

Miracle at U-Tapao

Logic said no one could be alive in the B-52, but something drew Capt. Brent Diefenbach to the blazing bomber.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

LINEBACKER II, the eleven-day bombing campaign of December 1972 that persuaded North Vietnam to sign a cease-fire, had been halted on Christmas Day. Now it was the night of December 26 and the operation was on again. The B-52 with Lt. Robert Hymel as copilot was assigned a target near Hanoi. Everyone knew the North Vietnamese had used the bombing break to restock and repair their surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites. It was going to be a rough night.

As Hymel's B-52 dropped its bombs and turned off target, the rear gunner called two SAMs coming up. Despite evasive action by the B-52, the missiles exploded just to the right of the bomber, wounding the gunner, knocking out two engines, and causing major fuel leaks and other undetermined damage. The aircraft commander headed for an emergency landing at Da Nang, then decided that, with several refuelings, they could make it back to their base at U-Tapao, in Thailand. The wounded gunner would have better medical treatment there.

Shortly after midnight, the BUFF started a straight-in approach to the Thai base. Capt. Brent Diefenbach, a B-52 aircraft commander who had just returned from a mission in the North, sat in a crew bus, waiting to cross the end of the runway as Hymel's battle-damaged bomber neared the runway lights. The approach didn't look or sound right. Suddenly, the aircraft veered to the left and the engines roared as power was added for a go-around. Diefenbach watched, horrified, as the big bomber pitched up, plunged to earth

about a mile beyond the runway, and exploded in a ball of fire.

Diefenbach later remembered the compulsive thought that he had to get to the crash site. "It appeared obvious to me that no one was alive, but something kept drawing me to go." He knew he had to get there fast. Jumping off the bus, he went out an entrance gate and climbed aboard a Thai bus that was headed in the direction of the crash. When the driver refused to go farther, Diefenbach ran down the road toward the burning B-52 until he spotted a path in the tall grass that seemed to lead to the aircraft.

"For a second," Diefenbach recalled, "I thought, 'Why go on? No one is alive in that inferno.'" But again he felt impelled, almost against his will. He approached the wreckage, shouting to see if anyone was alive. To his surprise, he heard

a voice inside the bomber calling for help. Rolling down the sleeves of his flight suit for protection against the heat, he entered the burning plane amidst a fusillade of exploding ammunition and pressure lines. There was no way of knowing if bombs were still aboard.

Diefenbach followed the cries—the only sign of life—through a pall of smoke to find copilot Hymel, badly injured, crumpled in a position that prevented him from unbuckling his seat harness, and with one fractured leg trapped in the wreckage. Diefenbach remembers accusing Hymel of not helping and of falling asleep—"anything to keep him conscious." In desperation, Hymel told his rescuer to cut off the leg if he had to. Finally, working together for what seemed an eternity, they were able to free the injured man. "By that time, the explosions [and] the heat were nearer than I care to think about."

Diefenbach dragged Hymel out of the fuselage and carried him away from the blazing wreck just as a helicopter and fire trucks arrived. The rescue crew was unable to approach the B-52, now engulfed in flames.

Lieutenant Hymel was air-evacuated to Clark Air Base in the Philippines, then to a hospital in the States where he eventually recovered from multiple fractures and lacerations.

After Diefenbach had reported details of the rescue to the wing commander and his staff, he was taken to the base hospital "for some minor repairs and bandages." Some time later, he discovered there were "a lot of thank you's in order for the Chief Pilot in the Sky." He had extricated the copilot from an armed ejection seat. That it had not fired in the struggle to free Hymel was a miracle within a miraculous and heroic rescue, for which the Commander in Chief of Strategic Air Command, Gen. John C. Meyer, presented Capt. Brent Diefenbach the Airman's Medal. ■



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Illustration by Jack Perlow