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Self-Inflicted Wounds: The Great ‘Flak Trap’ of 1965 & Lessons for Leaders of the 21st Century

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“It is clear ... that war is not a mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means. What remains peculiar to war is simply the peculiar nature of its means. War in general, and the commander in any specific instance, is entitled to require that the trend and designs of policy shall not be inconsistent with these means. That, of course, is no small demand; but however, much it may affect political aims in a given case, it will never do more than modify them, the political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose.”

- Carl Von Clausewitz



Figure 1: SA-2-north-vietnam

Civilian control of the military is a fundamental part of the United States military tradition. The way in which the United States has fought war throughout its existence has drastically changed, and with each war new lessons have been learned, in order to create a more efficient and powerful military force. Since the U.S. emergence as a world power, especially since the Cold War's dawn, the intersection of political and military priorities has only grown. Modern communication also ensures direct control from Washington in ways not available prior to 1945. The Vietnam War for the U.S. provides significant lessons about what this means from not only the overall conflict but from individual battles and missions. It is a case study in how civilian leadership in Washington D.C. played a direct role in military operations, and how that impacted military performance. Operation Spring High in 1965 is one such operation that highlights the mismanagement of military assets and the misunderstanding of modern air power. Studying the basic concepts of why the U.S. military failed in some areas will ensure that civilian leaders and military leaders do not repeat the same mistakes during conflicts in the same theater but against new targets.

U.S. Army War College professor Tami Biddle put Clausewitz' famous comments in modern terms, stating, "The U.S. military does not send itself to war. Choices about war and peace are made by civilians — civilians who,

increasingly, have no historical or analytical frameworks to guide them. They know little or nothing about the requirements of the Just War tradition ... the logistical, geographical, and physical demands of modern military operations.”¹

“Leopard 2” Down

On 24 July 1965, four F-4C Phantom fighter-bombers rolled into the Dien Bien Phu ammunition storage depot near the mountainous Lang Chi munitions complex in Northwestern North Vietnam.² As the four Phantoms of “Leopard Flight” provided cover for the remaining strike force of F-105s, a Soviet operated SA-2 “Guideline” surface to air missile (SAM) site was tracking their position. On the command to fire, 7 SA-2s leaped into the air towards the unalerted Americans at 2300 mph.³ Watching an unfamiliar corkscrew of smoke rise from the ground the American fighters had little time to do anything but watch the oncoming missiles. Seconds later, “Leopard 2” was hit and spiraling out of control into the clouds below as the remaining three F-4s turned for home in disbelief. The Cold War and America’s hot war in Southeast Asia had just kicked up a notch.

The introduction of the SA-2 missile into North Vietnam was not an unknown entity to Washington by July 1965. With the launch of Operation Rolling Thunder and the escalation of American involvement in the preservation of South Vietnam from the Communist Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese patrons, the Kremlin increased the air defense capabilities of Ho Chi Minh’s fledgling military. On 23 July, RB-66C “Raven” electronic warfare (EW) aircraft had picked up SNR-75 azimuth and elevation “Fan Song” radar emissions tracking F-105s on a strike mission over the North.⁴ These emissions stemmed from two new SA-2 regiments just outside Hanoi.⁵ Earlier missions picked up ‘Spoon Rest’ target acquisition radars fed to the EB-66’s from Ryan Firebee reconnaissance drones who were tasked with flying into enemy territory to attract anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) and SAM radars and active sensors to feed back to the electronic counter measure (ECM) assets like the EB-66 for analysis and intelligence building.⁶ Once these systems emitted by tracking the Ryan Firebee drones the EB-66 could then track and locate the signals. On 23 July 1965 the ‘Ravens’ in the back of an RB-66C identified new signals as a ‘Fan Song’ radar from SA-2’s near Hanoi. They had previously identified a ‘Spoon Rest’ target acquisition radar in the same area.⁷ In recognition of the RB-66C crews’ efforts to identify and issue warnings to “Leopard Flight” of the threat sites, the three ‘Raven’ crews who had flown the mission received a Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC).⁸ Air defense

reconnaissance using aircraft indicated the presence and construction of several SAM sites in the immediate Hanoi area and surrounding key sites within North Vietnam. RF-101C “Voodoo” photo reconnaissance aircraft, under heavy AAA fire, took photographs of the two SAM sites that later targeted “Leopard Flight”.⁹ The deadly dance between strike package management, countermeasures, and the tactics to hunt down and kill SAMs was now given due recognition.

Although the sites had been previously known, civilian leadership in the Johnson Administration feared attacking these sites out of the possibility of escalating the war by killing Soviet advisors, technicians, or operators since the Russians were the ones providing the North Vietnamese with the SA-2’s. Ironically, the first escalation within the SAM contest was initiated by the Soviets themselves, launching the first SAMs at U.S. aircraft in the Vietnam War against “Leopard Flight” on 24 July. The crew of “Leopard 2”, Pilot, Capt. Roscoe Fobair died in North Vietnamese captivity and weapons system officer (WSO), Capt. Richard ‘Pop’ Keirn survived.¹⁰ A response was required, but exactly how to respond became a hot debate amongst the elected civilian war architects within the administration. The responding operation identifies that when there is an imbalance between political and military priorities and actions, the political side tilts too far in favor of their objectives thus leaving the military to pay the price.

The Plan & Johnson Administration

President Johnson’s administration defined a circle of 10 nautical miles around downtown Hanoi as a strictly prohibited strike area, with a further 30 nautical mile circle beyond the 10 which could be targeted only with President Johnson’s specific approval.¹¹ Many key officials within Johnson’s circle were leftovers from the Kennedy administration. One primary decision maker, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, whose approach to diplomatic language includes utilizing military action to signal intentions and formulate language to the adversary. A revolutionary take on diplomacy for sure; however, one who speaks to the enemy through specific military operations and interpreting responses by putting oneself into Ho Chi Minh’s shoe’s does not make for an efficient use of the military arm of the DIME principle. DIME being diplomatic, information, military and economic power, Secretary McNamara preferred diplomatic means which then influenced his application of military power. It was believed amongst those in the Johnson administration that if

Hanoi was given prior notice to specific air strikes inside North Vietnam and that target was then destroyed, the communists would eventually discover that their resistance to the Americans was futile. The task of the strike force and its ECM support was made far more difficult by the US government's covert practice of providing the neutral Swiss government with details of the next day's targets in North Vietnam.¹² Secretary of State Dean Rusk justified this policy by explaining that 'we didn't want to harm the North Vietnamese people.'¹³ This information was then passed on, with US permission, to Hanoi, whose defenses could then be arranged accordingly to cause maximum US casualties.¹⁴ A new 85mm heavy AAA battery could be established and operational within six days, while mobile SA-2 batteries could be moved to new sites within a few hours."¹⁵ Many inside the Johnson Administration who were responsible for the selection of targets failed to recognize the mobility of modern air defenses which would cost them their political leverage through their limited use of force while also sealing a deadly fate for many American airmen asked to carry out the elected leadership's policies. This is a clear example of how civilian leaders too far away from the battlefield would significantly impact military operations, thus leaving the military personnel to follow orders that could easily get them killed. Unfortunately, this is a lesson that many had learned during the Vietnam War but is critical to understanding by both military and civilian leadership.



Figure 2: North Vietnamese ADA Crew

To continue, the diplomatic bombing approach example and the geopolitical thinking can be described by National Security Advisor Walt Rostow, who in 1965 briefed Senator William Fulbright on the administration's concept of "Limited Bombing", a series of selective air strikes to gauge Hanoi's response. Senator Fulbright described this briefing when he gave an interview for the 1980s documentary series, *Vietnam: 10000 Day War* stating, "Mr. Rostow had a theory, he called it surgical bombing, I heard him elaborate on this on various occasions. It is that you would give the North Vietnamese notice that we will bomb plant A tomorrow and take it out. Now we don't want to hurt you, we don't want to kill any civilians, everybody gets out of there, but this is what we are going to do. All you have to do is come to a peace conference and let's settle this matter. If you don't, then after plant A, then plant B, plant C, and so on and so on. Surely, at some point, they would quit, and they would realize that we would utterly destroy the country."¹⁶ This theory is only valid if the enemy is dormant and incapable of possessing any will to resist. Or the enemy is too ignorant to realize that any defenses they do have can be concentrated on the targets that are identified by the enemy prior to striking them. A weekly luncheon was held at the White House where President Johnson and his advisers would choose targets inside North Vietnam to hit and what routes the air crews were to take for political considerations, rather than the air war planning staffs who had trained their entire professional careers specifically in the conduct of air campaigns and the intricate science of aerial warfare.

The nature of the civilian leadership's attitude toward the conduct of the war shaped the disasters to be carried out by the crews of the strike packages who pushed into North Vietnam. Naturally, the retaliation strikes against the SAM sites in North Vietnam would be curtailed by Washington and limited to only 2 sites 40 miles west of Hanoi, which Secretary McNamara identified as the two sites that fired on "Leopard 2". Accordingly, the sites' locations and timing of the attack would be passed to the enemy to ensure that all capable air defense assets would be made available to meet the strike package soon to arrive against them. The North Vietnamese and their Soviet advisors, thankful to be given an opportunity to prepare for the coming assault by the Americans, proceeded to do something unthinkable to the planners in the Johnson Administration. The North Vietnamese moved their missiles to a safe location and put-up decoy missiles made of bamboo and placed all available AAA in the strike area.¹⁷ The F-105 crews at Takhli and Korat Royal Thai Air Force Bases preparing for a strike against all known missile sites in the North were told hours prior to launch that their target had narrowed to only two sites. The

sites that had been decoyed and filled with AAA, known by aircrew as “flak”. The Air Force’s first “Iron Hand” mission against a SAM site was doomed before the first F-105 rolled down the runway. The operation was named, “Spring High”, and a massive force of 54 F-105s took off on 27 July 1965 without knowing that despite their training and zeal, the battle was lost before their aircraft reached 1 foot above ground level (1 ft AGL).

Execution – Operation Spring High

The package sent by the Americans against site 6 and site 7 was enormous compared to the number of targets that were chosen for the operation. 54 F-105s of the 18th, 23rd, and 355th Tactical Fighter Wings (TFW), supported by a further 58 aircraft struck the two SAM sites along with a nearby barracks using bombs, rockets, and napalm.¹⁸ RB-66Cs monitored the strike force as they came off their KC-135 fuel tankers over Laos and eventually crossed into North Vietnam. The code phrase, “Bluebells are singing” were relayed by the EB-66Cs to the strikers if “Fan Song” radar emissions were found.¹⁹ Further support was offered by the Marine Corps, flying EF-10 “Skynights” of VMCJ-1 out of Da Nang. The six EF-10s were flying racetrack patterns at 20,000 feet, jamming any “Fire Can” fire control radars associated with the SA-2s that might try to hit the F-105 strike force attacking SAM sites 6 and 7.²⁰ As the Marines started north along the coast, they passed the infamous Thanh Hoa Bridge and began receiving indications of tracking radars. The Marines commenced their jamming and broke any locks the fire control radars may have started. The massive American joint air package displayed how intricate and complex the execution of a modern air war can be in the face of a modern air defense threat. The supporting aircraft, tasked with non-kinetic effects upon the enemy, are at many times outnumbering the strike aircraft. Few nations have demonstrated this capability or have found an opportunity to conduct such an effort.

A young Captain, “Chuck” Horner, who would later command the Allied Air Campaign for Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, flew his F-105D with the 18th TFW that day. Capt. Horner witnessed his squadron mate Capt. “Bob” Purcell’s F-105 hit by flak, rolled over and went into the ground. Horner described the scene by stating, “I looked out to the left and saw anti-aircraft artillery lined up in rows with their barrels depressed, fire belching forth.”²¹ Capt. Purcell’s F-105 would be followed by a further 5, making the total losses 4 aircraft shot down, 2 lost in a collision, 3 pilots killed, 2 captured, and 1 later rescued.²² Upon returning home the pilots were shocked to realize that their targets had been dummies all along. The North Vietnamese had painted long

sticks of bamboo white and ringed them around fake radar sites while placing over 130 AAA guns around the target area.²³



Figure 3: U.S. F-15 "Thunderchief"

Another pilot who flew an F-105 in this strike, Captain Vic Vizcarra, commented, “Spring High could have been a historic mission. It was the first time in history of an attack against a SAM site. If we had known the site was a trap, we would have never sent the force out. We attacked at a low level, which was based on the exaggerated assumptions of the SAM’s capabilities. I’m not sure we would have done much better even if we had been able to plan the mission without headquarters’ interference. We had a lot to learn, and you sometimes have to do the wrong thing to know it was wrong.”²⁴ This mission would lead to the formation of an air staff anti-SAM task force led by Brigadier General Kenneth “K.C.” Dempster.²⁵ This force encompassed all the services and contractors to develop the needed warning receivers and anti-SAM weapons, sensors, and jamming pods that would lead to the establishment of the “Wild Weasel” program. It was not until September 1966 when U.S. aircraft could self-jam SAM radars with the QRC-160 jamming pods.²⁶

Lessons Learned for Decision Makers Today

The lessons to draw from this case study are not ones a military member can manipulate to apply to his/her own operations. Bluntly, one must follow the lawful orders of those appointed over him or her. The key lesson from this study should be directed towards those who seek to serve in a representative

capacity on behalf of those who must carry out the orders given by civilian elected leadership. Military knowledge and an operational understanding of the environment in which war is carried out is not a requirement for office in the United States and it is for an understandable reason. However, it should be strongly acknowledged that possessing the necessary tools of historical context and learning the lessons of past failures are essential to making new mistakes rather than repeating old ones paid for in blood. Case studies such as Spring High must be utilized by military leadership as a tool to point to civilian leadership during consultation when on the eve of combat decision making. Understanding the nature of war itself is also key to quick victories rather than drawn out misunderstandings through governments who interpret intentions strike to strike. Had the Air Force been given the green light to strike all SAM sites that were established and under construction early and maintained such pressure through a sustained campaign, planned and overseen by those who were professionals, they could have severely weakened Hanoi's ability to carry out an integrated and high-cost air defense apparatus that would plague the Americans for years. The overall theme of this lesson in air power management for those who wear suits with American flag pins on them can be summed up by General "Chuck" Horner who said, "You cannot go at war incrementally, if you're going to embark upon this immoral thing called warfare, you better go at it hard and get it over with as soon as possible. You owe it to the men and women who are fighting the war and you owe it to the enemy, whose lives you're taking and destroying."²⁷ Chuck Horner additionally recalled, "The [anti-SAM] mission was just stupid. I concluded at the time that low-level attack was a loser."²⁸ *Rolling Thunder* convinced him that "air war planning was being done by people far away from the theater of operations who had no appreciation for the realities," and that "a bunch of amateurs were running things."²⁹ The weight of memory General Horner carried with him throughout his career after his Southeast Asia experience shaped the way he would structure the *Desert Storm* air campaign plan a quarter century later.

Like Chuck Horner using his experience to better inform current and future military operations, policy makers and strategic military leaders can do the same by understanding another lesson brought up by Operation Spring High. As previously mentioned, the DIME principle is integral when waging war. In this instance, a diplomatic outlook influenced a military operation that then ended up with U.S. military members being killed unnecessarily. A true understanding that each portion of DIME, diplomatic, information, military and economic can influence the others is critical. Information was the other aspect presented in Operation Spring High, since a diplomatic outlook was the

primary focus, information was provided thus again impacting a military operation that could have been one of the most significant anti-SAM operations in history. Yet instead we see the result of Operation Spring High being an ultimately failed mission. Operation Spring High, as an individual strike, has been overshadowed by the rest of the air war over North Vietnam in which roughly 800 American aircrew were killed. The study of this single operation however is a microcosm of America's Vietnam experience in the mismanagement, misapplication, and misunderstanding of modern air power. Ultimately those who endeavor to step into the echelons of civilian and elected leadership should look to cases like Operation Spring High and the lessons derived from their predecessors to avoid repetitive and self-inflicted wounds in America's future conflicts.

“The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.” – Carl Von Clausewitz, On War

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