

# ROLLING THUNDER

**Air Force and Navy airmen carried the war deep into North Vietnam.**

If the United States ever had a chance of winning the war in Southeast Asia—and that is a big if—it was Operation Rolling Thunder, the air campaign against North Vietnam from March 2, 1965, to Oct. 31, 1968.

Rolling Thunder began when the war escalated in early 1965. Less than two months later, President Lyndon B. Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara reached the conclusion that airpower could not achieve decisive results and adopted a different strategy, amounting in effect to a land war in Asia.

Airpower would be employed in both North and South Vietnam to support the main effort by ground forces in the south, but there would be no attempt at victory in the north. Targets in the south got first priority for available airpower. Rolling Thunder had no clearly defined military objective.

For the next three years, Air Force and Navy fighter-bombers would fly more than 300,000 combat sorties over North Vietnam from bases in Thailand and South Vietnam and carriers in the Tonkin Gulf. The signature aircraft of Rolling Thunder was the Air Force F-105 Thunderchief, known to all as the “Thud,” which flew more strikes than any other type and took more losses.

An EB-66 uses its radar as a bombsight to penetrate heavy cloud cover and direct F-105 pilots where and when to drop bombs during a mission over North Vietnam.





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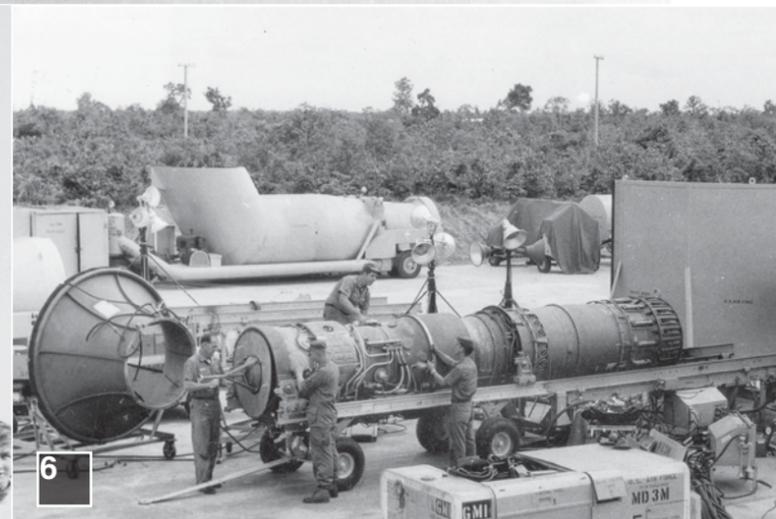
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The operation was tightly controlled from Washington. Targets had to be approved by the White House, which also imposed endless restrictions and prohibitions. No strikes were allowed within 20 miles of Hanoi or Haiphong. For the first two years, airmen were not allowed to strike the MiG bases from which enemy fighters were flying. The rules of engagement kept changing. A target on the approved list one week could be off limits the next week. There were frequent bombing halts.

#### THE STRATEGIC MISTAKE

The problem with the Johnson-McNamara southern strategy was that the war was not an indigenous conflict. It was instigated, planned, directed, and sustained from North

1/ L-r: SSgt. Gary Kightlinger, SSgt. Gene Andrews, and Sgt. Ronald Smitherman install a new wing on a Thud at Takhli AB, Thailand, in 1968. 2/ A four-flight of F-105s under radar control bomb a military staging area in North Vietnam in 1966. 3/ AIC David Panther touches up the gun port of an F-105 at Korat AB, Thailand, in 1967. 4/ A missile's tail protrudes from the engine of an F-105 after a mission over North Vietnam. The Thuds faced a high concentration of enemy fire. This aircraft received a new tail section and went back into action. 5/ Col. Robin Olds is carried off the airfield after completing a mission on the first day of Operation Bolo, an operation that lured North Vietnamese MiGs, believing they would be facing more vulnerable F-105s, into an ambush by the more lethal F-4 aircraft. 6/ Airmen run a final check on an F-105 engine at Korat Air Base.



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Vietnam. War materiel and reinforcements were infiltrated through mountain passes to the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the Laotian panhandle and on to client forces in the south.

US pilots could see weapons, equipment, and war supplies moving on the railroad near Hanoi and being unloaded from ships in the Haiphong harbor. They could look but not strike. The main interdiction campaign, Operation Steel Tiger, ran alongside Rolling Thunder and attacked the supply system in small loads, truck by truck, on the hundreds of miles of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The number of approved targets was expanded in 1967, but as always, political considerations were trumps. A strike on Phuc Yen air base was called off because the State Department had promised a visiting European dignitary that he could land there without fear of bombing.

The MiG-17s and MiG-21s were no match for the US F-4 fighters. In the "MiG Sweep" in January 1967, USAF F-4 Phantoms within 12 minutes shot down seven MiG-21s over the Red River Valley in North Vietnam.

Anti-aircraft guns and SA-2 surface-to-air missiles were more difficult to defeat, and accounted for most of the US aircraft lost. The North Vietnamese placed as many of their SAM sites as they could within the restricted zones, where they were safe from attack.

The most effective counter to the SAMs was "Wild Weasel" aircraft, especially equipped to find and destroy the Fan Song radars that directed the SAMs. The Weasels—initially F-100s but later F-105s—used themselves as bait. Their most famous tactic was the "SAM break," a high-speed dive past the rising missile, followed by a sharp pull up and change of direction. It was dangerous work.

1/ EB-66 aircraft at Takhli Air Base. 2/ Capt. Wilmer Grubb receives first aid from his North Vietnamese captors after his unarmed reconnaissance aircraft crashed in 1966. He died in captivity. 3/ A photo of the flight line at Korat shows USAF C-121s and F-105s. 4/ A KC-135 tanker refuels Thuds en route to bomb military targets in January 1967. F-105s (and, earlier, F-100s) flew "Wild Weasel" missions seeking out and destroying Fan Song radar sites that directed North Vietnamese SAMs. 5/ Armed F-105s on the line at Takhli. 6/ An F-105 approaches a KC-135 while preparing to take on fuel during a bombing mission in 1965.



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The North Vietnamese shot down 922 US aircraft in Rolling Thunder. The fate of many of the airmen is unknown, but some were rescued and hundreds of others were captured and confined in Hoa Lo—the “Hanoi Hilton”—and other prisons. Among the POWs was Lt. Col. Robinson Risner, who led the very first Rolling Thunder mission on March 2. He was shot down Sept. 16 and held by the North Vietnamese for more than seven years.

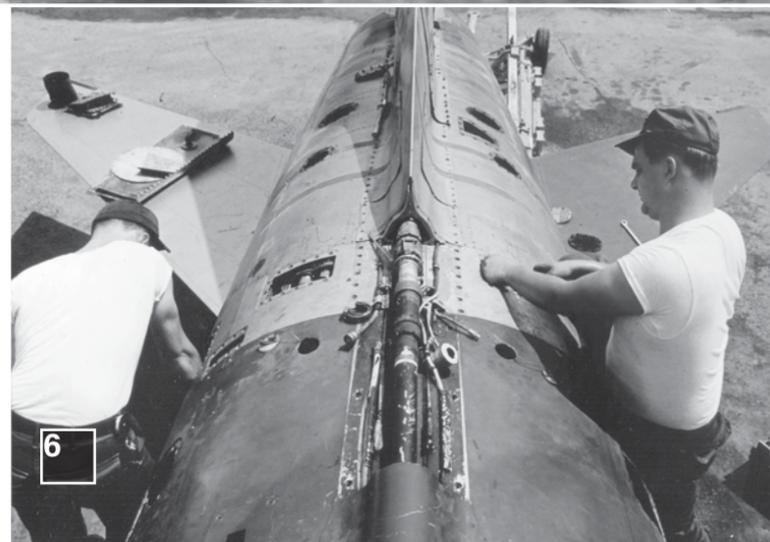
**END OF THE THUNDER**

Meanwhile, US troop strength in South Vietnam climbed steadily and by 1968, had reached 500,000. The war dragged on without resolution. In January, the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong delivered a resounding shock to both US leaders and the public with a major offensive over the Tet lunar new year holiday. Military Assistance Command Vietnam asked for 207,000 more troops, which was soon discovered and reported in the newspapers. Support for the war dropped severely.

President Johnson decided it was time to seek a negotiated settlement to the war. He ordered a partial halt to the bombing of North Vietnam in March 1968 and a complete stop on Nov. 1. The last day of Rolling Thunder was Oct. 31, almost three years and eight months after it had begun.

Critics of airpower were quick with the accusation that Rolling Thunder had failed. That was true, but complicated by the fact that it was not intended to win. McNamara had pointed repeatedly to its limited objectives and secondary strategic priority.

The net effect of the restrictions and prohibitions was that there was never a serious threat to the regime in Hanoi or to its support for the war in the south. Gradual



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1/ F-105s line up for fuel behind a KC-135 en route to bombing targets in North Vietnam. 2/ Sgt. Joseph Runyon kneels atop a fuel bladder as fuel is pumped into a KC-135 at a base in Thailand. 3/ An F-4 dives toward a target in August 1967. 4/ An F-100F Super Sabre fuels up from a KC-135 in April 1968. 5/ An F-4C Phantom on a mission in June 1967. 6/ Airmen work on an F-100 in Southeast Asia in 1966. 7/ Ground crew work on the tail section of a KC-135 tanker at U Tapao AB, Thailand.



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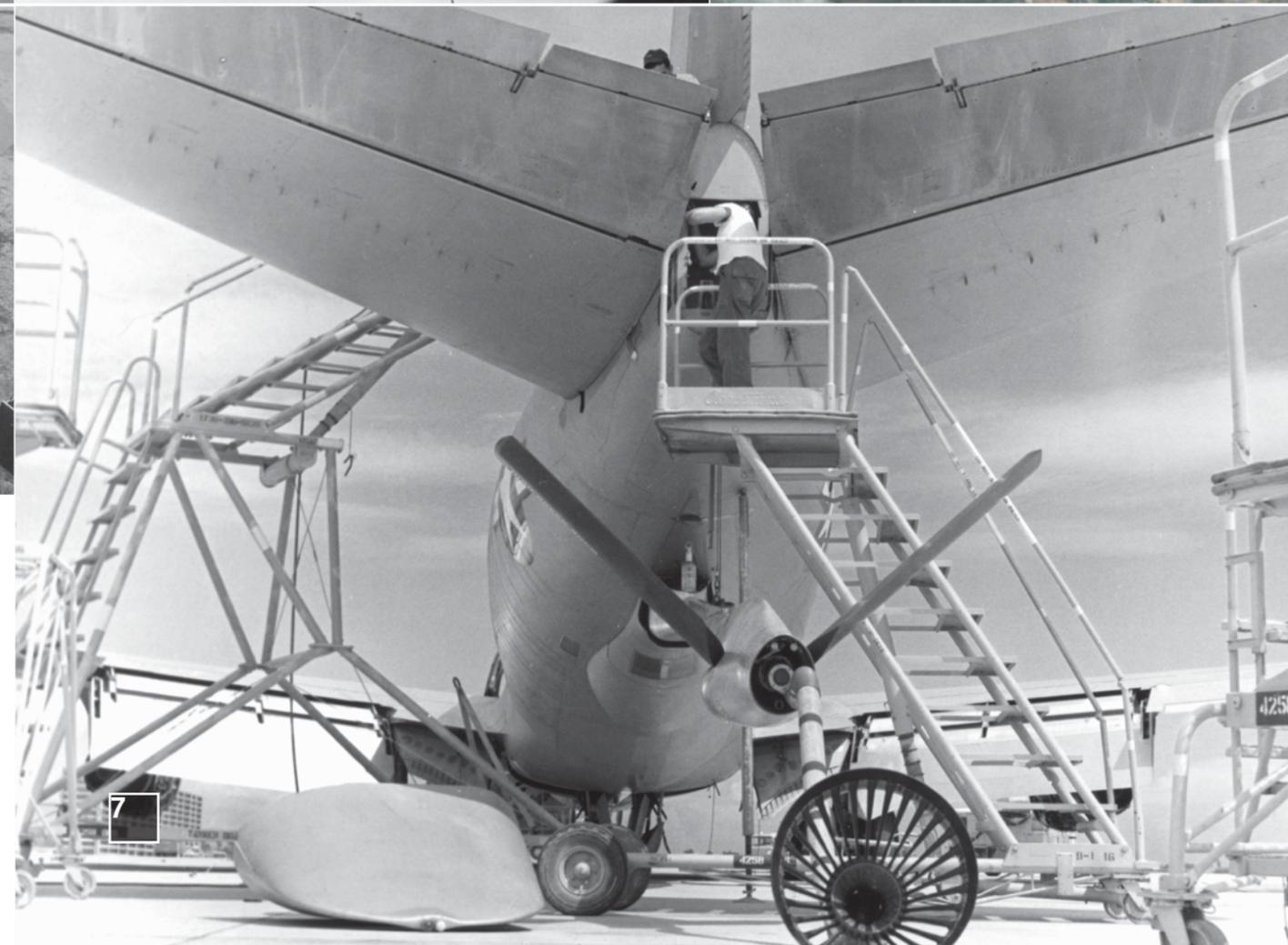
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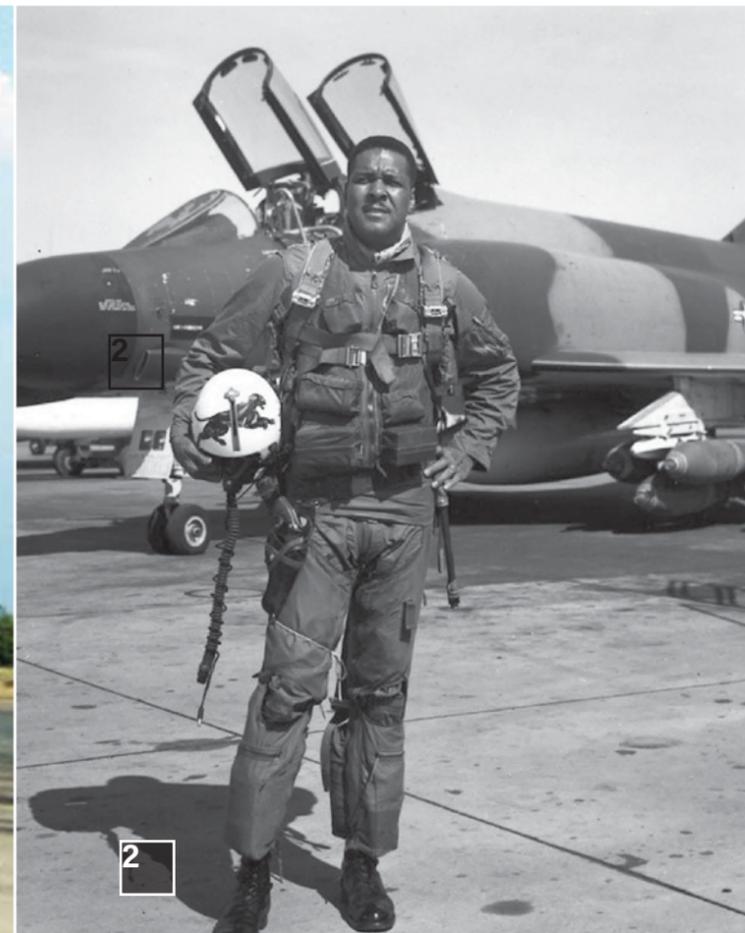
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1/ Thuds line up for takeoff before a bombing mission over North Vietnam in 1966. 2/ Col. Daniel "Chappie" James Jr., an F-4C pilot and vice commander of 8th Tactical Fighter Wing, Ubon AB, Thailand. James flew 78 combat missions into North Vietnam and went on to become the four-star commander in chief of NORAD. 3/ A Thud scrambles to dodge an SA-2 missile over North Vietnam. 4/ F-4C fighters in their early gray and white paint scheme in 1965. 5/ Five F-4Cs sporting the jungle camouflage paint scheme over Thailand in November 1967.



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escalation allowed the North Vietnamese to adjust to the attacks, improve their defenses, and find countermeasures. With difficulty, they managed to absorb the destruction and casualties.

The best effort by a US force of half a million in South Vietnam in cooperation with South Vietnamese forces was not successful either. The southern strategy failed as surely as Rolling Thunder did. Whether victory was possible without a ground invasion of North Vietnam in conjunction with airpower is questionable.

Within that context, Rolling Thunder was the best single chance of knocking North Vietnam out of the war—but the air campaign had not been built to succeed, and it didn't. ★

Nearly all of the images in this pictorial were provided by the National Archives at College Park, Md. The National Archives opens "Remembering Vietnam: Twelve Critical Episodes in the Vietnam War" on Nov. 10, 2017. The exhibit follows American involvement in Vietnam through six presidential administrations—from its World War II origins to the fall of Saigon in 1975. It will be on display in the Lawrence F. O'Brien Gallery at the National Archives Museum in Washington, D.C.

**John T. Correll** was editor in chief of *Air Force Magazine* for 18 years and is now a contributor. His most recent article, "Last Tango in Potsdam," appeared in the September issue.



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Photo: AFA files (1)