriers was the greatest concentration of carrier air power since World War II, matched only by Desert Storm in 1991.

In early April, Navy SEAL Lieutenant Thomas R. Norris would be awarded the Medal of Honor for multiple harrowing infiltrations behind NVA lines to successfully rescue two downed Air Force airmen. This was part of the largest, most complex, and costly combat search-and-rescue mission of the war (five aircraft would be lost, 16 damaged, 11 men killed, and two captured in the effort that began with the shoot-down of Air Force EB-66 "Bat 21" by an SA-2 SAM moved into South Vietnamese territory).

Responding to the scale and audacity of the NVA offensive, President Nixon quickly authorized a major expansion of bombing in North Vietnam, and unlike Operation Rolling Thunder, gave on-scene commanders wide latitude in targets and tactics. Since the end of Rolling Thunder, U.S. aircraft had only been authorized to conduct pinprick "protective reaction" strikes in the southern panhandle of North Vietnam in response to SAMs or anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) firing on U.S. reconnaissance aircraft and on aircraft going into Laos to bomb the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The

expanded bombing campaign was designated Operation Freedom Trail and allowed bombing into the outskirts of Hanoi and Haiphong. In the first several months, until the Air Force could get more aircraft into Thailand, carrier aircraft conducted 60 percent of the strikes into North Vietnam (as well as a similar number against the NVA in South Vietnam).

Freedom Trail also authorized naval gunfire missions on targets in North Vietnam as far north as the approaches to Haiphong. In response, on 19 April, the North Vietnamese launched a ship-attack mission with specially trained pilots and configured MiG-17 fighters. One MiG-17 achieved near misses with light damage on the Seventh Fleet flagship, USS Oklahoma City (CLG-5). The second MiG scored a direct hit on the after 5-inch gun turret of USS Higbee (DD-806). Fortunately, the turret had been evacuated due to a hang fire, so no one was killed. Damage was serious and excellent damage control saved the ship. Within a couple of months, the destroyed turret would be replaced in Japan and Higbee returned to the gun line. With few exceptions, naval shelling in North Vietnam was restricted to night operations after this attack.



Lieutenant Randall Cunningham and his radar intercept officer, Lieutenant (j.g.) William P. Driscoll. The two men became the first aces of the Vietnam War after downing five enemy MiGs while flying a Phantom II from Constellation (CVA-64), May 1972 (USN 1151748).

In early May, in response to the continued fierce fighting around An Loc and Kontum, and to the massacre of thousands of South Vietnamese refugees south of Quang Tri (the "Road of Horror"), President Nixon authorized an even greater expansion of the target set, with the primary goal of choking off support for the NVA offensive at the source. For the first time in the war, the Navy was authorized to conduct an offensive aerial mining campaign, something that Navy leaders had been advocating in vain since 1965 in order to stop the previously unimpeded massive supply of war material by sea from the Soviet Union and Communist China. The mining operation was designated Operation Pocket Money, and the overall operation designated Operation Linebacker (later known as Linebacker 1).

Following a final at-sea planning conference for Pocket Money, the commander of Seventh Fleet cruisers and destroyers, Rear Admiral Rembrandt Robinson, was killed along with two of his staff when his helicopter crashed in the water off his flagship USS Providence (CLG-6). Robinson was the only Navy flag officer to die in the Vietnam War zone.

On the morning of 9 May, three Marine A-6s and six Navy A-7s off Coral Sea executed the first aerial mining of Haiphong Harbor, timed to the minute to coincide with a prime-time TV address to the nation by President Nixon announcing the mining and expanded bombing campaign. No aircraft were lost. The mines were set to activate after 72 hours to allow "neutral" ships (which were almost all Communist bloc) to exit the harbor. Only one British and four Soviet ships did so. Pocket Money would continue for the duration of the war, with over 11,000 mines laid in North Vietnamese waters.

The first minelaying mission was supported by naval gunfire on North Vietnamese coastal SAM and AAA sites in the approaches to Haiphong by four destroyers. During the mission, guided-missile cruiser USS Chicago (CG-11) downed a North Vietnamese MiG fighter with a long-range Talos surface-to-air missile. The night after the mission, an even larger shore bombardment near Haiphong occurred, led by the newly arrived heavy cruiser USS Newport News (CA-148), along with Oklahoma City, Providence, and three destroyers.

The first strikes of the Linebacker campaign took place on 10 May and included the epic strike on the Hai Duong railroad yard by Constellation/CVW-9 aircraft. The railroad

yard was devastated, but the strike was jumped by two dozen or more MiG fighters. This resulted in the largest air-to-air battle of the war, including some of the most amazing escapes by A-7 and A-6 aircraft. One F-4 was downed by AAA. Six MiGs were shot down during the engagement, during which an F-4 flown by Lieutenant Randall "Duke" Cunningham and radar intercept officer (RIO) Lieutenant (j.g.) William "Irish" Driscoll downed their third, fourth and fifth MiG (making them the first American air aces of the war) before they were shot down by an SA-2 SAM while egressing.

For the rest of May and June 1972, Navy aircraft from six carriers and gunfire from more than two dozen surface combatants pummeled North Vietnamese troops and installations the length of North and South Vietnam, inflicting thousands of NVA casualties in the south and destroying numerous previously "off-limits" targets in the north. The mining operation had immediate effect, as the NVA in South Vietnam began to conserve air defense ammunition and missiles. Although the NVA would hold Quang Tri until September, the offensives at An Loc and Kontum culminated by mid-June and ARVN troops began to push the NVA back, thanks to U.S. air power (and significant ARVN courage).

Linebacker 1 would continue into the fall and Pocket Money until the peace accords were signed in early 1973. The rest of the considerable U.S. Navy action in 1972 will be covered in a future H-gram. The actions of Navy aircraft and surface ships in defeating the NVA offensive arguably represent one of the U.S. Navy's finest hours since World War II. More detail on more amazing actions can be found in attachment H-070-1. My suggestion

would be to take a minute to honor our Vietnam War Navy veterans who performed with such skill and courage (when the rest of the country mostly didn't care) by taking some time to read what they did.



Lieutenant Randall H. Cunningham (right) and radar intercept officer Lieutenant (j.g.) William P. Driscoll sit in the cockpit of an F-4J Phantom II fighter aircraft. The two officers are the first American fliers to qualify as aces solely as the result of Vietnam air action in May 1972 (KN-27357).

H-070-1: The Vietnam War Easter Offensive, Part 1

H-Gram 070, Attachment 1
Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC
April 2022

Despite the appalling result of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) Operation Lam Son 79, the offensive into Laos in February 1971 (see H-Gram 059), the Nixon administration's strategy of "Vietnamization" and drawdown of U.S. forces continued at a precipitous pace. As far as a vocal segment of much of the American population was concerned, the United States could not get out of Vietnam fast enough. As U.S. troop strength in Vietnam dropped from 475,200 at the end of 1969 to 334,600 at the end of 1970 and 156,000 at the end of 1971, U.S. deaths dropped accordingly, from 11,780 to 6,173 to

2,414 in 1971 (the peak was 1968 with 16,899 U.S. deaths). Of the U.S. troops in Vietnam at the end of 1971, only about 10,000 were ground combat troops and the rest were advisors and support, and even that number was on a glide slope to go below 30,000 by mid-1972.

As U.S. forces in Vietnam drew down, debate raged within the upper reaches of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) military and government about what to do next (while their negotiators played rope-a-dope at the Paris Peace Talks). One faction favored a continuation of Chinese-style low-intensity guerilla war in South Vietnam. This faction had been ascendant for years, but the disastrous losses suffered by the Communist Viet Cong in South Vietnam during the failed 1968 Tet Offensive didn't leave much for the North to work with. (Although Tet was viewed as a psychological and political victory for the Communists, it was a severe military defeat.)

Another North Vietnamese faction increasingly advocated that the time would soon be right for a major conventional invasion of the South. In the ARVN Lom Son 719 offensive into Laos (intended to cut the North Vietnamese "Ho Chi Minh Trail" supply route to the South), the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) inflicted a decisive and embarrassing defeat on the U.S.-trained and -equipped ARVN force, throwing them right back out of Laos in a pell-mell retreat (and shooting down over 100 U.S. helicopters while they were at it). Buoyed by this victory, reduction in U.S. forces, anti-war opposition in the United States, and miscalculating that in an election year the Nixon administration would not respond aggressively to an offensive, the North Vietnamese spent most

of 1971 preparing for an offensive. Despite nearly constant U.S. air attacks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the Vietnamese would move tens of thousands of men, hundreds of tanks, and huge stocks of supplies into position to attack by early 1972.

Another major factor in the North Vietnamese decision to commit to a conventional offensive was that although U.S. combat capability in Vietnam was weakening by the day, large quantities of Soviet and Communist Chinese arms and other war material were flowing into North Vietnam, mostly by sea through the port of Haiphong on the Gulf of Tonkin.

Although the mainstay of the Vietnamese People's Air Force's (VPAF) four fighter regiments was still the elderly (but highly maneuverable) MiG-17 Fresco (one 37-millimeter and two 23-millimeter cannons), increasing numbers of newer model MiG-21 Fishbeds with AA-2 Atoll infrared air-to-air missiles were joining the force. North Vietnamese air defenses were being upgraded with more SA-2 Guideline missiles and launchers, newer and better networked radars and ground-control intercept (GCI) capability, as well as more and larger-caliber radar-directed anti-aircraft artillery (AAA). The ground forces were being equipped with hundreds of T-54 tanks, PT-76 light amphibious tanks and armored personnel carriers, and 130-millimeter artillery. Air defense of the ground forces was dramatically upgraded with the introduction of SA-7 Grail shoulder-fired infrared-seeking surface-to-air missiles, as well as the ZSU-57-2 tracked mobile radar-directed AAA guns (these would present a highly lethal threat to helicopters and South Vietnamese A-1 Skyraiders, but posed a severe danger to jets as well).

U.S. Navy leaders, whose advice on how to conduct the war had generally been ignored by U.S. political leaders, were concerned that the unimpeded import of war material into North Vietnam by sea could result in no good. Key Navy leaders at the time included:

- Admiral Thomas Moorer, Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff
- Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, Jr., Chief of Naval Operations
- Admiral John S. McCain, Jr., Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Command (his son a POW in North Vietnam)
- Admiral Bernard A. Clarey, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet
- Vice Admiral William P. Mack, Commander U.S. Seventh Fleet
- Rear Admiral Robert S. Salzer, Commander Naval Forces Vietnam/Chief Naval Advisory Group

By 1972, the entire sizable U.S. Navy “brown water” riverine forces had been turned over to the South Vietnamese navy, which was also taking increasing responsibility for Operation Market Time off the coast, interdicting North Vietnamese attempts to infiltrate supplies to Communists inside South Vietnam by sea. U.S. Navy ships and reconnaissance aircraft still continued this mission, albeit with fewer assets committed. The South Vietnamese navy would actually acquit itself quite well over the last years of the Republic of Vietnam.

Of note (because I was a naval intelligence officer), the Seventh Fleet Detachment Charlie at Tan Son Nhut Air Base near Saigon had been downsized to about eight personnel, but was still charged with coordinating the air campaign with the co-located Seventh Air Force commander. The intelligence officer for the det was frocked Lieutenant Jake Jacoby, future director of naval intelligence and three-star director of the Defense Intelligence Agency.

1972

11 January: First Navy SAM shot at North Vietnamese Aircraft Since 1968

Destroyer Leader USS *Fox* (DLG-33, later CG-33) fired two RIM-2 Terrier surface-to-air missiles at a North Vietnamese MiG-21 Fishbed fighter that was flying near the North Vietnamese airfield at Vinh (near the coast about halfway between the De-Militarized Zone–DMZ–and the Hanoi/Haiphong area). Both missiles missed. This was the first such shot since nuclear guided-missile cruiser USS *Long Beach* (CGN-9) shot down her second North Vietnamese MiG fighter with a RIM-8 Talos surface-to-air missile in June 1968 at a range of 59 miles. (*Long Beach* shot down her first North Vietnamese fighter, a MiG-21, also near Vinh, on 23 May 1968, the first North Vietnamese aircraft downed by shipboard surface-to-air missile.)

18 January: USS Enterprise (CVAN-65) Returns Briefly to Gulf of Tonkin

Nuclear attack carrier *Enterprise* joined attack carrier *Constellation* (CVA-64) on Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin as part of Task Force SEVEN SEVEN (TF 77), after returning from a month-long foray into the Indian Ocean in response to the December 1971

India-Pakistan War (this resulted in the independence of East Pakistan, which became Bangladesh). Having been on deployment since June 1971, *Enterprise* shortly commenced her return transit to her homeport. *Enterprise* was commanded by Captain (later Rear Admiral) Ernest "Gene" Tissot, Jr., who flew 50 combat missions in Korea and 250 in Vietnam, receiving two Silver Stars, a Legion of Merit with Combat "V," and five Distinguished Flying Crosses, among other combat awards.

(The 1971 India-Pakistan War included some of the most intense naval action since World War II. It included a surprise attack on the Pakistani port of Karachi on the night of 4/5 December 1971 by Indian *Osa*-class missile boats that sank a Pakistani destroyer and a minesweeper, and badly damaged another destroyer. In turn, on 9 December, the Pakistani submarine *Hangor* sank the Indian frigate *Khukri*, the first ship sunk by a submarine since World War II. The Pakistani air force then bombed and badly damaged one of their own destroyers. Aircraft from the Indian carrier *Vikrant* attacked numerous targets in East Pakistan and then, Pakistani submarine *Ghazi* sank off the Indian naval base at Vishakhapatnam on the Bay of Bengal due to an explosion of unknown cause.)

19 January: First Navy MiG Kill Since 1970

While escorting an RA-5 Vigilante photo-reconnaissance mission over Quang Lang Airfield south of Hanoi, an F-4J Phantom II of VF-96 off *Constellation* sighted a section of two North Vietnamese MiG-21 fighters. The F-4J, flown by Lieutenant Randall H. "Duke" Cunningham and his radar intercept officer (RIO) Lieutenant (j.g.) William P. "Irish" Driscoll, maneuvered undetected behind the

MiGs. Cunningham declined the recommendation of Driscoll to fire an AIM-7 Sparrow radar-guided missile, opting to close in behind the lead MiG for an AIM-9 Sidewinder infrared-guided missile shot. At the last moment, the MiG pilot detected the incoming Sidewinder and maneuvered to avoid it. Both MiGs made a run for it, and in a winding pursuit, Cunningham blew the tail off a MiG with his second Sidewinder shot. This was the first MiG downed by Navy aircraft since 28 March 1970, and the 36th confirmed MiG and the 10th MiG-21 downed by Navy aircraft during the war. It would also be the first of five kills by the Cunningham/Driscoll duo, which would make them the first U.S. "aces" of the war.

29 January to 5 February: Talos ARM Shots at North Vietnamese Radars

During this period, Navy surface forces executed a plan initiated by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Thomas Moorer to attempt to set up a SAM trap for North Vietnamese MiGs, which continued to harass U.S. reconnaissance missions. The North Vietnamese declined to take the bait. However, on 3 February, guided-missile cruiser USS *Chicago* (CG-11) fired a long-range RIM-8H anti-radiation (ARM) variant Talos SAM at a North Vietnamese radar site near Thanh Hoa, while USS *Oklahoma City* (CLG-5), did the same at a radar site near Vinh. The missile from *Chicago* missed, while *Oklahoma City* hit a radar van. This was credited as the first successful combat surface-to-surface guided missile shot in U.S. Navy history. Although no MiGs were downed, these shots and another three from *Chicago* succeeded in forcing North Vietnamese ground-controlled intercept (GCI) radar sites to stand down for several days.

(*Oklahoma City* was commanded by Captain John J. Tice and was serving as the Seventh Fleet flagship for Vice Admiral William P. Mack. *Chicago* was commanded by Captain—later Rear Admiral—Thomas W. McNamara.)

31 January: The Phony Lull

The comparative lull in fighting in South Vietnam continued throughout January. Navy aircraft only flew eight tactical sorties in South Vietnam and only several protective reaction strikes in North Vietnam.

21 February: Nixon Visits China

President Richard M. Nixon commenced the first visit of a U.S. president to the People's Republic of China (PRC), meeting with Chairman of the Communist Party Mao Tse-tung (now Mao Zedong, under newer transliteration). President Dwight D. Eisenhower had previously visited Nationalist China (Taiwan) in June 1960, the only previous presidential visit to China. The visit had major global geopolitical repercussions, including driving a wedge between North Vietnam's two biggest supporters and suppliers of weapons, China and the Soviet Union. North Vietnam, which was taken by surprise by the visit, was deeply suspicious of Chinese motives, concerned that China was about to sell them out. Relations never really recovered (in 1979 China and Vietnam went to war with each other, both sides claiming victory, but the Vietnamese giving the Chinese a serious bloody nose). Soviet support for North Vietnam continued unabated, almost all of which still came by sea to the North Vietnamese port of Haiphong.

21 February: "Red Crown"

Among the unheralded heroes of the war were U.S. Navy radarmen and air controllers on board U.S. cruisers in the Gulf of Tonkin (call sign "Red Crown"), who provided radar warning and vectors for numerous successful intercepts of North Vietnamese fighters. On the night of 21 February, Radarman First Class Bill Bunch, on guided-missile destroyer leader USS *Sterett* (DLG-31, later CG-31), vectored two U.S. Air Force F-4D Phantom II fighter-bombers toward a North Vietnamese MiG over Laos. Bunch then detected a contact behind the F-4s and realized the North Vietnamese were trying to set up a trap with the first MiG as bait. Warned and then vectored by Bunch, the F-4s turned the tables on the trailing MiG and shot it down with an AIM-7E Sparrow AAM. This was the first MiG kill by Air Force aircraft directed by a Navy controller, and the first successful Air Force night intercept of the war. On 30 March, during her next line period, *Sterett* was to assist in the downing of two MiG fighters.

Over the years, much has been written trying to explain why the Navy had a much better kill ratio versus North Vietnamese aircraft during the war than the Air Force. Significant credit was rightly given to the Navy's institution of Topgun, but the advantage provided by geography (much shorter flight from carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin than from USAF bases in Thailand), as well as a key advantage provided by shipboard air controllers, also made a big difference. A number of Air Force fighters were shot down on bombing missions. In actuality, in an apple-to-apples comparison of pure fighter vs. fighter engagements, the Air Force kill ratio was about the same as the Navy's.

29 February: Three Carriers on Yankee Station (Two On, One Off)

During February, the number of carrier tactical sorties into South Vietnam increased to 733 amongst increasing signs of an imminent major North Vietnamese offensive, erroneously estimated to commence with the Vietnamese Tet Holiday (as had happened in 1968). During the month, three U.S. carriers operated at Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin, maintaining a rotation to keep two on station at all times. *Constellation*, commanded by Captain J. D. "Jake" Ward, had commenced deployment 1 October 1971 with Carrier Air Wing NINE (CVW-9) embarked, while *Coral Sea* (CVA-43), commanded by Captain William H. "Bill" Harris (later a rear admiral), had deployed 12 November 1971 with CVW-15 embarked. *Coral Sea* and *Constellation* were both on their sixth Vietnam combat cruise. The newest arrival, replacing *Enterprise*, was *Hancock* (CVA-19), commanded by Captain Albert J. "Jack" Monger (later a rear admiral), deploying on 7 January 1972 with CVW-21 embarked.

Hancock's air wing was still flying A-4F Skyhawks and F-8J Crusaders, while *Constellation* was flying F-4J Phantom, A-7E Corsair II, and A-6A Intruder aircraft. *Coral Sea's* air wing was configured the same as *Constellation's* except for older model F-4Bs and a Marine Corps A-6 squadron. Each carrier also had a mix of detachments of photo-reconnaissance, airborne early warning, and tanker aircraft, as well as helicopters.

6 March: MiG-17 Shoot-Down

Another air-to-air engagement occurred when an F-4B of VF-51 off *Coral Sea*, flown by Foster "Tooter" Teague and RIO Ralph Howell, was escorting an RA-5 Vigilante photo-reconnaissance mission over Quang Lang Airfield. The radarman on "Red Crown" reported North Vietnamese MiGs. Teague sighted and engaged one with a Sparrow radar-guided missile that appeared to hit, and then had to break off to engage another MiG, firing a Sidewinder too close to arm. The second MiG escaped and destruction of the first could not be confirmed (and was denied by the North Vietnamese after the war). Two F-4Bs of VF-111 off *Coral Sea* attempted to engage the escaping MiGs and the jet flown by Lieutenant Gary L. Weigand and RIO Lieutenant (j.g.) William C. Freckelton, downed one of them (a MiG-17) with a Sidewinder up the tailpipe only 150 feet above the deck.

(PIRAZ is an acronym for "Positive Identification Radar Advisory Zone." The PIRAZ station was first established in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1966. A cruiser ("Red Crown") with a capable anti-air warfare capability would remain on the PIRAZ station with the mission to track enemy aircraft to providing warning to strikes, vectors for fighter intercept, assistance to search-and-rescue efforts, and ensuring no enemy "leakers" mixed in with returning Navy aircraft).

10 March: "Protective Reaction" Strikes

The last major U.S. Army ground combat element, the 101st Airborne Division, departed Vietnam. Increased enemy SAM activity in the "panhandle" of North Vietnam resulted in a significant increase in the number of

"Protective Reaction" bombing missions. Between 5 January and 10 March, U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy aircraft flew 90 such missions in North Vietnam (compared to 108 in all of 1971). The commanding general of the Seventh Air Force, General John D. Lavelle, took a very liberal view of the rules of engagement (ROE) for such strikes, reasoning (correctly) that the North Vietnamese SAM, GCI, and radar sites were all part of a network, and that if any of them fired a missile or demonstrated hostile radar emissions, then any of them could be struck. This resulted in Lavelle being recalled to Washington on 26 March, accused of conducting 28 unauthorized strikes (out of 25,000 sorties), which caused a media uproar, a congressional investigation, and Lavelle having to resign "for health reasons," losing two stars in the process. Many years later, declassified material showed that Lavelle had been authorized by President Nixon to do what he did, and the Air Force has tried, so far unsuccessfully, to have his four stars posthumously restored.

The Navy's approach to the problem of increasing North Vietnamese SAM activity was different than that of the Air Force, but more dangerous. Navy aircraft would deliberately "troll" for SAM launches, and when the North Vietnamese took the bait, would then have justification for a protective reaction strike against the offending site.

16 March: HA(L)-3 Disestablished

The last helicopter gunships of Helicopter Attack Squadron (Light) THREE "Seawolves" retrograded to the United States on 6 March and the squadron was officially disestablished on 16 March. Operating from converted tank landing ship tanks (LSTs), the Seawolves were

one of the most combat-decorated units in U.S. Navy history. Since being formed in April 1967 as an all-volunteer unit to provide critical close air support to U.S. Navy and Army riverine operations, the Seawolves had earned six Presidential Unit Citations and two Meritorious Unit Commendations. In 120,000 combat sorties, Seawolves personnel had been awarded five Navy Crosses, 31 Silver Stars, two Legions of Merit (with Combat "V"), 219 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 101 Bronze Stars, 156 Purple Hearts, and hundreds of lesser combat awards (including 16,000 Air Medals). The cost was 44 Seawolves killed in action.

23 March: Paris Peace Talks Suspended

After months of North Vietnamese intransigence at the Paris Peace Talks (characterized by interminable wrangling over the shape of the table), the U.S. delegation finally got fed up and suspended the talks due to lack of progress. As it turned out, the North Vietnamese were just stalling as they prepared for their major conventional invasion of South Vietnam.

30 March: False Alarm?

With the failure of any North Vietnamese offensive to materialize during the Tet holiday, Navy strike missions in support of South Vietnamese forces decreased to 113 in the month of March. Significant intelligence of an impending offensive was then dismissed by many as a false alarm, with U.S. media and politicians accusing U.S. intelligence of crying wolf. The lull, however, was completely phony, as the North Vietnamese completed massive logistical preparations for an attack despite the U.S. air attacks along the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos. A degree of complacency set in after the non-offensive

and the U.S. ambassador, Ellsworth Bunker, and commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV), General Creighton W. Abrams, chose this time to be out of the country.

At noon on Good Friday, 30 March, 30,000 troops and 100 tanks of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) 308th Division and two independent regiments attacked across the Demilitarized Zone (a line the North Vietnamese had insisted was inviolate through months of negotiations) into South Vietnam's northernmost province, Quang Tri. At the same time, the NVA 304th Division attacked from Laos into the western flank of the ARVN, blowing right through Khe Sanh. The combined attacks took the ARVN 3rd Division by surprise. The massive assault was accompanied by numerous T-54 tanks and lighter PT-76 amphibious tanks, as well as heavy organic air defense capability.

The NVA force quickly overran and destroyed the ARVN fire support bases along the DMZ, leaving South Vietnamese forces in Quang Tri with no organic artillery support. The offensive, dubbed the "Easter Offensive" by U.S. press, was timed to coincide with heavy monsoon rain conditions, severely degrading U.S. and South Vietnamese airstrike capability.

The U.S. Navy immediately responded with naval gunfire support from surface combatants offshore, severely impacting NVA ability to use the coast road, but could do little against NVA movements further inland. Aided by an Air Force OV-10A Bronco with a U.S. Marine observer (that would subsequently be shot down), the first U.S. ships in action were the ships of Task Unit 70.8.9: *Buchanan* (DDG-14), *Joseph Strauss*

(DDG-16), *Waddell* (DDG-24), and *Hamner* (DD-718). The U.S. ships received 58 rounds of shore battery fire, but suffered no damage, as they pounded North Vietnamese troop movements day and night.

At the time of the NVA attack, carriers *Hancock* and *Coral Sea* were on station in the Gulf of Tonkin conducting "Steel Tiger" air strikes across the southern panhandle of North Vietnam into NVA supply lines through Laos. In response to the North Vietnamese attack, President Nixon ordered the execution of Tactical Air Command Operation Plan 100 "Constant Guard" to provide air support to the remaining U.S. advisory and support personnel in South Vietnam, but these strikes were severely hampered in the first week by the monsoon conditions.



USS *Constellation* (CVA-64) flight deck crewmen ready an A-6A Intruder of Attack Squadron 165 (VA-165) for launching, during Vietnam War operations in the South China Sea, 25 April 1972. Photographed by PH3 Ronald F. Reichwein (NH 98613).

1 April: VAL-4 "Black Ponies" Withdrawn from Vietnam

Despite the North Vietnamese offensive, some aspects of the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam were already too far along to halt.

The last U.S. Navy combat force in Vietnam left the country on 1 April. Light Attack

Squadron FOUR (VAL-4), the "Black Ponies," had been established in January 1969 flying OV-10 Bronco twin-engine light bomber/observation aircraft borrowed from the U.S. Marine Corps. The U.S. Navy's only land-based attack squadron commenced operations in Vietnam in March 1969, providing close-air support to U.S. riverine and Mekong Delta operations, as well as supporting Sea, Air, and Land (SEAL) operations, flying 21,000 combat sorties and dropping 11,000 tons of ordnance.

VAL-4 was credited with killing 4,487 enemy combatants and destroying 3,288 structures, 2,119 bunkers, 1,036 sampans, and one steel-hull trawler at a cost of seven aircraft lost, six pilots and one observer killed in action; eight pilots, one observer and one enlisted were wounded in action. VAL-4 was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation, two Navy Unit Commendations, and one Meritorious Unit Commendation. Commander Robert D. Porter was the last commanding officer of this squadron.

2 April: North Vietnamese Army (NVA) Reaches Outskirts of Quang Tri

After all Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) firebases in Quang Tri had been overrun, and following a short halt to regroup, NVA units reached to within 1.5 kilometers of the city of Quang Tri, the provincial capital.

3 April: Constellation and Kitty Hawk Ordered to Gulf of Tonkin

On orders from Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Command, Admiral John S. McCain Jr., the carriers *Constellation* (yanked out of a port call) and *Kitty Hawk* (CVA-63) were ordered to the Gulf of Tonkin. *Kitty Hawk*,

under the command of Captain Owen H. "Obie" Oberg (later Rear Admiral) had deployed from home port on 11 February 1972, with Carrier Air Wing Eleven (CVW-11) embarked.

4 April: Operation Freedom Trail

President Richard Nixon granted authority to U.S. forces to bomb (or shell) targets in North Vietnam up to the 18th parallel (i.e., 60 miles north of the DMZ). This was quickly expanded to the 19th parallel with "special strikes" with specific authorization even further north, designated Operation Freedom Trail. Many of the post-1968 (post-Rolling Thunder) restrictions were gradually lifted. By the end of April, unlimited strikes were authorized as far north as the 20th parallel (just south of Hanoi and Haiphong) with special strikes authorized further north, with approval.

6 April: More Naval Gunfire Support

More U.S. Navy surface ships joined in the gunfire support effort, including striking targets north and south of the DMZ. South of the DMZ, *Waddell* was joined by *Lockwood* (DE-1064), *Lloyd Thomas* (DD-764) and *Everett F. Larson* (DD-830). With the prevailing monsoon conditions, degrading air support, and the loss of the ARVN firebases, gunfire from these ships was the only artillery support the ARVN had, but the weather also made airborne spotting difficult as well. North Vietnamese artillery returned fire. *Waddell* received extensive counter-fire that littered her decks with shrapnel but resulted in no direct hits or serious damage; a surface burst five feet off the starboard bow caused superficial damage to the anti-submarine rocket (ASROC) launcher and AN/SPS-40B radar. During three weeks in April, *Waddell* fired over 7,000 rounds of 5-inch ammunition,

and by 21 April had to go to Da Nang Harbor to be re-gunned by repair ship *Hector* (AR-7). *Waddell's* experience was typical of the ships on the gunline.

U.S. Navy ships north of the DMZ participated in Operation Freedom Trail, shelling North Vietnamese coastal targets as far north as the 20th Parallel (just south of Hanoi/Haiphong). Ships engaged to the north included *Buchanan*, *Hamner*, and *Joseph Strauss* joined by *Richard B. Anderson* (DD-786). *Chicago* (CG-11) joined in and fired a Talos antiradar (ARM) missile at a radar site for a probable kill. Much of this shelling occurred at night, and return fire was very common, occasionally dangerously close. By May, 15-20 surface ships would be on the gunline up and down the coasts of North and South Vietnam. (The peak of shelling occurred in June, with 117,000 5-inch rounds expended that month).

7 April: Four Carriers on Station

Constellation joined *Kitty Hawk*, *Coral Sea* and *Hancock* at Yankee Station in the Gulf of Tonkin. By the end of the first week in April, Navy carrier-based aircraft had flown 680 sorties, despite the atrocious weather, in support of beleaguered ARVN forces, mostly in the vicinity of Quang Tri City, which was almost completely encircled. However events to the south soon resulted in *Constellation* and *Hancock* being sent south to "Dixie Station" off South Vietnam as the rest of the North Vietnamese offensive became apparent.

After several feints along the border of Cambodia and South Vietnam (that began on 2 April), the NVA launched another attack on 5 April, overrunning several border towns. It

quickly became apparent that this was the main effort in the south. The massive three-division attack from Cambodia into Binh Long Province, quickly besieged the provincial capital, An Loc, located only 65 miles northwest of Saigon along a main road. At points during the resulting brutal battle NVA forces approached within 40 miles of the capital, although An Loc continued to hold at great cost.

With the introduction of SA-7 Grail infrared missiles and mobile radar directed anti-aircraft artillery (courtesy of the Soviet Union), South Vietnamese helicopters and A-1 Skyraiders took extensive losses. U.S. Air Force (USAF) airborne forward air controllers (FAC) were overhead 24-hours a day, directing B-52 "Arc Light" raids (eventually about one every 55 minutes) that were coming not just from bases in Thailand, but also all the way from Guam. The B-52 raids had impressive shock value, but tactical aircraft played a key role as well, particularly the carrier-based aircraft off *Constellation*, especially the A-7Es with a gun and very accurate pin-point bombing. NVA armor, initially an advantage, became increasingly a liability in the face of air power, especially as the weather improved later in the month. In one particularly pitched battle near An Loc, nine out of ten NVA tanks were destroyed. Nevertheless, the battle for An Loc would go on for weeks.

8 April: Saratoga Med Cruise, Never Mind

Atlantic Fleet carrier *Saratoga* (CV-60) was preparing for a Mediterranean deployment, when she received orders to deploy to Vietnam instead. Commanded by Captain (later promoted to vice admiral) James R. "Sandy" Sanderson, *Saratoga* deployed on

72-hour notice and would arrive on station in the Gulf of Tonkin on 11 May, with CVW-3 embarked. (With the ongoing retirement of the antisubmarine warfare [ASW] carriers, carrier air wing composition on the attack carriers was changed to incorporate more ASW aircraft, intended to make the carriers more multimission capable.) Although the new S-3 Viking carrier ASW aircraft was not ready yet (first deployed in 1974), *Saratoga* deployed with extra ASW helicopters and was the first to have her designation changed from attack carrier (CVA) to carrier (CV).

10-13 April: Medal of Honor for Lieutenant Thomas R. Norris, U.S. Navy SEAL

During this period, Navy SEAL Lieutenant Thomas R. Norris, U.S. Naval Reserve (USNR), was engaged in the largest, longest and most complex search and rescue operation of the Vietnam War, for which he would be awarded the Medal of Honor, which he received in March 1976. His citation reads as follows:

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving as a SEAL Advisor with the Strategic Technical Directorate Assistance Team, Headquarters, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. During the period 10 to 13 April 1972, Lieutenant Norris completed an unprecedented ground rescue of two downed pilots deep within heavily controlled enemy territory in Quang Tri Province. Lieutenant Norris, on the night of 10 April, led a five-man patrol through 2,000 meters of heavily-controlled enemy territory, located one of the downed pilots at daybreak, and returned to the Forward Operating Base (FOB). On 11 April, after a devastating mortar and rocket attack on the small FOB,

Lieutenant Norris led a three-man team on two unsuccessful rescue attempts for the second pilot. On the afternoon of the 12th, a Forward Air Controller located the pilot and notified Lieutenant Norris. Dressed in fishermen disguises and using a sampan, Lieutenant Norris and one Vietnamese traveled throughout the night and found the injured pilot at dawn. Covering the pilot with bamboo and vegetation, they began the return journey, successfully evading a North Vietnamese patrol. Approaching the FOB, they came under heavy machine gun fire. Lieutenant Norris called in an air strike which provided suppression fire and a smoke screen, allowing the rescue party to reach the FOB. By his outstanding display of decisive leadership, undaunted courage, and selfless dedication in the face of extreme danger, Lieutenant Norris enhanced the finest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

The citation does not even begin to capture what really happened. On 2 April, a flight of two USAF electronic warfare B-66s (EB-66s) were escorting three B-52 bombers when one of the EB-66s (an EB-66C configured for signals intelligence collection), call sign "Bat-21," was shot down by two North Vietnamese SA-2 surface-to-air missiles. This was a surprise as this was the first time that the SA-2 launchers had been moved south of the DMZ. Only one wounded crewman survived, but the pilot and other aircrewmen were killed when the second SA-2 hit the plane before they could get out.

Lieutenant Colonel Iceal Hambleton, USAF (Bat 21 Bravo), who survived the ejection, parachuted right in the middle of 30,000 North Vietnamese troops crossing the DMZ accompanied by the densest concentration of anti-aircraft weapons ever observed south of

the DMZ including the first appearance of the Soviet ZSU-57-2 self-propelled radar-guided dual 57mm guns and SA-7 Grail shoulder-fired infrared-seeking missiles. With his top secret access to Strategic Air Command sensitive information and detailed knowledge of intelligence collection and surface-to-air missile (SAM) countermeasures, his capture would have been an intelligence prize for the Soviet Union.

Over the next days, the search and rescue (SAR) effort for Hambleton resulted in the loss of five additional aircraft, eleven deaths and the capture of two others due to intense North Vietnamese ground anti-aircraft fire, which also seriously damaged 16 other aircraft (one of those captured, Marine Corps 1st Lieutenant Larry F. Potts, reportedly died in a North Vietnamese prison but remains unaccounted for). On 6 April alone, over 80 SAMs were fired at rescue and supporting aircraft; it was estimated that Hambleton and at least two other downed airmen were surrounded by five or six NVA battalions. Finally, on 8 April, the commander of U.S. Forces in Vietnam, General Creighton Abrams, ordered a halt to airborne SAR efforts due to the losses.

U.S. Marine Corps Colonel (and a future commandant of the Marine Corps) Alfred M. Gray recommended a covert ground rescue operation. Lieutenant Norris, who had barely made it through initial SEAL training, was one of only three SEAL officers and nine enlisted remaining in Vietnam, and was awaiting orders to leave the country having concluded his "last" mission in the Mekong Delta. Norris was dispatched from Saigon to participate in a rescue mission led by Lieutenant Colonel Edwin "Andy" Anderson, commander of the Joint Personnel Recovery Center. Anderson's

first effort came under intense NVA fire that wounded him, all South Vietnamese officers and troops, and killed one South Vietnamese commando, leaving only Norris and five South Vietnamese Sea commando frogmen to attempt the mission.

In an unbelievably harrowing solo infiltration (Anderson and the five commandos provide overwatch), Norris succeeded in bringing out First Lieutenant Mark Clark (grandson of the famous World War II general) who had been co-pilot of an North American Rockwell OV-10A Bronco shot down during an earlier attempt to rescue Hambleton (the other pilot was captured). After Clark was exfiltrated, NVA mortar and artillery fire on the outpost killed two of the five remaining commandos.

Norris went back in for Hambleton with the three surviving commandos, two of whom balked while deep in enemy territory, although Norris convinced them that survival depended on the group staying together. After this failed attempt, Norris tried again, going north by sampan disguised as fishermen with the one commando he thought he could trust, Petty Officer Nguyen Van Kiet of the South Vietnamese navy. In yet another harrowing infiltration, Norris found the wounded and severely weakened Hambleton, and with Petty Officer Kiet, hid Hambleton under branches in the boat and made it past NVA patrols, who fired on the boat multiple times. Norris was getting ready to go behind NVA lines yet another time, when that downed pilot was surrounded and killed by NVA troops.

Norris was recommended for the Medal of Honor, but he initially declined to fill out the required paper work. Norris did strongly support Kiet for a Navy Cross. Norris would

be severely wounded in a SEAL mission on 31 October 1972, during which SEAL Engineman Second Class Michael E. Thornton saved Norris's life, and would also be awarded a Medal of Honor (the last of 14 awarded [by date of action] to Navy personnel during the war). Thornton actually received his Medal of Honor first, in October 1973 (Norris spent over three years in the hospital). In addition to the Medal of Honor, Norris was ultimately awarded the Silver Star, two Bronze Stars with Combat "V," Purple Heart, Navy Commendation with Combat "V," Presidential Unit Citation and numerous unit and campaign awards. Petty Officer Kiet was awarded a Navy Cross, the only member of the South Vietnamese navy to be so honored.

The 1988 Hollywood movie *Bat-21* depicts this event, starring Gene Hackman as Hambleton. However, at the time, Norris's actions were still classified, so he is not depicted in the movie. During the Vietnam War, 3,883 personnel were rescued as a result of SAR efforts at a cost of 45 aircraft and 71 lives. The Bat 21 action resulted in numerous lessons learned and significant changes to combat search and rescue equipment, procedures, and doctrine.

12 April: NVA Attack into Central Highlands

The third major thrust of the NVA offensive commenced with a major attack from Cambodia into the central highlands of South Vietnam with the initial primary objective to take the city of Kontum, then reach the coast and cut South Vietnam in two. After initial success, the NVA held up for three weeks, which gave the ARVN time to regroup and hold Kontum, and more time for U.S. air power to pound the NVA. Aircraft from *Hancock*, which had moved south to Dixie

Station, concentrated on hitting NVA forces around Kontum, while *Constellation* aircraft concentrated on An Loc, although aircraft from both carriers attacked targets in both places. *Kitty Hawk* and *Coral Sea* concentrated on the Quang Tri area and targets in North Vietnam proper as part of Operation Freedom Trail.

13 April: B-52 Strikes in North Vietnam

Three *Kitty Hawk* A-6A Intruders of VA-52 struck two North Vietnamese SAM sites as a diversion for a strike by 18 B-52 bombers on Bai Thuong airfield, a forward staging base for MiG fighters located about 60 miles southwest of Hanoi. Twelve SAMs were fired at Navy aircraft but all were avoided. This was the largest and closest strike to Hanoi since the end of Rolling Thunder in 1968. This airfield would be attacked multiple times by bombers and carrier aircraft over the next several months.

14 April: Navy Surface Strikes Move Northward

The Joint Chiefs of Staff authorized the Seventh Fleet forces to strike targets further to the north in North Vietnam. *Joseph Strauss* fired on two SAM sites ashore near Vinh, with destroyers *Higbee* (DD-806) and *Bausell* (DD-845) conducting suppressive fire. Nine destroyers were conducting gunfire missions north of the DMZ by this time under Task Unit 77.1, joined on occasion by the Seventh Fleet flagship, *Oklahoma City*. These ships fired 11,679 rounds at numerous SAM and AAA (antiaircraft artillery) sites, radar installations, coastal artillery positions, bridges, road junctions, and other targets.

16 April: Operation Freedom Porch Bravo

With authorization from the Secretary of Defense on 14 April, U.S. B-52 bombers struck a petroleum storage facility near Haiphong in a one day operation designated Freedom Porch Bravo. *Coral Sea*, *Kitty Hawk*, and *Constellation* aircraft flew 57 sorties in support of the bombing mission. The North Vietnamese fired over 100 SAMs at U.S. aircraft. Concurrently, *Oklahoma City* and four destroyers fired 600 rounds into the Do Son peninsula, just outside the entrance to Haiphong harbor, the first surface gunfire attack that close to Haiphong during the war. Enemy counter-battery fire was ineffective. The strikes near Hanoi and Haiphong caused an outcry in U.S. press and political circles accusing the Nixon administration of “widening the war” instead of ending it.

Meanwhile in the south, with adverse weather still a major factor, U.S. Navy aircraft flew 191 strike sorties in the second week of April, most to the north and west of Quang Tri before the full scope of the offensive thrusts at An Loc and Kon Tum became apparent. With attacks on three fronts, the NVA had committed the equivalent of 15 divisions (about 140,000 men) along with 600 tanks and armored personnel carriers.

Also on 16 April, during the ongoing battle for An Loc, NVA artillery hit an ARVN ammunition dump near the city, blowing up over 8,000 artillery rounds in a massive explosion. However, by this time ARVN forces in An Loc were receiving as many as 1,000 incoming NVA artillery rounds every day and only had one artillery piece left that had not been destroyed, thus forcing almost complete reliance on air strikes to beat back repeated NVA assaults, which were resulting

in thousands of NVA casualties and dozens of destroyed tanks.

19 April: Air Attack on USS *Higbee* and the Battle of Dong Hoi

Oklahoma City (DLG-5), *Sterett* (DLG-31), *Lloyd Thomas* (DD-674), and *Higbee* (DD-806) were firing on coastal targets around Don Hoi, North Vietnam when they were attacked and bombed by two North Vietnamese MiG-17s. At 1700, *Sterett* radar detected three hostile contacts inbound. Two MiG-17s subordinate to the 923rd Fighter Regiment of the Vietnamese People’s Air Force (VPAF), each armed with two 550-pound bombs, commenced an attack on *Oklahoma City* and *Higbee*. Given the short distance from the beach there was almost no time to react. The first MiG-17 overshot *Oklahoma City* on his first pass, circled around and dropped both bombs on a second pass that both missed and did only minor damage to her stern.

The second MiG-17 scored a direct bomb hit on *Higbee*’s after 5-inch gun turret. Luckily, the 12-man gun crew had just evacuated the mount due to a hangfire with the round stuck in the barrel, so no one was killed and only four were wounded, although the turret was destroyed. (Of note, during *Lloyd Thomas*’s 1970 deployment, while firing on coastal targets about 11 September, her forward 5-inch gun turret suffered an in-bore explosion that demolished the turret, killing three crewmen and wounding ten others).

Witnesses to the MiG attack on *Higbee* adamantly stated one of the MiG-17’s was downed by a Terrier missile from *Sterett* and another probably downed. Conversely, Vietnamese accounts seem very detailed and clear that both jets recovered safely, although

one overshot the runway and ended up in an arrester barrier with little damage - without digging up *Sterett's* original after action report I'm not going to solve this discrepancy. (In some accounts this is described as the first air attack on a U.S. ship since World War II. This is incorrect as heavy cruiser *Rochester* (CA-124) was lightly damaged in an attack by two North Korean aircraft off Inchon, South Korea in September 1952. *Liberty* (AGTR-5) was badly damaged in an attack by four Israeli jets in June 1968, and there is significant evidence that *Swift Boat* (PCF-19) was sunk by a North Vietnamese helicopter in June 1968 (see H-grams 054 (*Rochester*), 007 (*Liberty*), and 019 (PCF-19, for more detail).

Some accounts state a North Vietnamese Styx anti-ship missile was fired at the U.S. ships from shore and was shot down, but this is not confirmed in official documentation either; if true this was the first such attack and probably the only one. The U.S. ships did move to a safer distance offshore, at which point *Sterett* detected two high-speed surface contacts shadowing the force on a parallel course, assessed to be North Vietnamese P-6 torpedo boats. As darkness fell, *Sterett* engaged the two suspected torpedo boats with her 5-inch gun and sank them. The radar picture was described to be very confused at the time, and there appears to be no post-war confirmation of any lost North Vietnamese torpedo boats on this date.

North Vietnamese training for an anti-ship mission commenced in 1971, and ten pilots of the 923rd fighter regiment were trained with the assistance of a Cuban advisor. The aircraft had also been specially converted to carry bombs for the mission. The aircraft had deployed from Kep airfield in the north of North Vietnam the previous day, via Vinh

airfield before arriving at Gat airfield, where the specially trained and selected crew took custody of the MiGs

In a separate incident on the same day as the air attack on *Higbee*, *Buchanan* (DDG-14), *George K. MacKenzie* (DD-836), and *Hamner* (DD-718) were shelling bridges near Vinh, North Vietnam, when two motor patrol boats (assessed to be Shanghai-class) were observed approaching from behind an island. *MacKenzie* opened fire on the boats, forcing them to reverse course. A few minutes later, *Buchanan* received incoming fire from a 122mm shore battery. An airstrike above *Buchanan* holed the ship, killing one Sailor and wounded six others.

The U.S. Navy quickly responded to the attacks on the ships with airstrikes on Vinh airfield. Once the heavily camouflaged Khe Gat airfield, where the MiG ship-strikes launched from, was located two days later it was pounded by a 33-carrier plane strike, reportedly destroying one MiG and damaging another on the ground. As a result of the North Vietnamese attacks, the U.S. Navy ceased close-in daylight operations off the coast of North Vietnam, but continued extensive nighttime shelling.

With a shattered turret and impaired steering and propulsion, the damage to *Higbee* was pretty severe, but Commander Ronald R. Zuilkoski and his crew were able to gain control of the flooding. *Higbee* made her way to Subic Bay for initial repairs in the floating dry dock *Competent* (AFDM-6), and then to Japan where her turret was replaced. *Higbee* then returned to the gunline. (Of note, *Higbee* was named after Lenah S. Higbee who became chief nurse at Norfolk Naval Hospital in 1909 and the second

Superintendent of the Nurse Corps in 1911; she was the first living nurse to be awarded the Navy Cross, for her actions during the 1918 Spanish Influenza pandemic - three other nurses had previously been awarded posthumously.)

25 April: Blunting NVA Attacks at An Loc and Kontum

As weather conditions improved, U.S. carrier aircraft increased attacks against NVA forces that had invaded South Vietnam. A-4F Skyhawks from VA-55, VA-164, and VF-211 off *Hancock* pounded NVA positions around Kontum and Pleiku in the Central Highlands. The situation on the ground was so dire that even the F-8J Crusaders of VF-24 and VF-211 were pressed into service in a ground attack role, each carrying a 2,000-pound bomb under each wing, aimed with manual gunsight. The Crusader's four 20mm cannons were put to good use as well. At the same time VA-165 A-6A Intruders and A-7E Corsair II light attack bombers of VA-146 and VA-147 off *Constellation* inflicted severe casualties on NVA forces besieging An Loc and attempting to advance toward Saigon by road.

27 April: F-4B Downed in Air-to-Air Engagement

An F-4B Phantom II of VF-51 off *Coral Sea* flown by Lieutenant Alfred "Al" Molinare and Radar Intercept Officer (RIO) Lieutenant Commander James B. Souder was shot down deep in North Vietnamese territory by an AA-2 Atoll infrared-seeking air-to-air missile from a MiG-21. Both Molinare and Souder survived the ejection and spent the rest of the war in the "Hanoi Hilton."

As *Richard B. Anderson* (DD-786) was shelling positions in North Vietnam, four ocean-going

junks closed to within 8,000 yards and opened fire. *Anderson* returned fire, sinking three of the junks and badly damaging the fourth.

28 April–NVA Noose Tightens on Quang Tri

Despite 13,000 air attacks since the start of the North Vietnamese offensive which had held 40,000 NVA troops and 50 tanks just outside Quang Tri, the defense of the city was becoming untenable, and the NVA was about to close the last avenue of escape.

30 April: Five Carriers on Station

Carrier *Midway* (CVA-41), with CVW-5 embarked, deployed on 10 April 1972 and reached the Gulf of Tonkin on 30 April, bringing the number of U.S. carriers on station to five. *Midway* was commanded by Captain William L. Harris, Jr. (later promoted to rear admiral).

30 April: Better Weather (and More Carriers) Equals More Airstrikes

By the end of April, Navy carrier-based aircraft had flown 4,833 strike sorties over South Vietnam and 1,250 in North Vietnam. The Navy average per day had increased from 240 to over 300 for a monthly average of 270 per day. The U.S. Marine Corps contributed 537 strike sorties as Marine aircraft returned to Da Nang in South Vietnam.

1 May: Fall of Quang Tri City

Although U.S. airpower inflicted many NVA casualties around Quang Tri and had complicated NVA logistics by destroying every bridge between the DMZ and My Chanh River, the remaining ARVN forces commenced a withdrawal to the south toward

Hue City. The withdrawal would turn into chaos as 20,000 civilian refugees were mixed in with retreating military on the only road out. NVA on both sides of the road fired indiscriminately into the crowds resulting in what would be known as "the Road of Horror." The South Vietnamese government reported that approximately 5,000 civilians were killed (the NVA said "only" 2,000). Supported by strikes from Navy F-4s, an Air Force task force of "Jolly Green Giant" helicopters (HH-3E) extracted 132 personnel including Vietnamese and 80 U.S. advisors, just before the fall of Quang Tri. The loss of a provincial capital was a major blow to the prestige and credibility of the South Vietnamese government.

6 May: MiG-17 Fresco and Two MiG-21 Fishbeds Downed

As U.S. airstrikes into North Vietnam intensified and approached closer to Hanoi and Haiphong than ever before, North Vietnamese air and SAM-AAA opposition intensified as well. At 1410, an F-4B of VF-51 off *Coral Sea* flown by Lieutenant Commander Jerry "Devil" Houston and RIO Lieutenant Kevin Moore shot down a MiG-17 over Bai Thuong airfield with an Air Intercept Missile (AIM)-9 Sidewinder.

Later in the day at 1825, two F-4J Phantom IIs of VF-114 off *Kitty Hawk* engaged two MiG-21 fighters while covering another strike on Bai Thuong airfield. One F-4J was flown by Lieutenant Commander Kenneth W. "Viper" Pettigrew and RIO Lieutenant (j.g.) Michael J. McCabe. McCabe detected an incoming radar contact at 25 miles. When Pettigrew gained visual, the contact turned out to be a tight-box formation of four MiG-21s. Pettigrew's wingman was Lieutenant Robert

G. Hughes and RIO Lieutenant (j.g.) Adolph J. Cruz. Hughes had the best position on the MiGs so Pettigrew directed Hughes to engage first. Hughes turned into the MiGs. His first Sidewinder shot was out-of-envelope, yet still guided, and knocked a MiG out of formation, which then hit the ground. Hughes then fired two more Sidewinders at the lead MiG, but he missed his target. By this time, Pettigrew was alongside and both wound up firing a Sidewinder at the same MiG. Hugh's last sidewinder took a chunk off the MiG's tail while Pettigrew's sidewinder flew up the MiG's tailpipe and blew the jet apart. Hughes and Cruz were given credit for the first MiG-21. Pettigrew and McCabe received credit for the second.

8 May: Second MiG Kill for Cunningham and Driscoll

Two F-4Js of VF-96 off *Constellation* were conducting a sweep ahead of a carrier strike package heading for a truck staging area near Son Tay. Lieutenant Randall "Duke" Cunningham and RIO Lieutenant (j.g.) William "Irish" Driscoll were in the lead with wing aircraft piloted by Brian Grant. As the F-4Js neared the target, the "Red Crown" cruiser in the Gulf of Tonkin warned of a flight of MiGs coming from the direction of Yen Bai airfield, but then the cruiser lost radar contact. After making a couple turns trying to sight the MiGs in the haze, Red Crown regained radar contact and reported the MiGs closing from behind at 20 miles. The next transmission from Red Crown was garbled.

All of a sudden, a MiG-17 dove out of the clouds and hit Grant's jet with gunfire. When Grant increased speed and began to pull away, the MiG fired an Atoll. Warned by Cunningham, Grant narrowly avoided the

missile with a high-G turn, but the MiG was still on Grant's tail. Grant sighted two more MiGs coming head on, but Cunningham remained focused on taking the MiG off Grant's tail. Cunningham's first Sidewinder was a miss but it caused the MiG to break off and attempt to flee whereupon Cunningham hit the MiG-17 with a second Sidewinder causing the MiG to crash. By this time the other two MiGs were on Cunningham's six-o'clock, but a series of high-G diving turns shook them off and the MiGs bugged out. This was the second kill for the duo of Cunningham and Driscoll.



Rear Admiral Rembrandt C. Robinson, USN, circa 1970–72. Rear Admiral Robinson lost his life in a helicopter crash on 8 May 1972, while serving as Commander, Cruiser Destroyer Flotilla 11, and Commander, Cruiser Destroyer Group Vietnam, Seventh Fleet (NH 85525).

8 May: President Richard Nixon Orders Mining and Bombing Escalation

With the fall of Quang Tri and the increasingly desperate situation around An Loc and Kontum, as well as his being incensed by the duplicity of the North Vietnamese at the now-suspended Paris "peace talks," President Richard Nixon ordered a major escalation of the bombing effort in North Vietnam. Nixon stated, "The bastards have never been bombed like they're going to be bombed this time." Nixon also ordered the mining of North Vietnamese ports and rivers, something Navy leaders had been strongly advocating for years to cut off the unimpeded supply of Soviet war material.

In anticipation of Nixon's decision, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Admiral Thomas Moorer on 4 May ordered Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral Elmo Zumwalt to ready the long-standing mining plan for execution. The mining effort would be code-named Operation Pocket Money, and the combined bombing and mining effort would be termed Operation Linebacker (replacing Operation Freedom Trail). Linebacker would be a sustained bombing campaign against military installations, storage facilities, and transportation networks (many targets which had previously been off-limits) with the intent to choke off supplies to the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) offensive in the south, as well as to inflict enough painful damage to force the North Vietnamese to resume negotiations in good faith.

President Nixon's decision was quite bold in that it was an election year and antiwar sentiment in the United States was reaching an all-time high. Such action also risked

disrupting the planned summit between Nixon and General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party Leonid Brezhnev scheduled for 22-30 May in Moscow (it went ahead as planned and included the first Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I), which resulted in the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, as well as the signing of the U.S.-Soviet Incidents at Sea Agreement, and led to a period of lessened tensions known as *détente*). Nevertheless, the South Vietnamese Army was on the verge of collapse, putting at risk the entire Vietnamization program. Morale in South Vietnam was at an all-time low as many thousands of refugees fled the NVA advance. The situation was so dire that Nixon arguably had no choice but to take risks to alter the downward spiral.

Navy leaders had advocated for mining North Vietnamese ports, especially Haiphong, since before the war. Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp (Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet [CINCPACFLT] 1963-64 and Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command [CINCPAC] 1964-68) had pushed tirelessly and after retirement had even gone public. After World War II, Admiral Moorer had been involved in a study of the effectiveness of Allied mining of Japanese-occupied Haiphong in 1943-44 (it had been very effective) and therefore had a keen personal interest and advocacy.

Nevertheless, the Navy's recommendation to mine Haiphong and other North Vietnamese ports was repeatedly refused by the Johnson administration and early Nixon administration out of fear it would lead to conflict with Communist China or the Soviet Union or both. In the meantime, Soviet ships brought in the tanks, surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), fighter aircraft, and tons of other military equipment that would kill many American

service members. Although much Chinese military aid came overland across the border (through areas that had been off-limits to bombing), significant amounts came by sea into Haiphong as well. It was the apparent downturn in relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Soviet Union in 1969-70 (previously viewed as a monolithic Communist bloc) that led some senior civilian leaders in the U.S. government to believe that more aggressive action could be taken without necessarily resulting in widening the war.

The execution of Pocket Money was timed to coincide with a 2100 Eastern Standard Time prime time television speech by President Nixon announcing the mining and expanded bombing campaign, which necessitated a daylight operation.

8 May: Death of Rear Admiral Rembrandt Robinson

In preparation for the execution of Operation Pocket Money, Rear Admiral Rembrandt C. Robinson (commander, Cruiser-Destroyer Flotilla 11 and commander, Seventh Fleet Cruisers and Destroyers) and three of his staff flew by helicopter from his flagship *Providence* (CLG-6) to *Coral Sea* (CVA-43) to confer with Rear Admiral Damon Cooper, commander, Attack Carrier Striking Force, Seventh Fleet (Task Force 77 [TF-77]) in the Gulf of Tonkin. Robinson was a rising superstar, having been selected for early promotion three times. He had served in combat at Okinawa aboard *LST-485*, and again during the Korean War aboard *English* (DD-696), where he was awarded his first Bronze Star with Combat "V." He received his second Bronze Star with Combat "V" while in command of Destroyer Squadron 31

(DESRON 31) for Vietnam War operations. He had previously served as a liaison between Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Thomas Moorer and the president's Assistant for National Security Affairs Henry Kissinger. During that tour he was extensively involved in updating plans for mining Haiphong harbor that had first been developed in 1965.

Upon conclusion of the coordination conference, Robinson's helicopter was making a final approach on *Providence* when it suffered an apparent power failure, toppled over the side into the water, went inverted, and sank. The crew and Robinson's aviation officer survived, but Chief of Staff Captain Edmund Taylor, Jr., and Operations Officer Commander John M. Leaver, Jr., were never found. Robinson's body was recovered. His cremated remains were subsequently buried at sea from destroyer *Orleck* (DD-886). Robinson was the only Navy flag officer to die in the Vietnam War combat zone.

9 May: Operation Pocket Money Execution

Carrier Air Wing 15 (CVW-15) on *Coral Sea* was designated to execute the first Pocket Money strike. The commander of CVW-15, Commander Roger E. "Blinky" Sheets, would lead the strike. (Sheets had taken command when the previous commander, air group [CAG], Commander Thomas E. Dunlop, was downed by a SAM and killed on 6 April 1972.) Air Wing Mine Warfare Officer Lieutenant Commander Harvey Eikel played a key role in planning. The mine laying mission would be conducted by three A-6A Intruders of Marine All Weather Fighter Attack Squadron 224 (VMA[AW]-224), each with four 1,000-pound Mark 52-2 magnetic bottom mines, and six A-7E Corsair IIs of VA-22 and VA-94, each with four Mark 36 Destructor (DST) acoustic

bottom mines. (The Mark 36 DST was a Mark 82 500-pound general-purpose bomb converted to a mine with a Mark 75 modification kit, which included a magnetic-influence firing mechanism. Some accounts state that all nine aircraft carried Mark 52-2 mines—happy to hear from anyone who knows for sure.)

During planning for the mine laying operation it was determined that the weight of the Mark 52-2 mines would both slow the A-6s considerably and preclude the use of auxiliary fuel tanks. There weren't enough nose caps (only six) for all the mines, which would further increase drag. As a result *Coral Sea* would need to approach to within 100 nautical miles (NM) of the coast for launch.

To protect *Coral Sea*, *Chicago* (CG-11), *Sterett* (DLG-31), and *Long Beach* (CGN-9) took station within 40 miles of Haiphong between *Coral Sea's* launch position and the coast. At the planning conference the night before, it was agreed that the cruisers would shoot down anything flying higher than 500 feet. A separate surface action group would shell North Vietnamese anti-aircraft sites on the Do Son peninsula 6 NM west of the entrance to Haiphong harbor. This bombardment force consisted of *Berkeley* (DDG-15), *Myles C. Fox* (DD-829), *Richard S. Edwards* (DD-950), and *Buchanan* (DDG-14).

An EC-121M Constellation (electronic intelligence collection variant) launched in the early morning from Da Nang Air Base to support the mine laying mission. *Kitty Hawk* launched 17 strike sorties against a railroad siding at Nam Dinh as a diversion, although weather at the target necessitated diversion to alternate targets at Thanh at 0840 and Phu Quy at 0845. The surface action group, led by

Captain Robert Pace in place of Rear Admiral Robinson, commenced shelling the Do Son peninsula.

At 0840 on 9 May, an EKA-3B Skywarrior (tanker/electronic countermeasures) of Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron 135 (VAQ-135) Detachment 3 and the three A-6As and six A-7Es launched from *Coral Sea*. The EKA-3B orbited in support while the rest of the aircraft headed for Haiphong, led by Commander Sheets.

At 0849, *Chicago* radar detected three MiGs launching from Phuc Yen airfield. *Chicago* fired two RIM-8 Talos long-range surface-to-air missiles, downing one MiG at a range of 48 miles and causing the others to turn away. (A different account says *Chicago* detected two MiGs in a holding pattern and shot one down with two Talos missiles.) *Chicago* was on her fifth Vietnam War deployment and had actually commenced a return transit home to San Diego when she was recalled to the Gulf of Tonkin on 3 April due to the North Vietnamese offensive. Commanded by Captain Thomas P. McNamara, *Chicago* returned to positive identification radar advisory zone (PIRAZ) duty, receiving the call sign of "Red Crown." Between her return to the Gulf of Tonkin and late May, air intercept controllers on *Chicago* would be credited with assisting in the shoot down of 14 MiGs by U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force fighters.

Bombardier and navigator Captain William R. Carr, USMC, in the lead A-6 with Commander Sheets (if you're the CAG you get to fly Marine aircraft too) had the critical role of determining the correct azimuth and time of release. At 0859, the first of 12 Mark 52-2 mines went into the inner channel of Haiphong harbor, which was only 1,000 feet

wide. At the same time, the six A-7E Corsair II light attack aircraft, led by Commander Leonard E. Giuliani, laid 24 Mark 36 DST mines in the outer channel. All mines were in by 0901. The mines had all been set to "positive arm" (with 72 hour delay). Only 3 of the 36 mines would fail to arm. One A-7E failed to drop on the first pass, circled around, and dropped the mine on a second pass. Although heavy antiaircraft fire and heavy losses were anticipated, the raid appeared to have caught the North Vietnamese by surprise and no aircraft were lost. Despite shelling from U.S. Navy ships, the Do Son SAM site got off three missiles, but none hit.

Upon radio transmission from Commander Sheets that the mines were in the water, Rear Admiral Howard Greer (commander, Carrier Division 3) sent a flash message to the White House. President Nixon was already speaking live to the nation on television as the mines were being laid, and he wound up initially speaking very slowly until he received assurance the aircraft were off target. In his speech, Nixon announced that ships in Haiphong had three days to get out.

All mines were set for a 72-hour arming delay to allow for merchant ships in Haiphong to exit. There were 37 neutral vessels in Haiphong ("neutral" technically included one East German Communist bloc ship and 16 Soviet, five Chinese, three Polish, and two Cuban ships), but only one British and four Soviet ships took advantage of the delay and got out; the rest were trapped for over 300 days until the "peace accords" were finally signed in early 1973. (The United States used an offer to clear the mines as an inducement for the North Vietnamese to reach an agreement.) The mines were actually set to

deactivate in 180 days, and therefore had to be reseeded as the negotiations dragged on.

The initial mine laying strike was only the first of many. The same day, A-6s from three carriers would sow mines at six other lesser ports both north and south of Haiphong, and some of these strikes encountered heavy anti-aircraft fire, although only one aircraft would be lost on any mining mission and that was later in 1972. Pocket Money would continue until the last mission on 16 January 1973 by an A-6 Intruder of VA-35 off *America* (CVA-66). During the course of the campaign, 108 Mark 52-2 and at least 11,603 Mark 36 Destructor (DST) mines would be sown in 1,149 sorties from 10 aircraft carriers in Haiphong in virtually every port, bay, estuary, navigable river, and ferry crossing in North Vietnam. The mining halted all exports from North Vietnam and dramatically reduced imports of all kinds, particularly weapons. The North Vietnamese tried to compensate by bringing in more material via rail from China, but with many of the previous bombing restrictions lifted, this created additional lucrative targets for U.S. aircraft. North Vietnamese coastal shipping was also drastically reduced.

Of interest, on 4 August 1972, dozens of mines spontaneously exploded. It was assessed this was caused by a coronal mass ejection on the sun that triggered a geomagnetic storm, and resulting magnetic radiation triggered the mines. This theory was confirmed in 2017 by scientific researchers.

Commander Sheets would retire as a captain in 1982 with 285 combat missions in Korea and Vietnam, with two Legion of Merits with Combat "V," nine Distinguished Flying Crosses, three Bronze Stars, and other

combat awards. Sheets ended his after action report thus: "The overall reaction of the aircrews involved in the mining was one of pride, elation, and the gnawing feeling we had somehow missed our TOT [time on target] by seven years."

10 May: Operation Custom Tailor

A cruiser-destroyer force conducted another raid on Haiphong to enable the ongoing aerial mine effort by suppressing anti-aircraft batteries ashore. Task Unit 77.1.2 (TU-77.1.2) was led by heavy cruiser *Newport News* (CA-148) and guided-missile cruisers *Providence* (CLG-6), and *Oklahoma City* (CLG-5), along with guided-missile destroyer *Buchanan* (DDG-14) and destroyers *Hanson* (DD-832) and *Myles C. Fox* (DD-829). *Newport News* had just arrived in the Gulf of Tonkin after departing Norfolk on 13 April.

At 0200 on 10 May, the officer in tactical command (OTC), Captain Walter F. Zartman, commanding officer (CO) of *Newport News*, ordered the formation into line abreast with *Hanson* on the left, then *Providence*, *Newport News*, *Oklahoma City*, and *Buchanan*. *Myles C. Fox* was ordered to take station to the northeast to block any North Vietnamese patrol boat activity. At 0345, the five cruisers and destroyers in line abreast turned into a line ahead, their formation parallel to Cat Ba Island, on which the airfield and other military installations were the primary target. At 0347, the U.S. ships opened fire. *Newport News* fired 77 8-inch rounds and 40 5-inch rounds into Cat Ba as the two CLGs and the DDG fired hundreds of 6-inch and 5-inch rounds.

Hanson concentrated on suppressing initially vigorous shore battery fire from the Do Son peninsula, so the other ships could

concentrate on Cat Ba. At one point *Hanson* actually entered the outer Haiphong harbor (steering clear of mined areas), making her the last U.S. ship to do so during the war. Commanded by Commander Ian McEwan Watson, *Hanson* was awarded a Meritorious Unit Commendation for her actions.

When enemy shore batteries opened up on TU-77.1.2, they proved to be inaccurate in the darkness. After 30 minutes, the U.S. force departed, and extensive fire from enemy 152-millimeter (6-inch) artillery rained down inaccurately. None of the U.S. ships were hit during the operation.

In the first two days after the commencement of Operation Linebacker, U.S. Navy warships shelled multiple targets along the entire length of Vietnam, in North Vietnam at night and in the South whenever needed. The arrival of *Newport News* with her 8-inch guns proved particularly useful. By 19 May, U.S. surface ships fired 41,689 rounds into North Vietnam and 83,529 against NVA targets in South Vietnam. Since the beginning of the Easter Offensive, about 60 U.S. surface ships operated along the coasts, usually in groups of three destroyers or a cruiser and two destroyers. Those in the North made an average of three strikes per night at supply line choke points and other military targets.

10 May: Execution of Operation Linebacker

Operation Linebacker (later known as Linebacker I) had four major objectives:

1. Isolate North Vietnam from overland supply from China by destroying bridges and rolling stock between Hanoi and a buffer zone near the Chinese border.

2. Destroy marshaling yards and primary storage areas, particularly petroleum.
3. Destroy transshipment points.
4. Eliminate or severely degrade the air defense system.

By choking off the source of supplies, the overarching objective was to starve the North Vietnamese forces in the South of material and munitions needed to continue the offensive. A big difference between the Johnson administration during Rolling Thunder and the Nixon administration during Freedom Trail and Linebacker was that the Nixon administration left operational planning to on-scene commanders and greatly loosened target restrictions—in other words, far less micromanagement from Washington.

Operation Linebacker commenced on 10 May, with 414 sorties (294 by the U.S. Navy and 120 by the U.S. Air Force) resulting in the largest air-to-air battle of the entire war. Multiple targets were struck, including the Paul Doumer (Long Bien) Bridge, Yen Vien railroad switching yards, Hai Duong railroad switching yards, and Haiphong petroleum storage yards. Although the approximately 200 MiG interceptors of the Vietnam People's Air Force (VPAF) preferred to avoid direct engagements with U.S. fighters (preferring instead to ambush isolated attack aircraft), attacks on targets so close to Hanoi and Haiphong forced them to rise to the occasion (sorry). Eleven North Vietnamese MiGs (four MiG-21s and seven MiG-17s) were shot down in aerial combat, eight by U.S. Navy fighters. Two U.S. Air Force F-4s were lost in air-to-air combat. The North Vietnamese fired over 100 SAMs, downing two U.S. Navy F-4s.

The first target was the massive cantilever Paul Doumer Bridge on the northern outskirts of Hanoi, at the time, the only bridge over the Red River connecting Hanoi and Haiphong. It had been bombed in 1967 and one span had dropped but been repaired. It was damaged by a joint Navy-Air Force strike on 10 May. It would have to be attacked again in August 1972 using Walleye television-guided bombs. Another bridge attacked was at Hai Duong, over a tributary of the Red River about halfway between Hanoi and Haiphong. There is a very famous photograph of a VA-195 "Dambusters" A-7E off *Kitty Hawk* flown by Mike A. "Baby" Ruth coming off the target with bombs bursting on the bridge below.

Another target in the morning was the Haiphong petroleum products storage area, struck by Carrier Air Wing 9 (CVW-9) aircraft off *Constellation* (CVA-64). An F-4J Phantom II of VF-92 flown by Lieutenant Curt Dose (a recent Navy Fighter Weapons School [TOPGUN] graduate) and RIO Lieutenant Commander James McDevitt was flying wing for a section of fighters protecting the strike. Alerted to enemy fighters launching from Kep airfield north of Hanoi, the flight maneuvered to within close proximity of the airfield at very low altitude to engage the enemy flight. In the fight that followed, Dose downed a MiG-21MF with two AIM-9 Sidewinders; one exploded just below the aircraft and the second went up the tailpipe of the MiG and exploded, downing the aircraft and killing the pilot. Dose then fired a Sidewinder at a second MiG-21 that barely missed. Dose's fourth Sidewinder hung on the rail. Dose's section lead fired three Sidewinders at the same MiG without a hit. (This MiG-21 was flown by Dang Ngoc Ngu, a North Vietnamese ace with seven kills.) The MiG-21s were so recently delivered they still had

Soviet markings. Dose then had to make it through a hail of AAA fire at low altitude. Dose was awarded a Silver Star (McDevitt probably was too, but I can't find it).

The afternoon strike by CVW-9 aircraft on the heavily defended Hai Duong railroad yard was an epic in the history of U.S. naval aviation. The 35-plane strike was planned and led by the commander of CVW-9, Commander Lowell F. "Gus" Eggert (call sign "Honeybee"), who would be awarded a Navy Cross for the action while flying an A-7E Corsair II. On Eggert's wing was Lieutenant Charles W. "Willy" Moore Jr. of VA-146 (the "Busybees") on his second Vietnam combat tour (Willy would later lead Strike Fighter Squadron 131 (VFA-131) in a strike on Libya in 1986 and command U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, Fifth Fleet from 1998 to 2002 during Operations Infinite Reach, Desert Fox, and Enduring Freedom—I was his intelligence officer [N2] for most of it). (Note, the voice calls of the Hai Duong strike were actually recorded, and a transcription is on the internet.)

The strike launched from *Constellation* at 1130 (from "Dixie Station"). The strike package of A-6A Intruder and A-7E Corsair II aircraft also included seven F-4J Phantom II fighters of VA-96, each armed with 2,000 pounds of ordnance for flak suppression. (For two straight years, VF-96 had been awarded the Clifton Trophy as the most outstanding fighter squadron in the Navy.) As no AAA was readily apparent on the inbound run (often a harbinger of MiG activity), the VF-96 F-4 flak suppressors dropped their bombs on a warehouse area adjacent to the target. As the strike package was rolling in on the target, somewhere between 16 and 24 MiGs (depending on the account) were closing in

(about 36 were launched but not all engaged). The F-4s climbed to meet the threat.

As the attack aircraft were coming off a very successful strike on the target, with numerous direct hits on key railroad infrastructure by 30,000 pounds of bombs, the entire railroad yard was observed to be ablaze. MiGs began to roll in on the attack aircraft, which were at an acute disadvantage. Because of a shortage of Sidewinders, the A-7Es didn't have any, and many of their M61 20-milimeter rotary canons weren't working. The A-6s had neither missiles nor guns. A number of the attack aircraft soon had MiGs on their tails. An A-7E, "Busybee 5" flown by Commander Fred Baldwin, made repeated "dry" firing passes to get a MiG-17 off the tail of "Busybee 6" flown by Lieutenant Allen Junker, who didn't have a working canon either. By radical maneuver, the two A-7Es thwarted the attacks of a veteran North Vietnamese pilot.

The F-4s had to get in with the attack jets in order to clean MiGs off tails, resulting in the biggest dogfight of the Vietnam War. An F-4 flown by Lieutenant Steven C. Shoemaker and RIO Lieutenant (j.g.) Keith V. Crenshaw downed a MiG-17 with a Sidewinder. Another F-4, flown by Lieutenant Michael J. "Matt" Connelly and RIO Lieutenant Thomas J. J. Blonski, downed two MiG-17s with Sidewinders. Connelly and Blonski would each be awarded a Navy Cross for the fight against overwhelming odds.

Another VF-96 F-4J in the fight was flown by Lieutenant Randall "Duke" Cunningham and RIO Lieutenant (j.g.) William "Irish" Driscoll, with two air-to-air kills already to their credit. As in the previous engagements, Lieutenant Brian Grant was Cunningham's wingman.

Cunningham had begun the day with a Dear John letter from his wife asking for a divorce and was not scheduled to fly, but CAG Eggert assigned him to fly the flak suppression mission at the last moment.

As Cunningham came off the target, Driscoll reported many enemy aircraft coming up from behind. Two MiG-17s got behind Cunningham and his wingman, with Cunningham in front by 1,000 yards. The MiGs missed their target as Cunningham broke hard and the MiGs overshot, the lead MiG below and his wingman above. The MiG wingman made a mistake trying to climb, exposing his underside for a brief moment. Cunningham fired a Sidewinder up the MiG wingman's tailpipe and the aircraft exploded. Another MiG-17 then got on Cunningham's tail. Cunningham tried to drag the MiG in front of Grant so that his wingman would have a shot, but by then Grant had two MiGs on his tail. At that point both Cunningham and Grant went into afterburner and escaped the MiGs.

At a higher altitude, Cunningham could see down below about eight MiG-17s in a defensive wheel formation (this standard Vietnamese tactic involved MiGs following each other in a circle so that an attacking aircraft getting behind a MiG would immediately find another MiG behind it). Cunningham and Grant were looking to attack the wheel formation from above, when the executive officer of VA-96, Dwight Timm, flew by with two MiGs on his tail and another under his belly. Cunningham told Timm to break hard to starboard, so he could take a shot at the MiG underneath him. Not realizing there was a MiG below him, Timm was slow to comply out of concern for the MiGs behind him. By this time, Driscoll was calling out four MiGs behind and two others coming head on.

Finally Timm broke hard to starboard, and Cunningham fired a Sidewinder causing the MiG to explode. All aircraft then went to afterburner and escaped the MiGs.

The air melee was winding down as all the jets on both sides were starting to run low on fuel. To that point, one F-4 ("Silver Kite 212" of VF-92 flown by XO Commander Harry Blackburn and RIO Lieutenant Stephen Rudluff) had been downed by 57-milimeter or 85-milimeter AAA. Both men ejected with good chutes and were seen to land about a few hundred yards apart. Rudluff was released as a POW in 1973. Blackburn was not released and the Vietnamese initially denied any knowledge of him. However, in 1986 the Vietnamese returned remains they had "discovered" that were then positively identified as Blackburn. The exact time, place, and cause of his death remain unknown.

As Cunningham was coming south from Hai Duong heading back to *Constellation* he encountered a camouflaged MiG-17 nearly head-on. The MiG aggressively opened with a forward firing pass. Cunningham went vertical up to 12,000 feet, and as he pulled over the top at 6 Gs, expecting to see the MiG below heading away, he was shocked to find the MiG had matched his climb and they were canopy to canopy about 400 feet apart. There is some reporting that the MiG pilot was North Vietnam's leading ace with 13 claimed kills to his credit.* Regardless, what followed was an epic one-on-one duel between two really great pilots, with the advantage constantly shifting back and forth. Both aircraft were probably reaching critically low fuel state (Cunningham definitely was), but the Vietnamese pilot blinked first and made a fatal run for it. Cunningham fired a Sidewinder that destroyed the MiG. As it

exploded, he fired his fourth (and last) Sidewinder. The MiG crashed with no chute observed. (*North Vietnam's leading ace was Nguyen Van Coc with nine kills. He was no longer flying in combat after 1968 and is still alive today. It was VPAF practice to paint red stars on the tail for kills by the plane, regardless of who flew it. MiG-17 3030 had about 13 kills and was the one shot down by Cunningham on 10 May.)

After downing their third MiG of the day and fifth overall, the duo of Cunningham and Driscoll were the first U.S. aces of the war from any service (the Air Force wouldn't get their first ace until August 1972). By this time, there was serious doubt whether Cunningham had enough fuel to make it back to *Constellation*. He was flying through an area with a concentration of SAMs. His radar warning gear picked up nothing, but just then a Reconnaissance Squadron 1 (VQ-1) Lockheed EP-3 called out a SAM warning. Cunningham saw the SAM, which had possibly been launched optically, too late to do much about it, and the SAM exploded about 500 feet above him, severely damaging his aircraft.

With his hydraulics malfunctioning, Cunningham gradually lost control of the aircraft as he nursed it to the coast. Finally, as the plane gyrated out of control and caught fire, Cunningham and Driscoll were forced to eject. Luckily they came down in the water and were picked up after only 15 minutes by a Marine helicopter from *Okinawa* (LPH-3). The North Vietnamese fired SA-2 SAMs at the rescue aircraft but missed high.

Cunningham and Driscoll were each awarded a Navy Cross and a Purple Heart for this engagement, to go with two Silver Stars

awarded to both for previous kills on 19 January and 8 May. Both Cunningham and Driscoll retired from the Navy at the rank of commander. Sadly, Cunningham's second career as a Republican congressman didn't end so well.

The strike and air battle by CVW-9 wasn't the only action that afternoon. At about 1400, an F-4B of VF-51 off *Coral Sea* flown by Lieutenant Kenneth L. "Ragin Cajun" Cannon and RIO Lieutenant Roy A. "Bud" Morris downed a MiG-17 with a Sidewinder.

Of 11 MiGs downed on 10 May, U.S. Navy aircraft accounted for eight. Of those eight, seven were by planes of CVW-9, six by planes of VF-96, and three by Cunningham and Driscoll.

After the first day of Operation Linebacker, large strikes occurred regularly but most raids consisted of armed reconnaissance flights, which sought out and destroyed elements of North Vietnamese air defense and logistics capabilities within three main areas near Hanoi and Haiphong. Many such targets had previously been off-limits during Rolling Thunder. In the initial months, U.S. Navy aircraft flew 60 percent of strike sorties in North Vietnam and 25 percent of those were at night, giving the North Vietnamese no respite.

13 May: Amphibious Operations

The Seventh Fleet Amphibious Force, Amphibious Ready Group (ARG), centered on amphibious assault ship *Okinawa* (LPH-3), landed South Vietnamese marines in a raid miles behind NVA lines in Quang Tri Province. The *Okinawa* ARG conducted additional raids with South Vietnamese marines on 24 May

and then a landing on 29 June. Dock landing ship *Alamo* (LSD-33) would emplace a five section causeway on the coast east of Quang Tri to facilitate logistics support by South Vietnamese utility landing craft (LCUs) and mechanized landing craft (LCMs) to Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces that, with the aid of U.S. air support, stopped the NVA advance on the city of Hue and began to push the NVA back.

11 May: An Loc Holds

The North Vietnamese Army commenced what would be their last major push on An Loc. After firing about 8,000 rounds of artillery onto the city, the shelling ceased at 0430 as the attack commenced from all sides by 5,000 NVA troops and 40 tanks. However, U.S. and South Vietnamese tactical aircraft and helicopter gunships quickly pounced. B-52s then pounded NVA positions about once every hour. NVA casualties were extremely heavy and the attack stalled. Foul weather prevented tactical air strikes on the night of 12-13 May, which prompted the NVA to make one last attempt. This was thwarted by a U.S. Air Force 15,000-pound bomb and fuel-air explosives.

Although NVA shelling of An Loc remained heavy, the NVA shifted their effort to the ARVN relief column battling its way up the highway from Saigon. Here, aircraft from the recently arrived carrier *Saratoga* (CVA-60) and the recently arrived Marine A-4s of Marine Aircraft Group 12 (MAG-12) at Bien Hoa airfield would play a key role in blunting this NVA thrust. *Saratoga* arrived off Vietnam on 17 May, making six U.S. carriers engaged in turning back the Easter Offensive. The Marine attack squadrons VMA-211 and VMA-311 arrived at Bien Hoa on the same day.

By 16 May, the NVA offensive at An Loc had reached its culminating point, although it would take until 12 June before the ARVN could drive the last NVA troops out of the city. NVA activity would continue around An Loc for months, but the worst of the threat was over, and the route to Saigon secured, thanks to U.S. air power and the courage of the stubborn ARVN defenders of An Loc.

18 May: Two MiG-19s Downed

New target sets were approved for Linebacker strikes in North Vietnam, to include power plants, shipyards, and a Haiphong cement plant. Of 200 U.S. Navy sorties into North Vietnam on 18 May, 60 were in the Haiphong region, including a strike on the Uong Bi power plant near Haiphong.

At 1730, two Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-19s were downed by two F-4B Phantom IIs of Fighter Squadron 161 (VF-161) off *Midway* (CVA-41). One F-4B, flown by Lieutenant Henry A. "Bart" Bartholomay and Radar Intercept Officer (RIO) Lieutenant Oran R. Brown, downed a MiG with an AIM-9 Sidewinder missile. The other F-4B, flown by Lieutenant Patrick E. Arwood and RIO James M. "Mike" Bell, used a newer variant, the AIM-9G Sidewinder, for the kill.

23 May: Two MiGs Downed by a Single F-4B

Guided-missile destroyer leader *Biddle* (DLG-34) had just arrived in the Gulf of Tonkin on 15 May and relieved *Sterett* (DLG-31) on the northern search and rescue (SAR) station. At about 1745 on 23 May, controllers on *Biddle* vectored two F-4Bs of VA-161 off *Midway* toward enemy MiGs. The F-4Bs were supporting a strike on the Haiphong petroleum products storage. The lead F-4B

was flown by Lieutenant Commander Ronald E. "Mugs" McKeown and RIO Lieutenant John C. "Jack" Enschede. The two F-4Bs wound up overhead Kep airfield, one of the largest MiG bases in North Vietnam.

As the two F-4Bs turned to pursue two MiG-19s, they were unpleasantly surprised to discover six more MiG-17s in the air. A MiG-17 got on McKeown's tail, and in an effort to regain advantage, McKeown stalled his jet, which then went into an end-over-end tumble (not a Naval Air Training and Operating Procedures Standardization [NATOPS] approved maneuver); this did, however, cause the MiG to overshoot. McKeown fired a Sidewinder, but the MiG broke hard at the last instant and the missile missed. McKeown then engaged a different MiG-17 that passed in front of him; this time the shot was perfect and blew off the MiG's tail. McKeown then immediately turned to engage a MiG that had gotten on his wingman's tail and shot it down with another Sidewinder.

McKeown and Enschede were each awarded a Navy Cross for the engagement. Enschede would be shot down in August 1972 and held as a prisoner of war (POW) until his release in March 1973.

The same day, an A-7B Corsair II of Attack Squadron 93 (VA-93) off *Midway* flown by Commander Charles E. Barnett was shot down. Barnett was killed. His remains were returned in 1988. The North Vietnamese claimed it was an air-to-air kill, but U.S. records indicate a SAM hit. Barnett had previously survived being downed by a SAM in 1966 while flying an A-4 Skyhawk of VA-195.

24 May: Continuous Night Ops

Task Force 77 aircraft commenced constant night operations over Vietnam, weather permitting, relying on the A-6A Intruder (and the more capable A-6B Intruder on *Kitty Hawk* [CVA-63]) and A-7E Corsair II aircraft. At times, night sorties would account for 30 percent of the total.

26 May: Ineffective Shore Battery Fire

During a bombardment of the Ha Trung petroleum storage area by U.S. Navy surface ships, North Vietnamese shore batteries fired 175 rounds of artillery at the ships with no effect. Throughout the campaign, shore battery fire was common, but hits were not.

31 May: Statistics

U.S. Navy aircraft flew 3,949 attack sorties into North Vietnam in May compared to 1,250 in April. U.S. Navy attack sorties into South Vietnam dropped from 4,833 in April to 3,290 in May. This was compensated for by an increase in Marine sorties in the South from 543 in April to 1,502 in May with the arrival of more Marine aircraft in-country. U.S. Navy aircraft struck 2,416 targets in North Vietnam in May, up from 719 in April. Target categories included railroads (16 percent), roads and trucks (14 percent), storage areas (13 percent), and bridges (10 percent). U.S. Navy aircraft shot down 16 North Vietnamese jets in May, including 11 MiG-17 Frescoes, two MiG-19 Farmers, and three MiG-21 Fishbeds. The U.S. Navy lost six aircraft in May, two F-4 Phantom IIs and two A-7 Corsair IIs to anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) and SA-2 surface-to-air missiles. One F-8 Crusader and one RA-5 Vigilante were lost to unknown causes, but none were believed to be due to enemy fighters.