

Interview With MAJOR GENERAL JAMES E. McINERNEY, Jr., USAF (Ret.)

25 Jan 2006

Maxwell AFB AL

This is the transcript of a taped interview with Major General James E. McInerney, Jr. regarding the first Air Force strike against the Paul Doumer Bridge in North Vietnam on 11 August 1967. As a Lt. Col., he was the 13th TFS Commander at Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base who led the Wild Weasel force from Korat during the strike. He and his EWO, Capt Fred W. Shannon, were awarded the Air Force Cross. The interviewer was W. Howard Plunkett, who conducted the interview at the Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL. John J. Revak transcribed the taped interview on 2 February 2006.

(P) = Plunkett

(M) = Gen McInerney

(P): General, if you could, explain why the mission was a delayed mission and it suddenly popped up in the afternoon is what I am interested in knowing. So, if you could start with that.

(M): Let me say that, that's a good characterization of the events as they transpired. With respect to the question of why it happened that way, that was a decision made well above my pay grade. All I know is that we got word that the bridge was to be attacked. We had to reconfigure some of the airplanes. That didn't bother the Weasel airplanes because we operated with the same configuration day in and day out as long as we were going to Route Pack Six.

Probably at about 8 o'clock in the morning, I got a call from the Group Commander, I guess, more properly named Deputy Commander for Operations, Colonel Scrapy Johnson. And he reiterated what I already knew, that we were going to Downtown Hanoi, specifically, the Paul Doumer Bridge.

(P): Was that a surprise in terms [of] that becoming a target available for you at that point?

(M): I think so, because so much in talking about 1967, so much was really off limits. And anything that was really in the downtown urban area was off limits. But Scrapy simply wanted to know – Did I have the best crews? -- and I assured him, since I was leading, that I had taken care of [the] best crew there. We did have a good flight.

I will try and get you the names of other people who were on the flight. Typically, the number two and number four man came from a different squadron, but I knew who they were and was quite satisfied that they did the job, and they did.

(P): Can you tell me about the mission planning? How you planned their Weasel participation in this, in relation to the strike group. There were also Weasels from Takhli that came out. Did you coordinate with them? If you can, discuss that a little bit.

(M): No, we didn't. The communications, the secure communications, really being the matter at issue. The Takhli, the 355th Wing, went in first. Then the 8th Wing.

(P): You're talking about the strike force [that] went in first?

(M): Yes, and I knew that I had enough of a challenge to just take care of my airplanes. Essentially, 8th Wing F-4C's went in by themselves without any SAM protection.

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(P): And that was ... they were led by Robin Olds, I understand, at that time.

(M): That's correct. Great leader! So I concerned myself principally with protecting the force from Korat, without getting overly ambitious. I mean, that was enough of a challenge.

(P): So, the Weasel Force from Takhli protected the Takhli force that went in first. And then you guys protected the Korat force that went in next?

(M): That's correct.

(P): What was the separation, in time, between the two forces?

(M): And, as I recall, it was probably about five minutes between each force – Takhli, Ubon, Korat. But five minutes can be a very, very long time. I knew we had a challenge in that, essentially, by the time we got there, there was no surprise. The guys on the ground knew who was coming, knew what to expect, and pretty much had their sights aimed in the right places.

But we were very fortunate. We got in and out without losing anybody. Although [we] picked up, principally from Triple A, some battle damage on the airplanes.

(P): Can you talk about your mission planning? How much time did you have to plan, and then, how did you plan in relation to the strike force from Korat? I understand that Colonel Harry Schurr was the strike force leader from the 469th.

(M): We had a pretty standard routine and there was nothing about this particular mission that caused us to vary that routine. I felt that we had two things to do on all the Route Package Six missions. One was to determine the validity of the Intelligence we had, as to which sites were occupied and which were not. And of those sites that were occupied, which would be a threat to the strike force as they rolled in on the target.

We then had to be in a position to cover the airplanes as they rolled in. Approaching the target, they're in a pod formation with electronic jamming, as it were, providing what essentially was a blanking of the scopes.

(P): The strike force was in pod formation?

(M): The strike force was in pod formation.

(P): You guys didn't fly pod formation?

(M): We did not. We didn't use the pods when we had them. This particular case, we left the pods home and had two Shrikes on each airplane. The reason we did that was, with just four airplanes, the pods weren't any good and they did not blank out the scope [of the SAM operators]. So, normally we could go in front of the strike force, get the information we needed, do a diving turn out of the target area, and then chandelle up in behind the strike force, so that we were essentially sitting in that saddle, ready to take on any SAM site that felt like he wanted to do battle.

(break)

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(P): Lets see, you were talking about the, I guess, the mission planning.

(M): Yes, you had asked a question about the coordination between the strike forces. There wasn't any. But that was not uncharacteristic of the era. We didn't really communicate a lot either with respect to tactics, techniques, and procedures in general or the tactics for the mission of the day.

(P): So [for] this particular strike, even though it was a major target in downtown Hanoi, you didn't have any special arrangements or any special provisions other than your routine mission planning?

(M): That's correct.

(P): OK, talk about, if you would please, after you have taken off, what route did you use? Where did you refuel? What track did you use in your refueling? What approach did you take going into Hanoi?

(M): I'll have to try and find the mission card. As you know, the refueling tracks were characterized by color codes. And essentially, as I recall it, we flew up to Yen Bai area and down the Red in a standard fashion, and then, I think there was good reason for that. It was felt we didn't want to let them know anything different was coming. This was a route that we frequently flew. I think we had a Tacan station up there in the Yen Bai area, and

(P): Was it Channel 97?

(M): Yes.

(P): Off of, not in. It reached Yen Bai but it was in Laos.

(M): Laos, that's right. I guess what we did, we knew the Tacan coordinates, radial and distance off 97 to Yen Bai.

(P): OK, you synchronized your arrival time with the strike force just simply based on the time-over-target that was fragged to the strike force?

(M): Well, the way we coordinated with the strike force was simply to leave the tanker a few minutes early, probably five minutes, which put us 40 to 50 miles in front in terms of -105 cruise speeds. We did our recce, the two EWO's in the flight both listening. I can't say that I did it this particular day, but it was my practice to inform the strike force which sites were hot, using the codes that we had for the sites, and to give the strike force a better feel where to look in case the missiles were launched against them. But the coordination of the second phase, that is to say, to get in saddle as they rolled in, was strictly visual. In other words, as I was coming out, passed underneath then and off to one side, I would start a chandelle up to be right in their six o'clock, just a little bit high.

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(P): Talk about the actual strike itself. Did you encounter MiGs going in, or coming out, or over the target, and how did you go? Talk about the SAM sites that you actually attacked, too, in conjunction with the other things that were going on around you.

(M): Well, of course it was very interesting to watch. It was impressive. The 355th Wing in front of us, Takhli, had dropped one or two spans. I don't think the 8th Wing, which was carrying 750 pounders, they may have taken some decking out. But I don't really think they dropped a span with the little bombs. I don't recall seeing any MiGs, although Fred Shannon, my EWO, I believe reported two. And I see them in other readings, people not only saw some MiGs but knew what airfields they came from. How that knowledge was reported, I don't know.

But I was principally concerned with two sites that were very, very aggressive, and dealing with this, they wouldn't go down as we rolled in on them. And each one got a Shrike and a couple of 750-pound bombs for his efforts.

But, there were four more that were still playing cat and mouse with us, and we thought - and I think it was subsequently corroborated -- that they knew what the Weasels were and how they operated. And when we would dive in on them, they would shut down. And of course, with the SA-2 at the time, didn't have any memory, as it were. Once they shut down they had to start up again and rework [the] target acquisition problem and it all happened very quickly and, needless to say, we didn't stay there any longer than we had to. When our munitions were expended and the strike force was out of there, we were out, like with the speed of light.

(P): Your flight, do you recall who your wingmen were? I understood you had two F's and two D's in your flight.

(M): That's correct. That was our standard modus. There is a reason for the two F's, in that the second airplane provided capability should the electronic equipment in the first aircraft go out. I know that Takhli frequently used 3 and 4 Weasels in a flight. I didn't see any point in that, because, really only one, the Ironhand flight leader was really calling the shots.

I didn't split the Ironhand flight. I kept them all together. And, the reason for the D's in the 2 and 4 position ... were to ... I didn't see any reason to put any more people in harm's way than were necessary. And the D's, being a lighter airplane, could carry a heavier bomb load than we carried on the F's. I think we carried CBU-24's or 29's. I can't remember which. Whereas the D's carried 500-pound bombs, were very effective on a SAM site once you found it.

(P): Did they also carry Shrikes? Did they fire Shrikes, the D's?

(M): They did! Their preflight instructions were to fire off the lead or number 3, depending on how we worked it. It worked quite well. They didn't really need to know precisely the launch parameters because the Shrike would quickly pick it up. But it was better to have two Shrikes into an operating SAM site than one.

(P): Now, you were credited with, I understand, with killing six SAM sites during that mission. Is that your flight that did that and all six SAM sites?

(M): No, I think, if I recall the numbers right, I think we were credited with knocking two off the air and with Shrikes and bombs, and forcing 4 more off the air by threat of an attack. In other words, the Site Commander didn't know that we were out of ammunition when he saw us

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going for him. We could have perhaps strafed, but I never thought that was a particular good thing. We had a lot of heavy Triple A. Even a 20-mm gun is heavily outclassed by stuff on the ground.

(P): After you pulled off the target, you just returned back to Korat? Were there any problems in having to, as a shortage of fuel or anything else you encountered, that had to have diversions?

(M): No, we didn't have a diversion. I recall number 4 being lower on fuel. I had to have him clean his aircraft off, jettison the bomb racks and so on to give him a better chance to get to the tanker, which he did.

(P): This was in post strike now?

(M): Post strike, yes.

(P): Do you remember who the pilot was?

(M): No, I'll get you his name.

(P): From the mission card?

(M): Either that or recollection. He was a very good friend. A major that served at Nellis with me in a previous assignment. I've got a visual picture of him, but I can't pull up the name.

(P): After you returned to Korat, could you tell me about the process by which you were put in for the award that you ended up receiving, and how that all took place?

(M): Well, we had Wing Awards and Decorations procedures, I recall, and General Chairsell told several of us to write up the awards and General Chairsell specifically said to me – you deserve an Air Force Cross for that and I want the write up to reflect that sort of thing. And we had quite a discussion about Fred Shannon, and I reminded the General that my policy had been all along that the EWO got the same as the pilot. We felt that was important to the team spirit. I know in other organizations there tended to be a policy of giving the EWO one less award. But, General Chairsell supported me. Of course, I didn't know until, I guess, after I finished up my tour in November that the award had been approved. I guess something like that has to go back to Washington and, naturally, I was very pleased that both Fred and I had received the award.

(P): Were you at your next assignment at PACAF Headquarters when you got the award?

(M): Yes.

(P): The PACAF Commander, was that General Ryan still?

(M): No, General Ryan had gone back to the States as Chief of Staff, and General Joe Nazzaro was the Commander of PACAF.

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(P): I assume he presented the award.

(M): Yes.

(P): Was Fred Shannon with you then or was he given the award at his place.

(M): He was given the award at his place of duty, which, if I am not mistaken, I believe might have been Sheppard.

(P): That's really all I wanted to find out. Do you have anything else you would like to remember, that you would like to emphasize, on that particular mission?

(M): No, I can't think of it, except to count my blessings! I mean, so much that could have gone wrong, did not go wrong. Think of how fortunate I was -- later that year flying a Ryan's Raider mission when the engine let go -- and [if] something like that happened on the Doumer Bridge Raid, why, no matter how successful I was in dodging missles, you got to have an operational engine!

(P): Do you have a ... did you run an assessment of the effectiveness of the Weasels in their mission, from both Takhli, and specifically the Korat ones, in the success of everybody getting back from the raid without anything more than just combat damage?

(M): I think it played a very strong part of it. In other words, if the SA-2 Site Commanders had not been preoccupied with their own safety, [they] could have been allowed to attack the Strike Force. I think they could have been very successful. The old adage about the best defense being a good offense in it comes to play. Certainly, in what little we've been able to read about the North Vietnamese perspective of Counter-Air Operations indicates that they had a real morale problem in their Surface-to-Air Missile Forces.

(P): OK, that's it.