



Grupo de Investigación  
**Historia Militar**



# **The 11 Days of Xmas: The December 1972 USAF Strategic Air Command campaign against Hanoi**

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As the fall of 1972 approached, the US Nixon administration sought to end its military involvement in South East Asia by early 1973. During the spring of that year, the war had expanded, with the North Vietnamese launching a 30 March 1972 conventional ground invasion of South Vietnam in support of the insurgent movement there, the Viet Cong. US air assets, primarily those of the United States Navy (USN), the United States Marine Corps (USMC) and the United States Air Force (USAF), had launched an air campaign on 9 May, code named *Linebacker*, which inflicted huge losses on the North Vietnamese forces, attacked North Vietnam and allowed the South Vietnamese to recapture lost territory.<sup>1</sup>

A continuation of this active military role by the United States was by this point totally politically unacceptable, as the US populace and its elected officials had grown weary of a war that seemingly could not be won. US President Richard M. Nixon sought to end it, regardless of the obvious challenges that *Vietnamization*, the process of turning the war over to the US-equipped South Vietnamese forces, had experienced. However, peace talks involving the US, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV - North Vietnam), and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN - South Vietnam) and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, with its communist insurgent forces, the Viet Cong, were literally at a standstill in the light of the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert F. Dorr, *Air War Hanoi* (New York: Blandford Press, 1988), 161.

The South Vietnamese government, led by President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, did not, under any circumstances, want the US to withdraw, and their resistance had stalemated peace talks. US National Security Advisor (NSA) Henry Kissinger had been directed in 1969 to begin secret peace talks exclusively with the North Vietnamese representatives in Paris, France, led by their primary negotiator, Lê Đức Thọ.

Following the US blunting of the March 1972 Easter Offensive, the next set of negotiations took place on 2 May 1972, as both sides returned to Paris. Following the heavy fighting, both sides were ready to make concessions. On 8 May 1972, the US made a major concession to the North Vietnamese, announcing that they would accept a cease fire in place, allowing the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) to remain in Vietnam. The effect of Operation Linebacker and this concession allowed a July 1972 negotiation breakthrough, and a simultaneous US diplomatic effort to isolate the DRV from China and the USSR allowed further progress was made in the following months.<sup>2</sup>

President Nixon would be re-elected with a massive majority in November 1972, and had a clear mandate from the US electorate to end the war “with honour”, with US forces undefeated and with all US prisoners of war (POWs) held by Vietnamese freed. He was determined to achieve this goal, but arguably faced just as many hurdles as his predecessor, former President Lydon B. Johnson, did. Bypassing his Secretary of State William Rogers, Nixon had directed Kissinger to secure a peace deal for fall 1972, overcoming all obstacles in the process.<sup>3</sup>

Moving aggressively, and against all odds, a tentative agreement was secured by

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<sup>2</sup> Robert K. Brigham, *Reckless: Henry Kissinger and the Tragedy of Vietnam* (New York: Public Affairs, 2018), 181-186, 189-192.

<sup>3</sup> Frederik Logevall and Andrew Preston, Editors, *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 198

Kissinger with the North Vietnamese on 8 October 1972. Key points of the agreement stated all US POWs would be freed in exchange for total US military withdrawal and the recognition of the South Vietnamese government and its leader by the North. There would also be a cease-fire in place, accepting that the NVA would not have to withdraw from South Vietnam, while US forces would.<sup>4</sup>

There was a sticking point. Present Thiệu of South Vietnam's signature was needed on the documents. Thiệu was determined to object to any agreement – and his exclusion from peace talks and the assumption he would “go along” with any agreement was a misstep by the Nixon administration. Arriving in Saigon to present Thiệu with the treaty and gain his rubber stamp – Kissinger was rebuffed by Thiệu, whose government submitted 69 amendments. Upon first learning of the agreement, Thiệu claimed to be betrayed, and that the US Government went behind his back. Certain Nixon administration US State Dept staff at this point stated Thiệu had a point, making Nixon doubt the validity of the agreement, thus hindering accomplishment of his end state even more by indulging Thiệu.<sup>5</sup> The Nixon administration at this point understood the South Vietnamese concerns, but was also very cognizant that realistically the North Vietnamese would refuse all of their amendments, and the tentative agreement would be worthless.

On his return to Paris on 20 November 1972, North Vietnamese lead negotiator Lê Đức Thọ declared that the Americans are “negotiating in bad faith”, and he subsequently rejected the proposed South Vietnamese amendments when they are communicated to him. Thọ and the North Vietnamese negotiating team stated that only the previous deal would be good enough for

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 200.

them. Further attempts at talks break down on 13 December 1972, and the North Vietnamese hint ominously that US POWs may not be freed as a future condition.<sup>6</sup>

The US Congress, this being the US House of Representatives and the Senate, was also freshly elected in November 1972. While the new 93<sup>rd</sup> US Congress was not hostile to Nixon, both houses had Democratic party majorities and they saw their role to actively end a war that its members believed should have been ended years ago. The US Congress was wary of Nixon, given his previous invasions of Cambodia in 1970 and Laos in 1971, which in their eyes utilized US forces to effectively widen the war.<sup>7</sup>

As aforementioned, Nixon had used massive airpower to crush the NVA's 30 March 1972 Easter Offensive, which saw the North Vietnamese invade South Vietnam and made rapid progress until stopped by airstrikes. Come January 1973, Congress would have the power to effectively cut Department of Defence funding for US military operations in South East Asia. In Nixon's eyes, there was no doubt they would do this. The massive USAF, USN, USMC aviation assets in place within Vietnam, in the Gulf of Tonkin and within Thailand were straining the US budget. Secretary of Defence Melvin Laird pointed out to Nixon he needed to pass a defence appropriation bill in Congress for this Vietnam "Augmentation Force" if he in fact wished to maintain it. Nixon very much knew that Congress would not pass such a bill.

The domestic US protest movement, made up a cross section of America, was sick of the war and is now an established political force that is very much the sworn enemy of the US government and a prime concern for Nixon. In speeches and other statement to the press leading

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<sup>6</sup> Marshall L. Michel III, *Air Campaign: Operation Linebacker II 1972. The B-52s are sent to Hanoi* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2018), 35.

<sup>7</sup> Brigham, *Reckless*, 187-188.

up to fall 1972, he had declared that “Peace was at hand”. As a result, the US populace, Congress, and the electorate all expected a deal.<sup>8</sup>

As a result of all these factors, Nixon needed to restart the Paris talks, control Thiệu, and force an agreement with the North Vietnamese before January 1973. If these simultaneous goals were not achieved, Congress would likely cut off the funding for the war. There will be no “Peace with Honour”, this being an honourable US withdrawal in the eyes of the US electorate, and no deal on US POWs.

Kissinger, seeing no other option but to force the North Vietnamese to some kind of agreement, urged the President to consider massive military action to achieve the administration’s goals. In response, Nixon ordered the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and the Secretary of Defence to prepare US air assets for a massive military operation against North Vietnam. He immediately faced resistance from all sides within the Pentagon, the nerve center of the US military in Washington, DC, due to reduced US forces’ capabilities in the region, but was resolute. Seeing failure as not an option, he pressed forward with his direction for US forces to be ready.<sup>9</sup>

On 14 December 1972, Nixon threatened grave consequences for the North Vietnamese unless they return immediately to the Paris negotiations. On the same day, he provided more specific direction to the JCS, to prepare to attack North Vietnam with three days with massive air attacks, using all USAF Strategic Air Command (SAC) assets, specifically B-52 heavy bombers. It will be an all-out effort that would achieve maximum destruction to critical infrastructure in the Hanoi area and mine the strategic port of Haiphong. The operation is 100 percent politically

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>9</sup> Michel, *Operation Linebacker II*, 35.

driven to achieve goals whose achievement had been sabotaged by US missteps and South and North Vietnamese resistance.

The North Vietnamese never stated they didn't want to come back to the table or conduct further Paris peace negotiations, but realized in early December that Kissinger was now in a difficult position, and wished to frustrate his foreign policy and reduce the strength of his bargaining position. They viewed waiting until the US Congress cuts off future funding as a viable strategy in order to reduce the threat of US military action. They know they just have to wait.<sup>10</sup>

Operating under time pressure, Nixon realized that this operation has to show the North Vietnamese the US means business, and was capable of destroying their vital infrastructure and continuing to do so on a massive scale. An attack would also serve to reassure the South Vietnamese that if there was a future ceasefire violation the US was massively committed to their support, thus securing their signature on a future peace agreement. The plan, though crude, was to use the firepower of the SAC wings of B-52 bombers to bludgeon the North Vietnamese back to the negotiating table.

There were three main reasons behind the use of the SAC B-52s. First, they were able to deliver colossal conventional bombloads onto targets from high altitude in a precision manner, operating at night and thus impairing North Vietnamese fighter interceptors that were not proficient in night operations. Secondly, many of them could be assembled in theatre within the time frame demanded by Nixon, this number rising eventually to 207 B-52s based in Guam and Thailand. The employment of the massive number of the gigantic B-52 aircraft will have a huge

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 34.

impact on the North Vietnamese targets. Never before in the postwar Cold War era would this level of brute military destructive force be unleashed. Third, while there was the monsoon season weather in North Vietnam, the use of smaller tactical fighter bombers faced possible challenges due to the weather, and maximum military impact had to be made in the shortest amount of time.

The headquarters of SAC, the nuclear strike force of the USAF based at Offhuth Air Force Base (AFB) in Omaha, Nebraska, was uneasy about the deployment of some of its most important resources. The advanced air defence network present in North Vietnam was highly sophisticated, and well stocked with the most advanced weaponry the USSR and other Eastern Bloc states could provide. Its anti-aircraft forces had years of experience combatting US bombing campaigns, Operation Linebacker I being the latest. Each B-52D bomber, as an example, was worth the equivalent of \$ 66 million dollars in 2022 US currency, and no more were being built, as the production lines at Boeing had closed down. SAC was very nervous about potential losses, as its irreplaceable bomber force was its primary nuclear strike force against the USSR in the event of a nuclear war. Due to these pressures and the short time period needed to plan the air campaign, it would impose a top down planning structure for the upcoming missions.<sup>11</sup>

This campaign, officially designed *Linebacker II* and thus a continuation of the air campaign against North Vietnam that derailed its Easter Offensive, would be a dynamic escalation in the use of airpower exercised in South East Asia. If used earlier, it may have changed its course of the Vietnam war or North Vietnam's role in it.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 36-38.



Extensive resources were planned to support the B-52s. Despite their sophisticated targeting technology and electronic warfare (EW) jamming capabilities, there would be a huge escort of a specialist aircraft including F-105 “Wild Weasel” fighter-bombers whose responsibility was attacking surface to air missiles (SAM) sites and their radar installations. A large number of USAF F-4 fighter aircraft were to provide fighter escort and conduct drops of chaff, aluminum strips to confuse the enemy radar operators. A number of USAF Eb-66 and USN EA-6 aircraft would operate over the Hanoi area to provide radar-jamming capability. The B-52s operating from Guam would need to be refueled, and there would be a large number of KC 135s in the area for refueling. A large number of Search and Rescue (SAR) helicopters would be deployed in South Vietnam, Thailand and from USN aircraft carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin’s Yankee Station area of operations, on standby to rescue shot down aircrew.

While this amount of resources was impressive, the, the headquarters staffs of both the 7th and 8th USAF Air Forces (AF), based out of Thailand and Guam respectively, had been cut out of the planning – every single non-SAC USAF Lieutenant Colonel, Major, and Captain with all their experience and planning capabilities was not utilized. Linebacker II was to be exclusively commanded and controlled from Offhut AFB in Omaha. As an example of this under-utilization, the 8th AF headquarters was only delegated to coordinate the 7th AF tactical aircraft effort from Thailand.<sup>12</sup>

The air defence network ready to combat a large US air campaign was not insignificant. The NVA in December 1972 had a total of 36 SA-2 Guideline equipped surface to air (SAM) missile battalions. While these missiles and their radars were 1957 Soviet technology and not

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 38-42.

cutting edge, being somewhat obsolete in 1972, they still were very capable of shooting down US aircraft.

The North Vietnamese were very weak in the area of fighter interceptor capability. While the Vietnamese People's Air Force (VPAF) had 71 operational aircraft, only 47 were fighters (MiG 17s and MiG 21s). Only a very small number of their pilots are trained for night operations and had their instrument flight ratings (IFR) training, making their employment at night not an option. The fighter pilots present were very young and inexperienced, and their numbers were worn down from years of attrition against USAF and USN incursions that shot down many of their MiG fighters and killed many pilots.<sup>13</sup>

Let there be no misunderstanding; North Vietnam was a third world country, but its air defence network contained enough sophisticated weaponry to make a fight of the coming confrontation with SAC and the massive number of support aircraft. Whether the North Vietnamese could effectively stop or inhibit the coming US attack would rest on the shoulders of its SAM batteries.

It was planned that the B-52s, regardless of squadron and wing strength, would operate in three bomber "cells" to concentrate their EW signal power to jam the SAM batteries radars for mutual defence. They would also attack at night to avoid any MiG fighters, and would arrive in waves, three of them. This is where the planning effort, meant to be simplistic, was weak. While there were a large number of the aforementioned support aircraft from the USN, USMC, USAF, their effort was but diluted by having to service three B-52 "waves". Each wave was directed to utilize the exact same flightpath. Once the B-52s of a cell had dropped their bombs on their

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

designated target, they would then carry out their “Post-Target turns” a maneuver that was part of SAC tactics for dropping nuclear weapons – the B-52s intended role in modern warfare.<sup>14</sup> However, these turns would slow the aircraft significantly if they turned into a headwind, allowing for a longer time period subjected to SAM or MiG fighter attack and most importantly, radar detection. Secondly, the turn would bank the aircraft significantly, causing the EW defensive “beam” to point diagonally away from the earth for a short time, enough for a SAM radar operator to be provided with a bigger, clear radar silhouette.<sup>15</sup> To top it all off, the newer B-52G models have newer EW suites that were designed to defeat modern Soviet radars, making them more vulnerable to the 1950s era North Vietnamese SAMs. They also carry less bomb loads than the older D Models, which make up the majority of the B-52 force.<sup>16</sup>

## **Night 1**

Following Nixon’s direction that the new air campaign would begin in 72 hours from 14 December, the first wave of 129 B-52s, one of three, took off on mid to late afternoon on 18 December, those leaving Andersen AFB taking off at the rate of 1 per minute. There were three target areas that will be hit on the first night. To destroy or neutralize the MiG fighter threat, the three airfields at Kép, Phúc Yên and Hòa Lạc would be attacked, as well as an industrial target, the Yên Viên complex and other targets near Hanoi. After experiencing US air attacks throughout 1972 and knowing that the US negotiating effort in Paris had stalled, the North Vietnamese were ready, though some SAM battalions were not concentrated in Hanoi.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 40-41

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 38-42.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

As the B-52s conducted their bombing runs and post-target turns, the SAM crews and radar operators desperately tried to get a radar return on the gigantic bombers in order to loose their missiles. A total of 68 SAMs were loosed in salvos, their warheads set with proximity and impact detonation. Two B-52Gs and one B-52D were shot down over Hanoi, the entire civilian population watching them explode in the air, and two B-52Ds with heavy battle damage limped to the USAF U-Tapao base in Thailand. Of the B-52 aircrew members that survive, one crew was rescued and the others are captured and become POWs.<sup>18</sup> The Offutt AFB SAC formulated tactics are based on a MiG threat that is not there— no MiGs emerge in large numbers and the entire defensive effort is placed in the hands of the SAM and AAA battalions, the latter equipped with 100mm anti-aircraft flak weapons. Losses to the fighter-bombers included an USAF F-111 that is shot down while attacking Radio Hanoi. Back in Washington as the world watched, there was no presidential address from the White House. Kissinger did hold a press conference, which was very strange considering his position and that he is not a Defence Department official, military member or on the staff of the Secretary of State.

## **Night 2**

While the losses on the first night of bombing had shocked the SAC command staff in Nebraska, the decision was made to press on, and the second attack on 19 December saw 93 B-52 sorties. Targets attacked were the Kinh No railroad and storage complex, the Thái Nguyên thermal power plant and the again the Yên Viên complex. On this night only 20 SAMs were launched. No B-52s were lost, but some were damaged by near explosions. For the NVA SAM crews, the issue of SAM depletion was a challenge and it could not properly conduct an all-out

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 51-57.

aggressive air defence. Vietnamese crews in storage locations had to assemble newly arrived missiles out of their packing crates, properly fuel and ready them, and then transport them to the battalions, which again had to make them ready for firing. This took time, and the amount of SAMs fired on the first night had depleted ready stocks within the SAM battalions. Tragically, the lack of losses make SAC headquarters overconfident and complacent. All the waves on Night 2 again took the same altitudes and flightpaths, making their positions predictable to the SAM crews, and the “Post-Target Turn” continued to slow the B-52s and makes them more of a target for the radar and SAMs.<sup>19</sup>

### **Night 3**

The third night of attacks on 20 December was to be the most disastrous SAC. Targets to be attacked on this night, which some at SAC headquarters thought was to be the last night of the campaign, were the Yên Viên, Kinh and Ai Mo industrial complexes, the Thái Nguyên power plant, the transport hub at Bắc Giang, and finally the Hanoi petroleum storage complex.

Observing the waves and the identical flight plans, the North Vietnamese a total of 34 missiles into the target zone, loosing them in salvos, the SAM crews using various tactics to ensure hits, including “burning” through the B-52 EW jamming using the full power of their Song Fan radars. As the B-52s needlessly conducted their nuclear strike post target turns, their EW jamming capability was temporally lost as the aircraft banked. These factors and high winds displacing the aluminium chaff let the missile crews get a clear “blip” on their radars and also slowed the bombers down as they are forced to turn into the wind, massively decreasing their

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<sup>19</sup> Michel, *Operation Linebacker II*, 59. Dorr, *Air War Hanoi*, 181-182.

airspeed. The missiles do terrible damage as four B-52D's and four B-52G's are lost in the first and third waves. Due to battle damage, one B-52D crash landed back in Thailand.<sup>20</sup>

Getting the reports in real time, SAC high command in Nebraska was shocked at the ten percent loss rate, and they recall the B-52G model cells from the second wave.<sup>21</sup> This will be the first cancellation of a mission in USAF history since the Second World War due to enemy action. There is a huge furor in SAC headquarters over losses to bomber crews and the B-52 inventory. Regardless, it was decided that the SAC effort in the way of the third wave must press on. USAF airpower doctrine is at stake as well as US prestige and deterrence. Thus the third wave was committed, and loses bombers to the SAMs.<sup>22</sup>

### **Analysis of what went wrong**

In the analysis of what went wrong with the third night of bombing, the North Vietnamese anticipated the flight patterns, and the repetitive, simple, US tactics were exploited by the SAM battalions. With multiple waves rather than one main wave, the North Vietnamese have smaller numbers of bombers and support aircraft to contend with. The chaff, anti-radar jamming and Wild Weasel effort was thus diluted and less effective. The North Vietnamese were also well prepared for the B-52s. Research efforts near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) had analyzed B-52 EW jamming techniques in South Vietnam as well as the F-105 Wild Weasel methods of attacking SAM sites in the North, and these studies had been disseminated to the SAM battalions.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Michel, *Operation Linebacker II*, 63-66.

<sup>21</sup> Jon Lake, *B-52 Stratofortress Units in Combat, 1965-1973* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2004), 66

<sup>22</sup> Michel, *Operation Linebacker II 1972*, 66-67.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-28.

By using poor tactics, SAC General John C. Meyer and his staff showed they did not recognize the threat or power of the North Vietnamese air defence network. They also believed that there would be a significant amount of MiG fighters in action, when in fact there were none or very little. The previous uses of B-52s over Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam had not encountered any air defences network, and arguably the USAF had grown complacent following years of little to no losses.

### **Night 4 and 5**

To the surprise of the JCS and the USAF, President Nixon ordered continuation of the strikes, forcefully ordering the campaign to press on. Privately aghast at the losses and the poor tactics, he knows there is no other option but to press forward with the campaign using maximum US airpower strength to achieve the end state he needed.<sup>24</sup> Concurrently, there began within SAC a massive drive to cut losses. The huge differences between B-52D and B-52G models had been fully exploited by the North Vietnamese. The antiquated B-52Ds EW capabilities are ironically more effective against older SA-2 missiles and the Fan Song radar systems of the North Vietnamese, as the newer B-52Gs are designed for more advanced current Soviet SAMs and radar.

On night four only the Thailand based B-52D squadrons at the base in U-Tapao conducted sorties in their three ship cells. Only 30 B-52Ds strike the Hanoi Vãn Điện storage depot and Quang Te Airfield. Two of the B-52Ds are struck by SAMs and shot down. On night five there are no B-52 losses. Only an F-111 ground attack aircraft was lost as the majority of the strikes go against Haiphong harbour area, and this is where the SAM sites aren't concentrated.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 71.

Unfortunately for the North Vietnamese, and the Americans, the Bach Mai Hospital is accidentally hit and virtually all staff and patients are casualties. There is a heavy worldwide media reaction to this incident, hurting domestic support for the campaign.<sup>25</sup>

### **Night 6 and 7**

Nights six and seven of the campaign see heavy attacks by F-111s and other lighter fighter bombers during the day against an air defence effort by the North Vietnamese that is lacking. The F-111s hit SAM sites and airfields, and are very effective, as part of an attacks with over 100 sorties being launched during the day by non-B-52 aircraft. The SAM battalions are waiting for nightfall and the B-52s, as shooting down one of these makes more of an impact on the USAF and the world media. If the North Vietnamese can shoot down a B-52, the US public and world will take notice, possibly putting pressure on Nixon to end the bombing. During these nights the Andersen AFB B-52G models are still out of the rotation.

Night six will see over 30 B-52s attack the Lang Dang supply depot. Bad weather and poor planning mean no support aircraft – the B-52s are on their own. Luckily, the targets are away from the SAM battalion locations. In a rare effort, the North Vietnamese send up MiG fighters who fire missiles, but achieve no hits against the B-52s flying at high altitude. Night seven will see the Thai Nyugen railroad hub hit by 30 U-Tapao B-52s. Again, the Americans are very lucky, as only one bomber is hit by 100mm AAA fire but survives.

With Xmas eve on 24 December Nixon ordered operations to temporarily cease.<sup>26</sup> This was also a welcome break for the North Vietnamese, who were frantically assembling new SA-2 SAM missiles in Hanoi warehouses. They are running out of missiles, and this Xmas break was

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>26</sup> Lake, *B-52 Stratofortress units*, 69.



seen as crucial to allow them to get more missiles ready. Also, the decision to keep the B-52s away from Hanoi after the 20 December Night three losses has also helped the North Vietnamese stock up. But they still have a limited amount of SAMs, and Haiphong harbour was now mined by early US operations in 1972.

In a very slow manner, SAC finally turns over tactical planning of the missions to 8th AF headquarters in Guam – which rapidly makes new, effective plans for further attacks with 7th AF input. From 21 December onward, U-Tapao USAF Wing Commander Brigadier General Glenn Sullivan had argued for changes in tactics from SAC. This persistence would pay off, but would also cost Sullivan future USAF promotions. Cognizant of SAC reducing the numbers of bombers that were conducting sorties due to the earlier losses, Nixon orders massive force to be used on 26 December, night eight. He is determined to prevail.<sup>27</sup>

## **Night 8**

The 8th AF planning and command staff finally gain near total operational planning control at this stage of the campaign. The staff officers on Guam direct the operation very effectively, and plan to attack the Thái Nguyên, Kinh No, Duc Noi, Hanoi areas and Haiphong railroad yards and Văn Điển storage complex in one massive wave.<sup>28</sup> There will be a total of 120 B-52s involved in the bombing this night: 78 from Andersen on Guam, and 42 from U-Tapao. In support there will be 113 fighter bombers carrying out the Wild Weasel and chaff dropping roles, as well as more aircraft in the refueling and EW roles. It was planned that the North Vietnamese radar was to be overwhelmed by the massive EW jamming and chaff effort carried out by the fighter-bombers and support aircraft. There was no large waves – just one period of seven mini-

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<sup>27</sup> Michel, *Operation Linebacker II 1972*, 76.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-77.

waves of bombers and other aircraft coming in from all directions, and at all altitudes, for 15 minutes.

During the actual raid, the Wild Weasel SAM suppression effort is large and the F-105s aggressively seek to attack any known SAM site. Over 68 SAMs were fired, but the Vietnamese Song Fan radar operators can't break through the chaff and massive EW jamming. As a result, only one B-52 is shot down over Hanoi and another badly damaged.<sup>29</sup>

### **Night 9 and 10**

On night nine of the campaign, Lang Dang, Duc Noi, Trung Quang and Văn Điển were the selected targets. One B-52 is badly damaged by a SAM near miss, forcing the crew to later bail out over Laos. Another is shot down in spectacular fashion over the Trung Quang railroad (RR) hub, exploding in the air. The North Vietnamese continue to be overwhelmed, but fight hard, shooting down two USAF F-4s and a HH-53 SAR helicopter. On Night ten, 60 B-52s from Andersen and 30 from U-Tapao attack simultaneously. Six different mini-waves simultaneously hit five target areas, four of them hitting Hanoi. By now the North Vietnamese are totally overwhelmed.<sup>30</sup>

### **Night 11**

On the last night of the campaign, night eleven, 30 B-52Ds from U-Tapao sortie, matched by another 30 B-52D and G models from Andersen AFB. These forces attack the SAM sites in Phúc Yên and the Lang Dang transportation hubs. By this point, there is very little left in the way of targets, and 30 B-52Gs hit suspected North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troop assembly areas

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>30</sup> Jeannette Remak, *Boeing B-52 Stratofortress. Warrior Queen of the USAF* (Croydon: Fonthill, 2016), 166-168.

in South and North Vietnam in a similar manner as the previous South Vietnamese “Arc Light” type missions to attack Viet Cong and NVA ground forces. On 29 December 1972, SAC, under direction from the JCS, finally brings Linebacker II to an end.<sup>31</sup>

### **Back to negotiations**

On 22 December 1972 Washington had asked Hanoi to return to Paris and to discuss the terms of October that were decided upon. After first ignoring the Americans, the North Vietnamese relent on 26 December as the B-52 strikes hit the hardest on this date.<sup>32</sup> Nixon then dictated that he wished technical discussions to begin on 2 January 1973, and also stated that bombing would halt if the Vietnamese agreed. He decisively directs Kissinger to agree to the terms offered to the North Vietnamese in October, and also ruthlessly removes the 69 South Vietnamese amendments from the table. Nixon means business and relentlessly pursues his goal of achieving his end state of ending US military involvement in South East Asia. Some US politicians are disappointed by the proceedings, and state the US had literally “bombed the North into accepting the terms they had already agreed to”. All bombing north of the 20th Parallel (Northern North Vietnam) is suspended on 30 December 1972.

### **Talks resume**

On Kissinger and Lê Đức Thọ’s return to Paris, basically the same deal is finalized as in October before the South Vietnamese issue erupted. Though the US has reached an agreement, it is not a high point in the history of US foreign policy, and is an ugly end to an ugly war. In the return for the total withdrawal of all US forces from South Vietnam and the cessation of

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<sup>31</sup> Michel, *Operation Linebacker II 1972*, 85.

<sup>32</sup> Brigham, *Reckless*, 238.

hostilities, the Vietnamese agreed to a token and what will most certainly turn out to be temporary withdrawal of 30,000 North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops from South Vietnam. The North would also recognize the South Vietnamese government as legitimate, and the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) border is again agreed to as the boundary between two countries.<sup>33</sup> How much agreement would limit the South Vietnamese insurgent Vietcong activity was basically irrelevant to the US at this point. The matter of Laos and Cambodia, and the North Vietnamese transportation networks in both countries, is simply ignored as irrelevant this point.

### **Thiệu and the talks**

The South Vietnamese and the corrupt near-dictatorship of South Vietnamese President Nguyen van Thiệu was a constant obstacle during the peace talks. In order to placate South Vietnamese opposition, Nixon lied to Thiệu stating there will be continued massive US support – it reality it will be equipment only. Nixon then lied again, stating US forces will respond with massive military strikes if the North violated ceasefire terms to be discussed in Paris. There is no intention, political support or funding to resume large scale combat operations.

Still wary, Thiệu refuses to sign initially. In response, on 14 January 1973, Nixon states in communication with the South Vietnamese that he will go it alone if necessary, and make peace with the North unilaterally. Thiệu, facing no more US aid and possibly being deposed, caves in on 22 January 1973 – one day before a 23 January 1973 deadline for signature.<sup>34</sup>

### **Tally sheet**

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<sup>33</sup> Brigham, *Reckless*, 239-240.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

The tally sheet for the Linebacker II air campaign is full of both impressive and sobering statistics on both sides of the battle. USAF SAC B-52 forces had flown 795 sorties during the eleven days. 729 of these bombed effectively, dropping 15,237 tons of ordnance on eighteen industrial and fourteen military targets. The bombing had wrecked large important parts of the North Vietnamese capital area. In addition, the F-111s and F-4s had dropped an additional 5,000 tons of ordnance. On top of all this, a further 212 B-52 sorties flew in support of ground operations of the South Vietnamese forces.<sup>35</sup>

The losses on the US side were quite high considering the price of each aircraft lost and the investment in pilot and aircrew training. Ten B-52s were shot down in combat, and a further five crashed after sustaining battle damage in Laos and Thailand on the way back the USAF base at U-Tapao. This totalled a 1.89 percent loss rate. The total aircrew losses were 33 B-52 crew killed or missing in action, 33 captured by the North Vietnamese as POWs, 26 escaping this fate by being rescued by the SAR helicopters.<sup>36</sup>

### **North Vietnamese effort**

Considering it was a third world country struggling against a superpower, the North Vietnamese defensive effort was impressive. Its air defence forces undertook 180 engagements in eleven days, firing 266 SA-2 SAM missiles at the US aircraft. The propaganda effort within the communist north declared the air defence campaign to be a “Dien Bien Phu” in the air, a view still held to this day by the communists authorities.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Remak, *Boeing B-52 Stratofortress*, 168.

<sup>36</sup> Michel, *Operation Linebacker II 1972*, 86.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

Totally dependent on China and USSR for advisors and the means to fight this battle, the effort of the SA-2 Guideline missile batteries overcame EW interference to force missile engagement of the targets. The weight of the battle was always on their shoulders, as the VPAF MiGs were never a factor due to overnight bombing – their pilots could not carry out night operations in an IFR setting. Eventually overwhelmed by the US change in tactics and sheer numbers of aircraft, the North Vietnamese were battered in the end by the weight of the USAF and USN assault.<sup>38</sup>

### **Damage inflicted**

The damage inflicted by the bombing was substantial and very much the main factor for the North Vietnamese speedily agreeing to return to the negotiation table. There were over 500 interdictions of trains in northern North Vietnam. Over 372 cars of rolling stock were destroyed as well as 11,000 cubic meters of petroleum products. 80 percent of North Vietnamese electrical power capacity was disrupted, and the air attacks knocked down imports processed by rail and through the ports to little over 30,000 tons per month. Human losses for the North Vietnamese included 1,624 dead; 306 in Haiphong and a further 1,328 in Hanoi. Over 2,000 buildings and homes were destroyed or badly damaged.<sup>39</sup>

### **World and Domestic reaction**

The US was tried and convicted in the court of the world opinion for its aggressive air campaign. The Swedish Prime Minister likened the bombings to Nazi war crimes, and the Prime Minister of Australia, Gough William, severely criticized them, despite Australia being an active participant in the Vietnam war. Newspaper headlines were even more critical, describing the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>39</sup> Remak, *Boeing B-52 Stratofortress*, 169.

SAC attacks as stone age barbarism, genocide and every bomb load dropped a war crime. Nixon's domestic support in the US was severely tested.<sup>40</sup> The newly elected US Congress is appalled with Nixon and Kissinger, but at the same time shocked by his strength and determination to push through to achieve his goals. Nixon did want to severely punish them for their resistance and making it difficult for the US to exit the war. Once back at the negotiating table, the experienced North Vietnamese team stuck to the same terms as October 1972, but are open to negotiations and the remaining issues between the two main parties were rapidly settled. The Paris Peace Accords were finally signed in 27 January 1973.

## **Conclusion**

Nixon's steadfast refusal to bend forced the effective use of massive US airpower to achieve his political goals and his end state, which was a signed agreement, all US POWs freed, and the US out of Vietnam militarily by 1973. Unfortunately it would leave the Republic of South Vietnam, the losers during this event, facing a powerful North Vietnam in an conflict it could not win.

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<sup>40</sup> Logevall and Preston, Editors, *Nixon and the World*, 200.