

# The Practice of Professionalism

Capt. Merlyn Dethlefsen said he was "just doing his job" at Thai Nguyen. It was an extraordinary job by any standard.

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IN mid-1964, Air Force and Navy airmen began fighting for approval of a large-scale air campaign against strategic targets in North Vietnam in order to end the war quickly. But timorous military amateurs who were setting policy in Washington both feared unlikely Chinese intervention and believed that close support of ground forces in South Vietnam was the way to victory. It was not until eight years, thousands of lives, and billions of dollars later that a major air campaign in the North—Linebacker II—was approved, leading to a cease-fire in eleven days.

During those eight years, while this country was being torn apart by antiwar sentiment, high-priority targets in the vicinity of Hanoi were released sporadically and in dribbles by the civilian theorists, "sending signals" from Washington. In response, the North Vietnamese, with Soviet and Chinese help, rapidly built up an extremely dense air defense system in their industrialized areas.

One of the targets approved early in 1967 was the iron and steel plant at Thai Nguyen, located in a valley some forty miles north of Hanoi. It and its surrounding industrial complex were considered an important symbol of industrial growth by the North Vietnamese. By 1967, the Thai Nguyen area was heavily defended by AAA guns, surface-to-air (SAM) missiles, and about 100 MiG fighters on fields that were off limits to strikes by our airmen.

The first attack on the steel plant was launched from Takhli Air Base in Thailand on March 10, 1967, a day of rare good weather. Preceding

the strike force was a flight of four F-105G Wild Weasel aircraft, call sign "Lincoln," whose job it was to knock out ground-based defenses around the target. The Weasels had a high-risk task for which only the best pilots were selected. Flying No. 3 aircraft was Capt. Merlyn Dethlefsen, on his seventy-eighth combat mission.

Strike aircraft ordinarily made one run at a target, dropped their bombs, and headed for home. Those who tried a second pass often didn't survive. The Weasel crews, on the other hand, were usually in the target area for ten minutes or more.

Coming in on the steel plant, "Lincoln" leader immediately picked up an active SAM site, fired a missile that missed, and was shot down by flak. His wingman was also hit and had to pull out, leaving Captain Dethlefsen in command of the remaining two Weasels.

As Dethlefsen lined up for a run at the SAM, two MiG-21s came in fast from the rear. Quickly, he fired a missile at the site and broke away from the MiGs. Standard practice when attacked by fighters was to jettison ordnance, hit the deck, and outrun the MiGs to safety. Dethlefsen kept his bombs and dove through the flak, guessing correctly that the enemy pilots wouldn't follow him. Climbing back to altitude, he evaded two more MiGs, but was hit by flak, as was his wingman.



Maj. Merlyn Dethlefsen (right) and Jeffrey and Julie look on as President Johnson presents Medal of Honor citation to Jorga Dethlefsen.

By this time, the strike force had dropped its bombs and departed with no damage to any of its aircraft. Captain Dethlefsen and his backseater, Capt. Kevin Gilroy, checked their aircraft and found it extensively damaged but still controllable. Dethlefsen knew that another strike on the steel plant would be scheduled for the next day. He decided to get the SAM, which was now hidden by smoke. While maneuvering around the flak pattern, he spotted another SAM site and silenced it with a missile.

Once more Dethlefsen went down to the deck through murderous flak, looking for the first SAM. His wingman, Maj. Kenneth Bell, stuck with him, despite the damage to his own plane. Pulling up, Dethlefsen rolled into his run and destroyed the site with a direct bomb hit. To make sure the SAM wouldn't come up the next day, he hosed the site with his 20-mm cannon, headed for a tanker, and nursed his damaged F-105 back to Takhli, 500 miles away.

Captain Dethlefsen could have pulled out of that maelstrom of enemy fire with honor when the MiGs attacked his loaded Thud, or when he and his wingman were hit by flak, or when the strike force completed its attack, or when the smoke of battle made it difficult to locate the remaining SAM site. Instead, he chose to make repeated runs on enemy defenses, the chance of survival decreasing with each pass. Why did he do it? "It was a case of doing my job to the best of my ability," Dethlefsen said. "I think that's what we mean when we call ourselves professional airmen in the Air Force."

For his courageous decision to finish the job at any cost, Merlyn Dethlefsen, an extraordinarily professional airman, was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Johnson at a White House ceremony on February 1, 1968. He was the third of twelve airmen to be awarded the nation's highest decoration for valor during the Vietnam War. ■