

## THE BRIDGES AT TOKO-RI:

The Real Story by CAPT Paul N. Gray, USN, Ret,  
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Recently, some friends saw the movie "The Bridges at Toko-ri" on late night TV. After seeing it, they said, "You planned and led the raid. Why don't you tell us what really happened?" Here goes.

I hope Mr. Michener will forgive the actual version of the raid. His fictionalized account certainly makes more exciting reading.

On 12 December 1951 when the raid took place, Air Group 5 was attached to *Essex*, the flag ship for Task Force 77. We were flying daily strikes against the North Koreans and Chinese. God! It was cold. The main job was to interdict the flow of supplies coming south from Russia and China. The rules of engagement imposed by political forces in Washington would not allow us to bomb the bridges across the Yalu River where the supplies could easily have been stopped. We had to wait until they were dispersed and hidden in North Korea and then try to stop them.

The Air Group consisted of two jet fighter squadrons flying *Banshees* and Grumman *Panthers* plus two prop attack squadrons flying *Corsairs* and *Skyraiders*. To provide a base for the squadrons, *Essex* was stationed 100 miles off the East Coast of Korea during that bitter Winter of 1951 and 1952.

I was CO of VF-54, the *Skyraider* squadron. VF-54 started with 24 pilots. Seven were killed during the cruise. The reason 30 percent of our pilots were shot down and lost was due to our mission. The targets were usually heavily defended railroad bridges. In addition, we were frequently called in to make low-level runs with rockets and napalm to provide close support for the troops.

Due to the nature of the targets assigned, the attack squadrons seldom flew above 2000 or 3000 feet; and it was a rare flight when a plane did not come back without some damage from AA or ground fire.

The single-engine plane we flew could carry the same bomb load that a B-17 carried in WWII; and after flying the 100 miles from the carrier, we could stay on station for 4 hours and strafe, drop napalm, fire rockets or drop bombs. The *Skyraider* was the right plane for this war.

On a gray December morning, I was called to the flag bridge. Admiral "Black Jack" Perry, the Carrier Division Commander, told me they had a classified request from UN headquarter to bomb some critical bridges in the central area of the North Korean peninsula. The bridges were a dispersion point for many of the supplies coming down from the North and were vital to the flow of most of the essential supplies. The Admiral asked me to take a look at the targets and see what we could do about taking them out. As I left, the staff intelligence officer handed me the pre-strike photos, the coordinates of the target and said to get on with it. He didn't mention that the bridges were defended by 56 radar-controlled anti-aircraft guns.

That same evening, the Admiral invited the four squadron commanders to his cabin for dinner. James Michener was there. After dinner, the Admiral asked each squadron commander to describe his experiences in flying over North Korea. By this time, all of us were hardened veterans of the war and had some hairy stories to tell about life in the fast lane over North Korea.

When it came my time, I described how we bombed the railways and strafed anything else that moved. I described how we had planned for the next day's strike against some vital railway bridges near a village named Toko-ri (The actual village was named Majonne). That the preparations had been done with extra care because the pre-strike pictures showed the bridges were surrounded by 56 anti-aircraft guns and we knew this strike was not going to be a walk in the park.

All of the pilots scheduled for the raid participated in the planning. A close study of the aerial photos confirmed the 56 guns. Eleven radar sites controlled the guns. They were mainly 37 MM with some

five inch heavies. All were positioned to concentrate on the path we would have to fly to hit the bridges. This was a World War II air defense system but still very dangerous.

How were we going to silence those batteries long enough to destroy the bridges? The bridges supported railway tracks about three feet wide. To achieve the needed accuracy, we would have to use glide bombing runs. A glide bombing run is longer and slower than a dive bombing run, and we would be sitting ducks for the AA batteries. We had to get the guns before we bombed the bridges.

There were four strategies discussed to take out the radar sites. One was to fly in on the deck and strafe the guns and radars. This was discarded because the area was too mountainous. The second was to fly in on the deck and fire rockets into the gun sites. Discarded because the rockets didn't have enough killing power. The third was to come in at a high altitude and drop conventional bombs on the targets. This is what we would normally do, but it was discarded in favor of an insidious modification. The one we thought would work the best was to come in high and drop bombs fused to explode over the gun and radar sites. To do this, we decided to take 12 planes; 8 *Skyraiders* and 4 *Corsairs*. Each plane would carry a 2000 pound bomb with a proximity fuse set to detonate about 50 to 100 feet in the air. We hoped the shrapnel from these huge, ugly bombs going off in mid air would be devastating to the exposed gunners and radar operators.

The flight plan was to fly in at 15,000 feet until over the target area and make a vertical dive bombing run dropping the proximity-fused bombs on the guns and radars. Each pilot had a specific complex to hit. As we approached the target we started to pick up some flak, but it was high and behind us. At the initial point, we separated and rolled into the dive. Now the flak really became heavy. I rolled in first; and after I released my bomb, I pulled out south of the target area and waited for the rest to join up. One of the *Corsairs* reported that he had been hit on the way down and had to pull out before dropping his bomb. Three other planes suffered minor flak damage but nothing serious.

After the join up, I detached from the group and flew over the area to see if there was anything still firing. Sure enough there was heavy 37 MM fire from one site, I got out of there in a hurry and called in the reserve *Skyraider* still circling at 15,000 to hit the remaining gun site. His 2000 pound bomb exploded right over the target and suddenly things became very quiet. The shrapnel from those 2000 lbs. bombs must have been deadly for the crews serving the guns and radars. We never saw another 37 MM burst from any of the 56 guns.

From that moment on, it was just another day at the office. Only sporadic machine gun and small arms fire was encountered. We made repeated glide bombing runs and completely destroyed all the bridges. We even brought gun camera pictures back to prove the bridges were destroyed.

After a final check of the target area, we joined up, inspected our wingmen for damage and headed home. Mr. Michener plus most of the ship's crew watched from Vulture's Row as Dog Fannin, the landing signal officer, brought us back aboard. With all the pilots returning to the ship safe and on time, the Admiral was seen to be dancing with joy on the flag Bridge.

From that moment on, the Admiral had a soft spot in his heart for the attack pilots. I think his fatherly regard for us had a bearing on what happened in port after the raid on Toko-ri. The raid on Toko-ri was exciting; but in our minds, it was dwarfed by the incident that occurred at the end of this tour on the line. The operation was officially named OPERATION PINWHEEL. The pilots called it OPERATION PINHEAD.

The third tour had been particularly savage for VF-54. Five of our pilots had been shot down. Three not recovered. I had been shot down for the third time. The mechanics and ordnancemen had worked back-breaking hours under medieval conditions to keep the planes flying, and finally we were headed for Yokosuka for ten days of desperately needed R & R.

As we steamed up the coast of Japan, the Air Group Commander, CDR Marsh Beebe, called CDR Trum, the CO of the *Corsair* squadron, and me to his office. He told us that the prop squadrons

would participate in an exercise dreamed up by the commanding officer of the ship. It had been named OPERATION PINWHEEL.

The *Corsairs* and *Skyriders* were to be tied down on the port side of the flight deck; and upon signal from the bridge, all engines were to be turned up to full power to assist the tugs in pulling the ship alongside the dock.

CDR Trum and I both said to Beebe, "You realize that those engines are vital to the survival of all the attack pilots. We fly those single engine planes 300 to 400 miles from the ship over freezing water and over very hostile land. Overstressing these engines is not going to make any of us very happy." Marsh knew the danger; but he said, "The captain of the ship, CAPT. Wheelock, wants this done, so do it!"

As soon as the news of this brilliant scheme hit the ready rooms, the operation was quickly named OPERATION PIN HEAD; and CAPT. Wheelock became known as CAPT. Wheelchock.

On the evening before arriving in port, I talked with CDR Trum and told him, "I don't know what you are going to do, but I am telling my pilots that our lives depend on those engines and do not give them more than half power; and if that engine temperature even begins to rise, cut back to idle." That is what they did. About an hour after the ship had been secured to the dock, the Air Group Commander screamed over the ships intercom for Gray and Trum to report to his office. When we walked in and saw the pale look on Beebe's face, it was apparent that CAPT. Wheelock, in conjunction with the ship's proctologist, had cut a new aperture in poor old Marsh. The ship's CO had gone ballistic when he didn't get the full power from the lashed down *Corsairs* and *Skyriders*, and he informed CDR Beebe that his fitness report would reflect this miserable performance of duty.

The Air Group Commander had flown his share of strikes, and it was a shame that he became the focus of the wrath of CAPT. Wheelock for something he had not done. However, tensions were high; and in the heat of the moment, he informed CDR Trum and me that he was placing both of us and all our pilots in hack until further notice. A very severe sentence after 30 days on the line.

The Carrier Division Commander, Rear Admiral "Black Jack" Perry a personally soft and considerate man, but his official character would strike terror into the heart of the most hardened criminal. He loved to talk to the pilots; and in deference to his drinking days, Admiral Perry would reserve a table in the bar of the Fujia Hotel and would sit there drinking CocaCola while buying drinks for any pilot enjoying R & R in the hotel.

Even though we were not comfortable with this gruff older man, he was a good listener and everyone enjoyed telling the Admiral about his latest escape from death. I realize now he was keeping his finger on the morale of the pilots and how they were standing up to the terror of daily flights over a very hostile land.

The Admiral had been in the hotel about three days; and one night, he said to some of the fighter pilots sitting at his table, "Where are the attack pilots? I have not seen any of them since we arrived." One of them said, "Admiral, I thought you knew. They were all put in hack by the Air Group Commander and restricted to the ship." In a voice that could be heard all over the hotel, the Admiral belted to his aide, "Get that idiot Beebe on the phone in 5 minutes; and I don't care if you have to use the Shore> Patrol, the Army Military Police or the Japanese Police to find him. I want him on the telephone NOW!"

The next morning, after three days in hack, the attack pilots had just finished marching lockstep into the wardroom for breakfast, singing the prisoners song when the word came over the loud speaker for Gray and Trum to report to the Air Group Commander's stateroom immediately. When we walked in, there sat Marsh looking like he had had a near death experience. He was obviously in far worse condition than when the ships CO got through with him. It was apparent that he had been worked over by a real pro.

In a trembling voice, his only words were, "The hack is lifted. All of you are free to go ashore. There will not be any note of this in your fitness reports. Now get out of here and leave me alone."

Posters saying, "Thank you Black Jack" went up in the ready rooms. The long delayed liberty was at hand.

When writing about this cruise, I must pay homage to the talent we had in the squadrons. LTJG Tom Hayward was a fighter pilot who went on to become the CNO. LTJG Neil Armstrong another fighter pilot became the astronaut who took the first step on the moon. My wingman, Ken Shugart, was an all-American basketball player and later an admiral. Al Masson, another wingman, became the owner of one of New Orleans' most famous French restaurants.

All of the squadrons were manned with the best and brightest young men the U.S. could produce. The mechanics and ordnance crews who kept the planes armed and flying deserve as much praise as the pilots for without the effort they expended, working day and night under cold and brutal conditions, no flight would have been flown.

It was a dangerous cruise. I will always consider it an honor to have associated with those young men who served with such bravery and dignity. The officers and men of this air group once again demonstrated what makes America the most outstanding country in the world today. To those whose spirits were taken from them during those grim days and didn't come back, "I will always remember you."

As the actor Admiral asked at the end of the movie ... "Where do we get such men?" The impudent response is ... "Any Bar!"