

# **High Road to Hanoi**

## *FOREWARD*

The High Road to Hanoi is historical fiction which portrays the lives, concerns and emotions of the B-52 crew members during the height of the cold war and throughout the Vietnam Conflict. The period of the narrative is from 1962 to 1973. The main character is a radar navigator (bombardier) on a combat-ready crew who, as a second lieutenant, finds himself flying over the North Pole with nuclear weapons during the Cuban Missile Crisis. During the ensuing ten years, the young officer learns to cope with the sobering responsibilities of standing day-to-day nuclear alert interspersed with actual combat missions over Southeast Asia.

The B-52 crews were subjected to unmitigated stress during one of the most tense periods in this country's history. The pressure was relentless. During their normal peacetime role, these men lived with nuclear weapons on a daily basis and were totally committed to wreak unimaginable devastation across the globe on a moments notice. "Peace is our profession" was not just a slogan. The responsibility imposed by nuclear deterrence allowed no mistakes. The Strategic Air Command (SAC) demanded perfection, anything less was unacceptable. To err is human; but it is not SAC's way. When stateside, the crews routinely pulled seven-day tours of duty on the alert pad where they lived and slept with nuclear bombs. Daily they faced a barrage of tests, in-flight evaluations, and no-notice nuclear combat simulation missions where failure was not an option.

When SAC did go to war in Vietnam, it was different than the war it had prepared for. The Operation was called Arc Light. High altitude formation bombing with conventional weapons was alien from any tactics mastered by the crews throughout years of practice for nuclear conflict. New skills had to be learned, aircraft needed modification, unique support equipment was needed, and bombing techniques had to

change. Crews were dispatched to Southeast Asia for six-month tours of duty. Combat missions imposed a different kind of stress from that of the nuclear role; and when the crews rotated back to the States, the stress of nuclear deterrence took over again. And then they went back again ...and again ...and again.

Initially, the bombers were not effective and the butt of many jokes. Military leaders had to learn how this aging weapon system could be brought to bear in this new environment. It took time, blood and courage; but by war's end, the B-52 was the most feared weapon in the theater and brought the war to a conclusion. It was not a victory, but it was an end.

The big bombers literally flew above the conflict. The crews witnessed the war from 35,000 feet, and they experienced it over a long duration. The novel's main character, Patrick Campbell, had five combat tours from 1966 to 1972. He saw the war up close and personal when deployed, and also witnessed it from the safe venue of the home front. These two perspectives were different, and starkly so. Over there, TET was a major victory for the United States and the South Vietnamese forces. Yielding to antiwar pressure, the most revered and trusted newscaster of the era, Walter Cronkite, deemed it a failure. The American public bought Mr. Cronkite's version and the rest of the mainstream media's flawed interpretation. The media robbed the troops of a hard-earned battlefield triumph.

The enemy losses during TET destroyed the Viet Cong forces; these experienced troops never again posed a major threat throughout the duration of the conflict. Regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces had to carry the battle in the South and were based there in great numbers. Unlike the Viet Cong, these warriors couldn't live off of the land. They were outsiders to the local South Vietnamese populace even if some of the locals supported their cause. The NVA lifeline was the Ho Chi Minh trail which extended from Hanoi, through Laos and Cambodia, all the way to the South China Sea into the Parrot's Beak just west of Saigon. US air forces tried throughout the war to

stop the flow of traffic down this vital highway. Although these efforts greatly impeded traffic heading south, the trail continued to supply sufficient logistics and men to effectively continue the war.

When President Nixon ordered the 1972 Christmas bombings of Hanoi and Haiphong, B-52s at last shut down the enemy's flow of supplies at the spigot. Our adversary in the South quickly began to run out of food and supplies. The Communists had no choice; they had to return to the bargaining table and sign a previously rejected peace treaty. Unfortunately, the treaty was fatally flawed by allowing the North to keep NVA forces on the ground in the South. This earth-shattering decision led directly to the final defeat of South Vietnam. It is also true that another outcome could have been dictated at that time, North Vietnam was facing a military debacle after the Christmas raids. This opportunity for victory wasn't apparent to our Nation's leaders and the chance for total victory was sadly squandered.

The reader learns the meaning of the term "BUF," the affectionate nickname of the big bird that ended America's longest war. That term lives to this very day. It wasn't a term of endearment in 1967. The combat role of the BUF is discussed, as well as some of the early problems. The main character, Captain Patrick Campbell, describes his early experiences during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and relates the fears and responsibilities he felt navigating across the North Pole carrying nuclear weapons. There are many tales of his early days flying from Grand Forks, North Dakota; how Patrick and his new bride surmounted the tensions of the nuclear alert and daily routine of the B-52 cold war warriors. The constant pressure exerted on the crews by SAC to ensure positive control of the nuclear bombs was relentless. Included in the narrative are anecdotes describing the keen sense of humor exhibited by the crew members in their attempt to maintain their balance in a very confusing and dangerous world.

The tone shifts when Patrick is transferred to a bomb wing flying Arc Light operations against targets in Southeast Asia. The combat tours are interrupted by returns to the real

world, and right back to stress of preparing for nuclear war. The tension was unrelenting, only the nature of the angst changed. There were mistakes, losses, and some painful lessons as the aircraft evolved from a standing joke to the most effective warplane in the theater. The BUF eventually forced the final resolution of that bitter conflict. The book ends with the crescendo of the B-52 raids on Hanoi in 1972. Along the way, many friends give their last measure of dedication in the service of their country.

Patrick Campbell presents a vivid description of the evolution of the Vietnam War. The BUFs were commuters to that conflict and literally had an ideal observer's view of the action that a historian would envy. Missions were flown from Guam, Okinawa, and Thailand. Life as a combat flyer is presented in a straightforward narrative. These men were not heroes; there were no parades when they returned home. But they accomplished their mission in a professional manner and wielded the instrument that finally forced the final outcome.

The concept of strategic nuclear deterrence comes into focus, as well as the origins, nature and eventual outcome of this nation's long struggle in Southeast Asia. A counter viewpoint is presented by a pair of reporters, one American and the other French; each has a different perspective on the War. Their views serve as sounding board to Patrick's single-minded dedication to the effort.

The book is laced with humor, drama, poignancy, and melancholy as all the emotions are stretched to the limit during one of the most epoch moments in this country's history. Don't miss the Falcon Code reproduced at the end of this book.