

A Place Called the Doumer Bridge

Former X-15 pilot Col. Bob White led the first strike against the most heavily defended target in North Vietnam.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

ROLLING Thunder, the JCS strategic plan for eliminating ninety-four high-value targets in North Vietnam, was prepared early in 1965. But the plan was orchestrated timidly by Washington officials who feared Chinese intervention and believed the war would be won in the South. Single targets were released from time to time, but most were south of the twentieth parallel.

The big one that Air Force crews wanted to get was the Paul Doumer Bridge at Hanoi, a railroad and highway span more than a mile long but only thirty-eight feet wide. Over it passed an average of twenty-six trains a day and many trucks, carrying more than 6,000 tons of supplies to enemy forces in South Vietnam and Laos.

That key link in Hanoi's logistic systems was surrounded by AA guns ranging from 37-mm to 100-mm, automatic weapons, SA-2 SAMs, and MiGs at nearby fields.

At 1000 hours on August 11, 1967, the 355th Tac Fighter Wing at Takhli, the Korat-based 388th, and the 8th at Ubon received long-awaited orders to hit the bridge—not tomorrow, but *that afternoon*. The 355th would lead the strike force with Col. Robert M. White, Deputy Commander for Operations, as mission commander.

Colonel White's credentials were impeccable. He had flown P-51s in Europe during World War II and fighters in the Korean War and had piloted the experimental X-15 to a record altitude of 59.6 miles and a speed of 4,093 miles an hour. For his

X-15 flights, he was awarded both the Harmon and Collier Trophies and NASA's Distinguished Service Medal.

Recalling the events of August 11, Colonel White, now a retired major general, said: "The intensity in the 355th rose to a higher level than I had seen since joining the wing." Everyone, knowing full well the risks, wanted to go to that superdefended target. Three squadron commanders who had not been on the day's schedule volunteered to lead flights. But a miracle of mission planning and preparation had to be worked in the short time before takeoff.

The wing's F-105s, to take only one example, had been configured with 750-pound bombs for the previously assigned mission. Tanks had to be changed and 3,000-pound bombs substituted—normally an hour's work per aircraft. It was completed in about twenty minutes for each plane by waiving regulations against arming and refueling simultaneously. "You'd have [had] to be there to understand" how the support people and planners did what seemed impossible when the mission order came in, says General White.

Start-engines was at 1350 hours. At 1418, the strike force started to roll. It was clear skies all the way, target time 1558. After refueling over Laos, the F-105s, preceded by their Wild Weasel and flak-suppression flights, crossed the Red River and headed southeast along Thud Ridge toward Hanoi. As they approached the bridge, they were met by MiGs in a head-on attack that failed.

Moments later, Colonel White rolled into his bomb run from 13,000 feet. In the seconds before bomb release at 8,000 feet, he and the pilots who followed held the intense concentration demanded for accurate bombing, flying into a highly visible barrage of flak and several SAM launches. But the experience

of those veterans paid off as the 3,000-pounders blossomed below.

The leader of the second flight looked back. They had done it! A span of the railroad bridge lay in the water. A few minutes later, the other two wings dropped two spans of the highway bridge. Thanks to the outstanding work of the Weasel and flak-suppression flights, the entire force made it safely home or to friendly bases.

After bomb release, Colonel White broke hard to the left, down the Red River, then led the force west, low and fast across a plain to hills twenty miles away, rather than withdrawing along Thud Ridge as mission planners had recommended. His judgment proved correct. No one was hit on the way out. The entire mission had been a textbook demonstration of professionalism.

The following morning, at the suggestion of newly arrived 355th Commander Col. John Giraudo, Colonel White trooped the line with a large blow-up of the downed bridge "to show the people who worked so hard to ready the aircraft how their efforts paid off." It was a team victory.

For his leadership of the strike force, Colonel White was awarded the Air Force Cross. The same decoration went to 8th Wing Commander Col. Robin Olds; Col. James McInerney, leader of the Weasels, and his EWO, Capt. Fred Shannon; and Lt. Col. Harry Schurr, Commander of the 469th Squadron.

That first of many attacks on the Paul Doumer Bridge will always hold for Colonel White a special place among the seventy combat missions he flew in Southeast Asia. It wasn't just another rail or road cut south of the twentieth, but "a real target that, once hit, would hurt the enemy and help our people in the South."

That mission was what *tacair* and professionalism and valor are all about. ■