

Triumph at Thai Nguyen

Jim Brickel's RF-101 was shredded by flak, but there could be no turning back on this mission.

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RECONNAISSANCE has been a key element in warfare since men began fighting with clubs and stones. During the long years of the Vietnam War, special requirements were laid on the pilots who flew photo recon missions in the heavily defended areas of North Vietnam. The decision-makers in Washington wanted volumes of target and poststrike photos almost before the smoke of battle had settled.

Until late 1967, most of the photo recon work in the North was done by venerable RF-101 Voodoos, flying alone, in pairs, or leading a formation that included F-4 MiG CAP fighters. Enemy defenses and recon tactics—photo runs were flown at low to medium altitude—took a heavier toll of the unarmed RF-101s than of strike fighters. Photo recon pilots were in a technically sophisticated, extremely dangerous, and rarely lauded business.

Into this sweaty and demanding environment came Lt. Col. James R. Brickel on November 30, 1966, assigned to the 20th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron at Udorn Royal Thai AFB. A 1952 graduate of the Naval Academy, Jim Brickel transferred to the Air Force and cut his teeth as an F-86 pilot. Later earning two advanced degrees in engineering, he spent seven years in nuclear weapons R&D and with the Apollo lunar landing program before volunteering for RF-101 combat crew training.

Three months after reporting at

Udorn, he was named squadron operations officer. By that time, it was apparent that RF-101s could not continue flying over the North much longer. Losses to ground fire and to MiGs had run as high as seven in one month. Plans were afoot to replace them with newer and higher-performance RF-4s, but never mind that. The insatiable demand for photo coverage had to be satisfied, regardless of risk.

March 10, 1967, was a landmark day in the SEA war, as it was for Jim Brickel. After months of hesitation, Washington had released the iron and steel plant at Thai Nguyen, some thirty miles from Hanoi, for attack. (See "Valor," August '86 issue.) Seventh Air Force Commander Gen. William Momyer called it "the most important target of the war." It was also one of the most heavily defended. Colonel Brickel, now a veteran of fifty sorties in the North, volunteered for this hazardous photo mission, which meant flying through a sixty-mile circle of thoroughly alerted SAMs and guns, with MiG-21s lurking in the wings.

As Colonel Brickel and his escort of four F-4s from the 8th Tac Fighter Wing under Lt. Col. Thomas McGuire swung south over Thud Ridge toward the smoke and flame rising from Thai Nguyen, the defenses opened up, first with 37-mm and 57-mm guns, then with an estimated ninety radar-controlled 85s. According to Colonel McGuire, flak was the heaviest he had seen, "except in World War II movies." As Colonel Brickel rolled into his photo run, there may never have been so much flak thrown at a single flight of aircraft.

Then, about ten miles short of the target, an 85-mm shell exploded directly under the RF-101's left engine. Oil pressure on that engine dropped to zero, the left aileron was torn up, a hydraulic pump that provided power for the flight controls

failed, and the cockpit filled with smoke. With the damaged engine retarded, airspeed dropped off by fifty knots, making the Voodoo even more vulnerable. Fire and an explosion seemed imminent, but Colonel Brickel regained control of the aircraft and resumed his run just as the cameras began to roll. He knew there could be no abort on this mission so long as he could keep his crippled bird in the air.

Fighting on through barrage after barrage of flak, Jim Brickel came through with complete photo coverage and nursed his stricken Voodoo back to Udorn. General Momyer, who presented the Air Force Cross to Colonel Brickel, termed his performance over Thai Nguyen "a superb display of guts." General Momyer never was one to bestow compliments lightly.

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Jim Brickel flew another fifty-six missions over North Vietnam as squadron commander and was awarded a Silver Star and the Vietnamese Cross for Gallantry before returning to the States and a distinguished career in command and research assignments. He retired as a lieutenant general in September 1984 and now is a vice president of United Technologies Corp.'s Defense and Space Systems Group in Washington.

Today General Brickel has the highest praise for "the career tac recon pilots who flew those demanding missions throughout the war. They set an exceptional standard of courage, dedication, and professionalism," he says. "Flying with them was one of the most rewarding experiences of my Air Force years." ■