

The F-105Ds were capable of carrying 14,000 pounds of ordnance deep into North Vietnam. These Thuds had just topped off their tanks and were headed up into the Hanoi area. The tail codes identify them as being from two different squadrons, but both were based out of Korat AB in Thailand with the 355th TFW. (Photo by James Wood via Warren Thompson)



The FIRST BRIDGE

The Vietnam War Had to Start Somewhere

BY LT. COLONEL BOB HANSON, USAF (RET.)

General Curtis E. LeMay, Air Force Chief of Staff, was not happy. First line U.S. fighters had been in South East Asia in small numbers since 1960. By mid-1964, more fighters began rotating through bases in South Vietnam and Thailand, as a show of force. Reconnaissance missions, with a pair of fighters as escorts, known as armed recce, were being flown into Laos and Vietnam, but they were severely restricted in their operations. The fighters escorting the reconnaissance aircraft could attack enemy positions only if they were first fired upon. The politicians were being cautious. By January 1965, there had been several "protective reactions," and even a few fragged (planned) missions, but nothing of any real scope. In fact, many of the pre-planned missions had failed to find their targets in the confusing jungle landscape or reported disappointing BDA (Battle Damage Assessment).

General LeMay, Air Force Chief of Staff, longtime architect and commander of the Strategic Air Command, did not take kindly to less than desirable results on his watch. Exercising his dictatorial powers, he personally selected and fragged a target in Laos. It would be Barrel Roll Mission 9, scheduled for January 12. The target was a small, reinforced wooden bridge, the Ban Ken bridge, over the Nam Mat river roughly 12 kilometers east of the town of Ban Ban, which was located on Route 7 at the eastern edge of the Plain of Jars (Plain de Jars). Route 7 was a major supply route from North Vietnam, turning west at Vinh, crossing the mountains at the Barthelemy Pass, down through the jungle to join Route 4, which was an even larger supply route to Southern Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam.

Huns and thuds

The force for this mission would be the largest to date. General LeMay directed that 16 F-105s and four F-100s from Thai bases would join four F-100s based at Da Nang to compose the strike force, and that an RF-101 Voodoo reconnaissance fighter act as a pathfinder to lead the strike force to the target.

In keeping with restrictions in Thailand, the fighters would be loaded with their ordnance, and flown to Da Nang for the mission launch. The F-105s, affectionately referred to as Thuds, were each loaded with eight 750-pound Mk-117, general purpose bombs or six 750-pound bombs, and two AGM 83 Bullpup missiles. The F-100s would be armed with AGM-83s and CBU-2 cluster bomb weapons to provide flak suppression.

Bad weather and an accident on the runway at Da Nang caused the inbound fighters to divert, and the mission was delayed one day. In a hasty rescheduling for the 13th, tanker support was laid on. However, search and rescue forces were unintentionally omitted from the frag.

At 1300 hours on January 13, 1965, the quiet of the jungle was shattered as an RF-101 reconnaissance fighter flashed over the bridge at low altitude. As the sound of the RF-101 faded, a flight of four F-105s rolled in from the west, one after the other, dropping their loads of 750-pound bombs on the bridge. The mission leader, Lt. Col. Bill Craig, CO of the 44th Squadron, was first in, putting his bombs on target, shattering the west end of the bridge. The next three loads finished off the bridge. Three more flights of four F-105s

followed. The second flight dropped its bombs into what quickly became a dense rolling wall of dirt, dust, and smoke, slowly rising into the air on a near windless, and increasingly cloudy day, obscuring the bridge and the surrounding area. The next two flights led by Lt. Col. Robin Risner, CO of the 67th Squadron, held their bombs at Risner's direction. He led them back down the road where they destroyed a smaller bridge, since there was no designated alternate target.

The two flights of F-100s, four from the 613th Sq., led by Maj. Bob Ronca, and four from the 428th Sq., led by Lt. Col. Ben Clayton, fanned across the target area, firing Bullpup missiles and dropping CBU-2 bomblets in an effort to suppress the anti-aircraft fire, which turned out to be more intense than had been anticipated. For the majority of the pilots, this was their first combat mission and the first time they had experienced anti-aircraft fire. A large number of 37mm and 57mm anti-aircraft guns were adding greatly to their experience!

"You're on fire!"

The second flight of F-105s came around for another pass, in spite of the fact that they were unable to see the bridge. Captain Vollmer, number two in the flight, lined up and fired a AGM-83 into the churning mass of dirt and smoke. It was necessary to fire a AGM-83 in a shallow dive, and guide it visually via radio control. Maj. Larry Guairno, was flying a loose wing position on Vollmer. About halfway into the run, Vollmer felt and heard a loud thump behind the cockpit,



"THEY WERE ALL CALLING AT ONCE FOR ME TO PUNCH OUT, BUT THE ENGINE WAS STILL RUNNING, I HAD CONTROL, AND ALL I COULD THINK ABOUT WAS GETTING AWAY FROM THE TARGET AREA."

Several Thud squadrons that were based in the Far East sent in their all-silver F-105s early on in the war. This one, flying a combat mission, was flown by the famous 80th TFS "Headhunters" that were based in Japan. The first combat mission flown by the Thuds in SEA was on August 14, 1964. (Photo by Bob Pielin via Warren Thompson)

The F-105D's specialty was delivering a maximum load of 750-pound GP bombs or GBUs against anti-aircraft batteries in North Vietnam. This Thud had the maximum bomb load as it taxied out from its base at Korat. Note the all-silver paint scheme on the aircraft. Not long after this was taken, they all changed over to the camouflage scheme. (Photo by Ed Skowron via Warren Thompson)

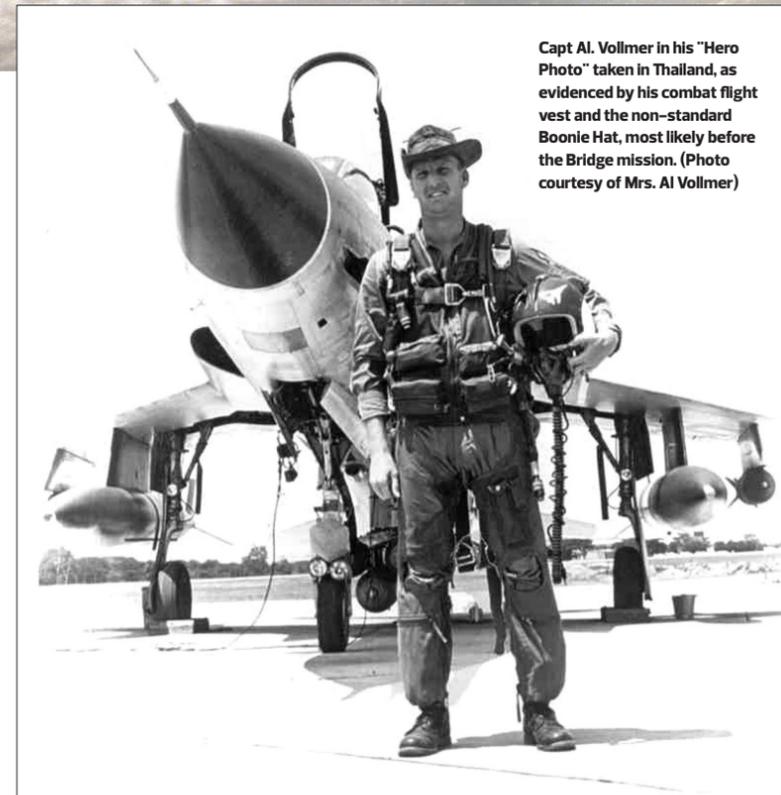


and instantly, Guairno and others in the flight advised Vollmer he was on fire; a fact that he confirmed by glancing in the rear-view mirror and from the glowing red lights on the instrument panel. Vollmer remembered, "They were all calling at once for me to punch out, but the engine was still running. I had control, and all I could think about was getting away from the target area." Vollmer jettisoned the drop tanks and bomb racks, selected afterburner, and pulled the nose up for altitude and distance, while turning south and away from the target.

It was looking good in the climb, with Guairno giving him updates about the fire engulfing the airplane from the cockpit, rearward. Suddenly, the aircraft pitched nose up, so violently that Vollmer blacked out. Others in the flight could see panels and parts falling off the airplane, as a result of the pitch-up.

Time to get out

Seconds later, Vollmer recovered and realized the controls were frozen and ejected. Vollmer recalled, "The ejection seat was the old type, the kind that gave you a real kick in the rear. I separated from the seat, and began tumbling. When the tumbling stopped, I looked up at a twisted set of risers, and a chute only a quarter open. I shook the risers, and the chute blossomed." As a graduate of the Army jump school, he remained cool with the chute malfunction. "With the parachute under control, I looked around and saw my flaming aircraft spinning downward. It hit the ground and exploded in a ball of flame just below me." Two of the flight flew past and Vollmer waved his arms and legs to show he was physically OK.



Capt Al. Vollmer in his "Hero Photo" taken in Thailand, as evidenced by his combat flight vest and the non-standard Boonie Hat, most likely before the Bridge mission. (Photo courtesy of Mrs. Al Vollmer)

Another one hit!

A voice on the radio ordered the F-100s to hit the area around the gun sites. The four F-100s from the 528th Sq. swept in fast and low, wingtip to wingtip, spraying the area with CBU-2 bomblets. As the flight started their release, Capt. Chuck Ferguson, on the right wing of Col. Clayton, experienced a loud thump followed by an engine surge, and a flameout! Ferguson pulled the nose up, jettisoned the external stores, turned to the south, and attempted to restart the engine. He



The two-seat version of the Super Sabre was the F-100F. It was originally designed to be a trainer, but was modified for Vietnam to fly SAM suppression missions known as the "Iron Hand" and also as a fast forward air control that was known as "Misty Fac." Today, the only flying "F" is owned and operated by The Collings Foundation and is based in Houston, Texas. (Photo by George Hall/Check Six)



Bombs on the Ban Ken Bridge (the distant one appears to be a hit) later in 1965. Note the absence of surrounding jungle, laid bare by frequent attacks. (Photo courtesy Ed Skowron)

could only get about 65% rpm; not enough to keep flying. At what Ferguson estimated to be around 500 feet, he raised the ejection handle, blowing the canopy, but could not feel the ejection trigger for the seat. The trigger failed to cock into position as it should have. He managed to pry the trigger up with his fingers, squeezed it, and ejected. As the chute opened, he immediately crashed through tall elephant grass and landed on a steep, sloping hillside. The F-100 crashed into the base of a karst (rock) formation at the bottom of the slope, and blew up, causing a rock and shale slide that completely buried the airplane, leaving no trace.

Ferguson released his parachute, took an emergency radio from his "G" suit pocket, and in haste, broke the antenna off. (He had been un-

able to make a radio call before ejecting, because of the excited chatter on the radio, over Vollmer's bailout.) A call on the emergency brought no reply. Then he heard shouts and thrashing noises as a group of men climbed toward him.

Ferguson says, "It sounded to me like an army was coming after me. I can truthfully say that it was the worst feeling I have ever experienced, when those people were approaching me. I didn't know what to expect, and drew my survival pistol for self defense. Then I decided I was certainly outnumbered and I put the pistol back in the holster, and prepared myself mentally for the worst.

While Ferguson was ready to be captured, Vollmer was living out his own drama. His ejection was higher than Ferguson's, at around 2,000 feet, giving him more time to collect himself for the landing. He could hear what sounded like rifle fire just before he crashed through a large tree, and stopped, hanging in the tree, just a couple feet off the ground. The gunfire continued, and bullets were ripping through the elephant grass. He released his harness, and dropped to the jungle floor. Shots were still tearing through the foliage. It was then he realized the shots were some of the 1,000 rounds of 20mm ammo cooking off in his burning airplane.

The remaining aircraft in his flight were circling his position. He removed the emergency radio from his survival vest, and called the flight a number of times, with no response. Within a

couple of minutes, a flight of two passed over him, dipped a wing, and disappeared to the west. Vollmer said, "I never remember having such a lonely feeling in my entire life, but I knew I had to shake the feeling, and prepare for a pick up."

Rescue wouldn't be easy

Captain Ed Skowron, number three from Craig's flight, with Will Snell on his wing passed over Vollmer's position. Skowron relates, "We were low on fuel, so as we passed by Al, I marked his position on the Doppler, and dipped a wing so he would know he had him. Will and I returned to Korat. Our flight commander Bob Lines, (who had been number three in Vollmer's flight) asked if I could find Al again, and I said I could. So we refueled, and reloaded our guns. I remember it seemed to take an awfully long time to get the ammo in the guns, and by the time Lines and I got back to Al's position, he was gone. We really felt like we had failed him."

And then the Voodoo is hit

As the smoke and dust cleared the target area, and the fighters departed, Parks, in his RF-101, circled around the mountain, hoping the gunners would think he had left with the others. He came in low and fast, heading north over the target for the post-strike photos. As he passed over the wreckage of the bridge, the whole left side of his canopy lit up with orange flashes from 37mm shell hits. They were shooting down at him from the sides of the valley. One shell went down through the canopy, hit the armrest on the seat, and exploded! With that, Parks said, "I pulled up, with no lights (warning) on, and got ready to

bail out, because it was quite an explosion! Then I thought, 'No lights, I must be OK,' but being a dumb ass, I didn't realize that I had complete electrical failure! Then I thought, 'What am I going to do? I hadn't taken fuel on the pre-strike, so I was low on fuel, and had no instruments, or radios. Thailand was socked in, so I turned South on my standby compass, and headed toward Da Nang. There were clouds down that way, so I did a little offset to the left, and figured if I could see the coast, I could find Da Nang."

A friend?

The tall grass parted in front of Ferguson, and a small, barefoot man, carrying a machete and wearing a khaki sweater and ragged shorts, appeared. Upon seeing Ferguson, he dropped the machete, made a slight bow, and brought his hands together in a prayer-like position. Not knowing what to do, Ferguson returned the gesture. The small man reached out to shake hands. At that Ferguson felt relieved, but still wary, when three more men appeared, similarly dressed.

"The men pulled my parachute down, wrapped my survival kit in it, and led me to a trail away from the crash site. After a short walk, we came to a small grass-hut village, with kids, pigs, and small chickens. There was also a group of young men dressed in black with carbines slung over their shoulders. A man dressed in a greenish, Swiss-type uniform, with a broad-brimmed hat and shoes, came forward, shook my hand, and indicated for me to follow him along the trail out of the camp," Ferguson recalls.

The rest of that day, the group followed narrow jungle trails, frequently pausing and watching for

The RF-101C was instrumental in obtaining pre-strike and post-strike images early on in the war. They were replaced by the RF-4C Phantoms. The 45th TRS Voodoos, shown here, were identified by the Polka-Dots painted on the vertical stabilizer. They operated in Southeast Asia from their home base at Misawa, Japan, but had a detachment at Tan Son Nhut. (Photo by Ben Welch via Warren Thompson)

I GOT READY TO BAIL OUT, BECAUSE IT WAS QUITE AN EXPLOSION! THEN I THOUGHT, 'NO WARNING LIGHTS, I MUST BE OK,' BUT BEING A DUMB ASS, I DIDN'T REALIZE THAT I HAD COMPLETE ELECTRICAL FAILURE!



bad guys, stopping in at small villages for a rest, and now and then Fergie would hear shots, somewhere in the distance. He even rode a horse for a short time, until some shots fired in his direction made him think it might not be such a good idea—six feet tall, 200 pounds with blond hair, riding a white horse, might be a tempting target. Just before dark they came into a rather large village, where Ferguson was treated like visiting royalty, being served a large, tasty dinner, and given a place to sleep in the headman's hut.

Spotted at last

Vollmer hadn't seen anyone, as Ferguson had, so he decided to climb the slope across the valley to be in a better position for pickup. Elephant grass on the slope made it like walking on ice, and half way up, exhausted, he dropped to rest. That was when he heard the drone of engines above the increasing clouds. A call on the emergency radio was answered immediately by an Air America C-123 cargo airplane transiting the area. After a couple

put, that the chopper would drag the sling past, and I should grab it. On the next pass, the sling came right at me. I grabbed it and hung on for dear life. The winch operator pulled me up and in. The longest 50 minutes of my life was over. The winch operator had candy and cigarettes. I hadn't smoked for over a year, but I must have smoked a pack on the way to the drop-off site," Vollmer recalled.

Howard Estes, the, chopper pilot, also an Air America employee, told Vollmer that on the way over to a pick-up point, he had been hauling a load of supplies and personnel on a re-supply mission in his H-34, when he heard the initial MAYDAY call. Estes dropped the personnel and supplies off in a field, then he and his crew chief headed north, racing to the rescue. The departing F-105 flight gave him an idea of the area, and then the C-123 called Estes vectoring him to the location.

On arrival at a remote site, Estes dropped Vollmer off, and said to his grateful passenger, "I guess this was your lucky day, Al. I like you a lot, but I don't know if I would have come in there if I had known they were shooting!" With that, he left Vollmer standing on a dirt strip somewhere in Laos, as he took off in his H-34, bullet holes and all, to complete his original mission.

Within an hour, a single-engine turboprop arrived, and flew Vollmer to Udorn, where he received a welcome shot of "mission whiskey," and endured a short debriefing. He was then flown back to Korat in the back seat of a T-28, by an old friend, in time for beer call.

Damaged Voodoo heads for home

With low fuel, and unable to call for help, Parks and his RF-101 managed to find the coastline and turned right. Five minutes later, he spotted Da Nang, and lined up for landing, only to be cut out of the pattern by an F-100, who failed to see him, causing him to pull up into a tight circle, before he could drop the gear with the emergency extension. He landed, taxied to the ramp, and his engine immediately flamed out. He was out of fuel!

As Parks puts it, "Now this is where it gets interesting." When he went to get out of his Voodoo, he discovered the canopy would not open. The exploding shell had jammed the canopy and disabled the ejection seat! He could not have escaped from the Voodoo! It took the better part of an hour to cut him out, and a large group was waiting to talk with him, including Gen. Joe Moore, commander of 2nd Air Division, in charge of all Air Force operations in SEA at that time. He was there for a firsthand report.

A long day gets longer

After deplaning, Parks discovered he had been wounded in the left arm. Gen. Moore asked if he thought he could fly the spare Voodoo to Saigon, and Parks said he could. A flight surgeon checking Parks' wounds said he couldn't fly with those wounds, to which Gen. Moore replied, "Doc, why don't you go burp some babies? This boy has a job to do!"

The strike film was downloaded, put in the spare Voodoo, and Parks flew it to Saigon. General Moore followed in his T-39, Sabreliner, and met Parks at Tan Son Nhut. He said, "Son, go throw some clothes in a bag, you're going to Hawaii to brief Admiral Sharpe, Commander Pacific Forces, as soon as we get this film processed."

In short order, Parks was in a transport, bound for Hawaii. Someone on the staff in Saigon had been thinking ahead, and called Parks' wife, at Okinawa, telling her to pack his class A uniform, so he would have it for the briefings. It arrived in Hawaii, on another courier, about the same time as Parks. However, in her rather excited state, his wife had failed to pack his shirt, tie, belt, and shoes—she had only sent his class A blue uniform! All Parks was wearing was a flight suit and boots, but with some scurrying, the Air Force members of Admiral Sharpe's staff managed to fit him with the missing items.

The locals looked after him

The next morning shortly after daybreak, Ferguson awoke rested and laid under the sun and warm blankets. After a breakfast of a coffee-type drink, he was given a pan of hot water and a washcloth. As he finished washing up, he could hear airplanes in the vicinity. Outside, he saw that the hills were wreathed in early-morning fog. Assuming the aircraft were looking for him, he turned on his emergency radio, and sat it on the roof of the hut. Just before 1100 hours, a C-123 flew over and rocked its wings in response to Ferguson waving an orange flag. Shortly after that, a flight of two F-100s flew over and also acknowledged his presence. Then in the distance they heard, and spotted a chopper headed toward them. The jungle adventure was over.

Asia to Hawaii to the Pentagon

After briefing Admiral Sharpe in Hawaii, RF-101 pilot Parks was directed to proceed to the Pentagon, where he briefed General LeMay, and then Secretary of the Air Force, Eugene M. Zuckert, on the success of the mission. Following the meeting with Zuckert, he was marched back to LeMay's office, where LeMay pinned a Distinguished Flying Cross, and Purple Heart on his chest.

Was it all worth it?

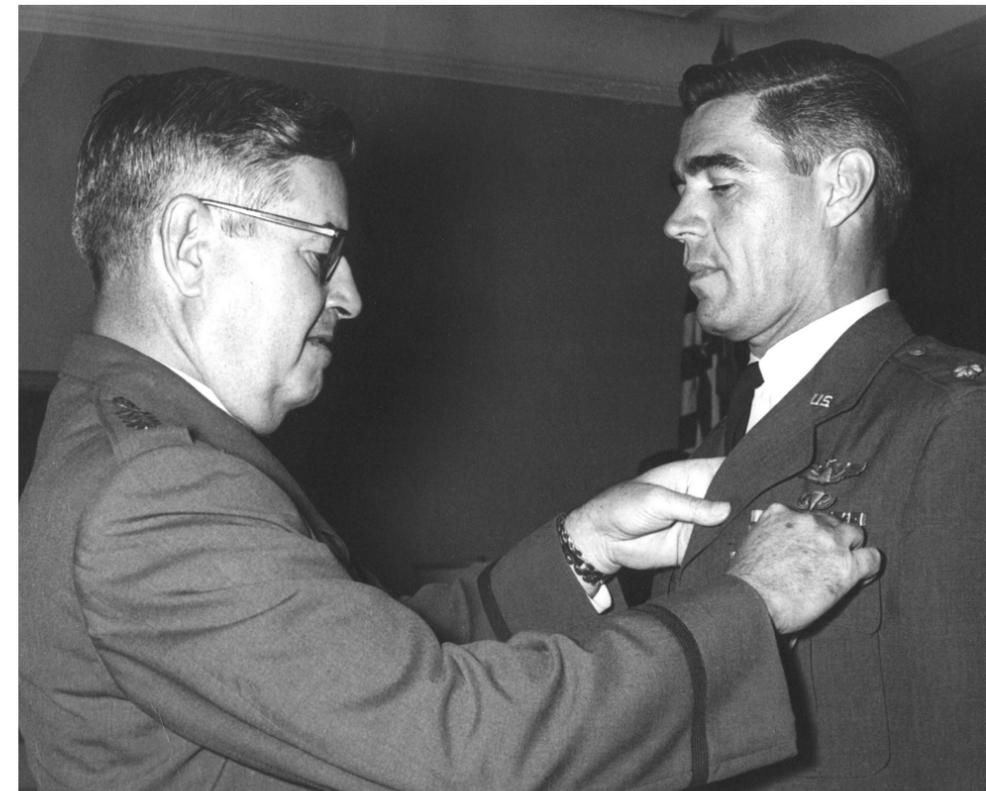
Depending on the point of view, the mission could be labeled a success. After all, the bridge was knocked down, and General LeMay was pleased. On the other hand, it might be classified as a minor disaster. Two fighters were shot down, and one heavily damaged, all for the destruction of a small wooden bridge, which would

A hatless Captain Ferguson being welcomed back by his Squadron Commander, L/C Ben Clayton. (Photo courtesy of Colonel Chuck Ferguson)



of passes overhead, the C-123 came out of the clouds, got a visual on Vollmer, and set up an orbit a mile or so away, so as not to reveal his position.

"The C-123 pilot advised me he was in touch with a helicopter, and for me to remain where I was. The next 30 minutes seemed like an hour. Then I saw the chopper come over the ridge and drop into the valley, taking small arms fire. He lowered his sling and moved into position, but his blades started hitting the elephant grass, and he pulled away. The 123 pilot told me to stay



General LeMay pinning the Purple Heart and Distinguished Flying Cross on Major Al Parks. (Photo courtesy of Col. Al Parks)

be bypassed in a matter of hours. In spite of the fact that no search and rescue units were in place, both downed pilots were rescued almost entirely by chance.

Ban Ken Bridge was the first of many bridges and pales in significance to the many bridges that were to come, and the losses which would be incurred.

Epilogue: The losses would mount

Six months after Barrel Roll Mission 9, Capt. Vollmer would once more be shot down and rescued, again while delivering a Bullpup. This time he would spend two-plus years recovering from injuries received in the ejection. Major Ronca would be killed in action on February 19, 1965, near Sam Nuea. Col. Risner, Major Guirano, Capt. Elander, and Capt. Hall would be shot down during later missions, and become POWs for the next seven-plus years. Capt. Skowron would be shot down and recovered on his 99th mission. Maj. Al Parks would return later in 1965, and do a tour flying the F-105. Capt. Ferguson did not return to combat until 1972 because of his knowledge of sensitive recovery methods. †