

IDIOT'S LOOP

The Day I Nuked Los Angeles

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The AD Skyraider is still held up as one of the best close support aircraft of all time because of its immense ordnance load combined with impressively long on-target loiter times. However, when it was tasked to deliver nuclear bombs, it entered an entirely new combat arena. (Photo by George Hall/Check Six)

During the early 1950s, I fooled around with football, girls, and socializing while I was attending college and really didn't know what I wanted to do in my life. When I saw the Korean War movie *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*, I knew right then I wanted to be a naval aviator.

Although I had never been up in an airplane before, I didn't give it much thought as I progressed through my flight training in a variety of aircraft. My first phase was in the very docile T-34 Mentor and then into the big roomy cockpit of the T-28 Trojan. Somewhere along the line, my grades must have been good enough because I was selected to continue

and was sent to attack training. Even though I wanted to fly fighters, I didn't like being strongarmed into signing up for the extra year that was required of a fighter pilot.

During my final phase of training I was selected to fly the WW II-designed, single-engine, big behemoth monster called the Douglas Skyraider.



That was my introduction to a tailwheel airplane. The instructor gave me some pointers on how to handle the takeoff, but first wanted me to get the feel of it so he told me to make a fast taxi, go to full power and get the tail up, and then chop the power to taxi speed again. The last thing he said was to add right rudder to counter the torque of the big radial engine. Everything seemed to be going well as my feet danced on the rudder pedals while I kept the Skyraider pointed in a somewhat straight line. The good times ended quickly, however, when I chopped the power and was along for the ride as the Skyraider made a quick 90-degree turn to the right. Fortunately, I was still on the runway — no one had told me to ease up on the right rudder! Eventually the Skyraider would be my front office for the next few years as I learned how land it on a pitching carrier deck, fire its 20mm guns, drop bombs, and launch rockets from this flying dump truck.

A much bigger bang

The Skyraider had “a lot” of everything bolted onto it; big engine, big wings and it carried an assortment of ordnance second to none. Bombs, rockets and cannon — what more could a naval aviator ask for? As we trained on the Skyraider, we did a lot of strafing and rocket work around Corpus Christi, Texas. Some of our targets were located on the edge of a large parcel of land called King Ranch. About every two weeks, I would see one of the King Ranch trucks near the base carrying a dead cow with a 5-inch rocket sticking out of it. I guess some of the guys got a little carried away with their chance at a live target.

In the summer of 1957, I joined Attack Squadron 195 (VA-195) in California. The unit's lineage went all the way back to WW II and Korea where the squadron, known as the “Dam Busters,” became famous for not only destroying the Bridges

“Thor” tactical nuclear bomb. The Mk-7 weighed as much as a full-size Clydesdale Horse, 1,700 pounds and it was slung underneath the belly of our Skyraider in the event of war. Although it was as long as one of the earlier torpedoes carried by Skyraiders during the Korean War, the Mk-7 packed a much greater punch — like comparing a firecracker to a stick of dynamite!

The old torpedoes had about 400 pounds of TNT packed inside of them and did a nice job when they hit their target. The Mk-7, however, had an implosion system that had a variable yield of 8 to 61 kilotons depending on the setting of the weapon. One kiloton equaled the explosive power of 1,000 tons (2 million pounds) of TNT so even at the smallest setting of 8 kilotons it would have taken 40,000 torpedoes to equal the explosive power of the 16 million pounds of TNT that was packed into the weapon — we had really come a long way! Our delivery system, however, was not the typical one used during WW II when the bombers would climb up to a high altitude, make their runs with their wings level while the bombardier peered through a Norden bombsight. The Navy's approach to delivering a tactical nuclear bomb was much more creative: send a single-engine, single-seat, prop-driven aircraft in at very low level and deploy the nuke by “tossing” it like you would an underhand throw of a baseball.

Shut up and go

Although the slide rule boys called it toss bombing we pilots called the maneuver an “idiot loop” because only an idiot would deliver a nuclear bomb in that fashion! Theoretically, we would have the Mk-7 strapped to our centerline bomb rack and launch from a carrier that was parked safely out to sea away, far away from the enemy coast. With a good 10-12 hour fuel endurance,

the Skyraider could fly a very long distance. After launch we would buzz along at low level, between 200 and 250 feet, making sure to stay under the

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at Toko-Ri but also for their involvement in the destruction of the North Korean Hwachon Reservoir in the last aerial torpedo attack. Although I would never get to drop a torpedo like my Skyraider forefathers did, I was given an opportunity to drop something that would have made a much bigger bang — a tactical nuclear bomb.

Because VA-195 was an attack squadron, we had a dual role, conventional or nuclear delivery. During the fall of 1957, we were sent to Moffett Field, California, to learn how to deliver nuclear weapons at a school called Special Weapons Unit Pacific. After completing three weeks of classroom, we were sent to China Lake which was in the middle of nowhere out in the Mojave Desert, where we were introduced to the Mk-7

enemy's radar, and when we reached the target area, we would pull the Skyraider up into the beginning of a loop at a 60-degree angle. When we passed through 1,000 feet during our climbing maneuver, we would release the bomb with the assistance of a 35mm cannon shell that kicked it downward so the nuke wouldn't fly through the propeller arc as it began its climb profile to the target. As the Mk-7 was slingshot skyward, we would pull our Skyraiders through the top of the loop inverted and pull the nose down about 30 degrees before rolling 180 degrees into a half-Cuban-8, then diving back down at full throttle to under 200 feet to get the heck out of there.

The bomb was supposed to climb to about 4,000 feet and because it was an airburst weap-

Left: Richard Lundy poses in back of his nuclear-toting Skyraider. (Photo courtesy of James Busha)

Below: Navy squadron VX-5 showed the way to deliver a nuke with a Skyraider. The low-level entry and exit earned this mission the nickname "sand blower," and this VX-5 pilot took that seriously. After operating from Moffett Field, VX-5 set up shop at China Lake in the Mojave Desert in 1956 to be closer to the ranges where its arcane craft was practiced. (Photo courtesy of AFFTC/HO via Frederick A. Johnsen)



THE GENIUSES IN THE WHITE LAB COATS THEORIZED THAT WE WOULD BE BELOW THE MUSHROOM CLOUD AS WE MADE OUR ESCAPE FROM THE TARGET AREA

Adorned with some of the most colorful squadron markings painted on Navy aircraft during the Vietnam War, A-1H Skyraiders of Attack Squadron (VA) 176 were part of the first all-attack carrier air wing that deployed to Southeast Asia, joining another Skyraider squadron and two attack squadrons equipped with A-4 Skyhawks operating from the carrier Intrepid (CVS 11) in 1966. In this image, flight deck personnel prepare an aircraft for a mission over Vietnam. (Photo courtesy of Hill Goodspeed/USN Archives)

on, it would detonate at around 2,000 feet during its descent. In theory, we were supposed to have completed our looping maneuver in less than 2,000 feet and be zipping along on the deck when the bomb detonated. The geniuses in the white lab coats theorized that we would be below the mushroom cloud as we made our escape from the target area. As a safety precaution, we were told to close one eye and to tilt our rearview mirrors down and away. We also carried a white scarf to wrap around our neck as we smeared white cream all over our face to protect us from the intense heat caused by the blast. Our main concern, however, was the fabric that covered our rudder, ailerons, and elevators and we wondered if they would burn up like a piece of dry paper. As a precaution, the Navy ended up painting them white to help deflect the heat. But again, it was all a theory and our job as naval aviators was to

simply fly the mission — shut up and go!

We started out by throwing 25-pound “blue boy” practice bombs all over the desert floor to get the feel of tossing bombs instead of dropping them. We quickly got the hang of the maneuver and became quite proficient at it, so much so that we began using the real deal. Actually, those bombs were just inert shapes of the Mk-7 and instead of containing nuclear material, they were packed full of concrete. When our squadron had the maneuver down pat, we were sent to sea for an ordnance readiness test to see if we could really pull it off.

Target: Los Angeles, California

Our carrier was 1,000 miles out to sea somewhere off the coast of Mexico as we sliced through the Pacific Ocean under a starlit night sky. Our FJ-4 Fury jets had to stand down because they didn't have the range to make it to the target and back. There were 10 of us in Skyraiders all queued up on the carrier deck and each of us was launched with a Mk-7 shape hanging from our belly. Our goal was to fly in low, dodging radar and USAF



fighters, drop our “nukes” and return to the ship in one piece. Although it may have sounded easy on paper, it wasn't. We had to take off at night, initially staying under 500 feet until we got closer to the California coast where we had to drop even lower. We had no navigational aids and there weren't any landmarks in the vastness of the Pacific. We did have a submarine that would surface for less than 10 minutes every hour to give us a relative position from the carrier, and that was

then a few minutes later we turned them again as we changed headings on a continual basis so we wouldn't leave a radar track for the “enemy” back to our ship. We also knew that the Air Force “boys in blue” would be gunning for us and acting like the cavalry trying to save the day. That was the least of my worries however, especially since the last time the Air Force was up looking for me, it turned into a hilarious game of hide and seek.

I had been on a nighttime “sand blower” flight so low to the ground that my propeller wash kicked up the dust and dirt as I raced over the ground as I had entered California near Vandenberg Air Force base. As I made my run into the target, the Air Force controller asked if I could abort my run and orbit for a bit while they plotted were I was. After droning around in a circle they finally acknowledged that they were able to plot me from the ground and said I was about to be intercepted by an all-weather F-89 Scorpion. I waited and waited and never did see the F-89. I told the controller that I couldn't hang around anymore and I never found out if those poor guys in the Scorpion ever located anyone to “shoot down”

I COULD SEE THE GLOWING LIGHTS OF LA OFF MY RIGHT WING AS I MADE MY WAY DOWN TO IMPERIAL VALLEY TO DROP MY BOMB NEAR THE SALTON SEA

primitive at best, compared to today's standards. Oh, and did I forget to mention that the entire 12-hour flight would require us to maintain radio silence?

While dead reckoning, we never kept the same heading once we launched off the carrier. We started turning our Skyraiders one way and

SKYRAIDER COLORS

The mighty Douglas AD Skyraider was a long-service warrior. A 1945 design, it was rechristened A-1 in the 1962 Department of Defense redesignation scheme inflicted by Robert Strange McNamara, who reputedly could not keep the Air Force and Navy systems straight in his whiz-kid cranium.

Whatever the designation, the Skyraider appeared in every color

scheme the Navy employed from the post-World War II era into the Vietnam “conflict.” Originally, ADs entered fleet service in 1946, painted overall gloss dark blue.

Unification of the armed forces in 1947 brought about the Department of Defense, with addition of a red stripe in the white horizontal bars of the national insignia. The absence of the red bar on a dark-

blue Skyraider usually is proof of a pre-1947 photo.

Beginning in 1955, Navy and Marine Corps combat aircraft were painted light gray over insignia white, usually with white control surfaces, providing better reflective protection against atomic blasts.

When production ended in 1957, more than 3,000 Skyraiders had



As original flown, the Skyraider was gloss blue. This is a Korean scheme. (Photo courtesy of Norm Taylor)



By mid-'50s, the light gray scheme was adapted with training command and Reserve units getting color bands. (Photo courtesy of Budd Davisson)

that night.

As I neared the California coastline, I knew this time that even if an Air Force controller would have called me, tonight I would have ignored his request. I entered the coastline around Santa Barbara and went across the mountains before I made my right turn. I could see the glowing lights of LA off my right wing as I made my way down to Imperial Valley to drop my bomb near the Salton Sea. Our squadron had been far from the first ones to drop atomic “shapes” in that area of California. During WW II, the “Silver plate” B-29s of the 509th Composite Group flying from bases in Utah dropped over 150 prototypes of the atomic bomb shapes, two of which were used against Japan in August of 1945.

Just like I had practiced so many times before, I tossed my Mk-7 shape and dove for the deck as I headed back out to sea. And just like the last mission — no Air Force fighters in sight! Everything had been right on the money until we flew back out to sea to where the carrier was supposed to be. The other Skyraiders on the mission began to show up as we flew around for another hour and

expanded our grid search. Eventually we found the carrier and trapped all 10 Skyraiders without any of us ever having to key a microphone. The admiral was ecstatic to say the least, as we passed our final test before being allowed to carry the real thing.

“Peace through Strength” is the motto of the United States military, and during the Cold War we were pushed to the brink more than once. I was eventually stationed on the USS *Bon Homme Richard* (CVA-31) as we patrolled in the Far East and was assigned three primary targets — all of them containing big Red stars! Although I knew I could sneak my Skyraider in to any one of the targets and fulfill my job requirement, but I had a nagging question, “Where were the USAF B-52s going to be when I made my bombing run?” I was always told that was on a need-to-know basis. I didn’t buy that thinking because if I was at 500 feet and the B-52s were at 50,000 feet and they dropped a nuke in front of my nose, then that was something I definitely needed to know! I was just thankful I never had to test the theory. †

been produced in an astonishing 28 variants. However, the Able Dog continued service long into the future.

Training Command aircraft, including ADs, received orange areas. Utility squadron aircraft — mostly target tugs and drone controllers — typically had blue fuselages, or—ange tails, and yellow wings. Naval Reserve aircraft often had orange

fuselage bands.

During USS *Kitty Hawk*'s 1965 deployment, several aircraft received Southeast Asia green “lizard color schemes” including VA-115 A-1H/Js, but the two-tone paint was short lived.

The “Spad” left fleet service in 1969 with the final examples retired in 1971.

Some warbird Skyraiders bear

unrealistic color schemes. Former French AD-4s of Korean War vintage imported into the U.S. have been painted with Vietnam War color schemes, which have more crowd appeal — except among modelers who know the difference. — Barrett Tillman



Among the most flamboyant paint jobs applied to Skyraiders were found on Skyraiders assigned to South Vietnam's three squadrons. (Photo courtesy of Norm Taylor)



Skyraiders from the USS *Oriskany* fly in formation during an exercise in the Far East. Between 1960 and 1966, VA-165 made four Western Pacific deployments. (Photo by Lee Boles via Warren Thompson)