

## The Scent of Pine

Yankee Station, 1972

An A-6 *Intruder* launched from the carrier at night to attack a truck park near Haiphong Harbor, where the North Vietnamese were offloading material from Chinese Communist ships onto trucks in the target area. Allied aircraft were prohibited from bombing the ships, so they had to wait until the cargo was on the trucks. As the A-6 was ingressing, the crew of an outbound *Intruder* reported heavy anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) and surface-to-air missile (SAM) activity in the area.

The *Intruder* sped toward the trucks at 200 feet altitude, its 500-pound Snakeye bombs at the ready. Approaching the target, as the A-6 popped up to 300–400 feet for the drop, AAA fire erupted around the plane. The A-6 sustained several light hits on the bottom of the starboard wing. Pulling off target after releasing the bombs, the bombardier navigator (BN) noted that two SAMs had been fired at the *Intruder*. The A-6 was so low that the SAM radar could not track it, so the enemy missile crew was guiding the missiles manually. Because the bomber was under a low, thin overcast, the pilot and BN could see the flame from the rocket motors as the North Vietnamese guided the SAMs. If one of the missiles could be guided close enough to the A-6, the enemy would detonate its warhead manually.



The BN concentrated on the SAMs as the pilot flew the *Intruder*; and as best he could kept his eye on the AAA that streaked and flashed by the A-6. As a result, neither the pilot nor the BN was watching the terrain avoidance radar. They observed a slight break in the overcast at the same time the refueling probe of the *Intruder* was struck by shells from a 23 mm gun. Because there was a full moon that night, visibility was good on top of the

overcast as well as low to the ground through breaks in the clouds.

Suddenly, as they raced along hugging the deck, the crew saw a ridge directly in front of them, illuminated by the moonlight. A collision was imminent, so the pilot hauled back on the control stick as hard as he could. The A-6 angled sharply upward. The two manually guided SAMs had so distracted the crew that they nearly slammed into the ridge.

“We cleared most of the ridge,” the pilot said later, “but not everything on it.” The *Intruder* had plowed through the treetops, causing significant damage to the wings and fuselage. The pilot zoom-climbed to altitude to ensure the A-6 was flyable, then rapidly descended to the deck for the run-out to “feet wet” and escape from the SAM envelope. The two SAMs were no longer a threat, but the pilot noted, “We knew there were more where they came from.”

Once clear of land, the A-6 climbed to altitude so that a second *Intruder* crew could examine it. Because of the damage, the second A-6 recommended the first make a no-flap, no-slat landing on the carrier. The crew jettisoned all external stores, including the multiple ejector bomb racks. All wing fuel had been lost due to punctures

caused by impact with the trees, but the main tanks had plenty, so gas was not a major concern. One of the two main hydraulic systems was disabled.

En route to the carrier, the crew slow-flighted the A-6 and determined they could fly without flaps and slats at 22 knots *above* the maximum speed for engaging the cross-deck pendants. The air boss and skipper gave the *Intruder* permission to trap. All airplanes were pulled forward, and the deck was cleared of all personnel except the landing signal officers. Because the A-6 had to land at a speed much higher than normal, there was fear the arresting cable might break and whip across the deck, causing a severe hazard.

Fortunately, the pilot made a good landing—although catching the number one wire—considering his

forward vision was obscured by tree sap and leaf stains on the wind-screen. The battle-weary *Intruder* was taxied forward and taken below where it was parked in a corner of the hangar bay. It remained there for the rest of the deployment.

“The *Intruder* reeked of pine trees,” noted the pilot, “which was a welcome seasonal touch much appreciated by the troops, since it was near Christmas. The damage to the airplane was so severe that it was later struck from the inventory. You have probably heard of the Grumman ‘Ironworks.’ Well, this was a great example of how Grumman builds tough aircraft!”



**Grampaw Pettibone says:**

**And an even greater example of the tough aviators who flew the A-6 in Vietnam combat.**

