

Operation Linebacker II

CHARLES TUSTIN KAMPS



By October of 1972, peace talks between the United States and North Vietnam had come to a standstill as America tried to extricate itself from the nightmare war in Southeast Asia. President Richard M. Nixon, frustrated by communist intransigence, decided that it was time for the “Buffs” (B-52s) to go “downtown”

and take out any targets of military value in the formerly restricted Hanoi and Haiphong metropolitan areas. In just 11 flying days between 18 and 29 December, the Air Force and Navy achieved an objective that had eluded US politicians since 1964—forcing the North Vietnamese to the peace table on America’s terms.

Linebacker II saw the greatest operational concentration of B-52s in history, with some 206 employed from Andersen AFB, Guam, and U-Tapao Royal Thai Air Base. In addition to 729 effective B-52 sorties, the campaign included over 700 sorties by Air Force tactical aircraft and 500 by Navy planes. Initial flaws in tactical planning were overcome but not before 15 of the giant bombers were lost to North Vietnamese SA-2 missiles. In effect, just under 2 percent of the committed heavy-bomber force had been lost. By the end of the operation, however, the

B-52s were traversing North Vietnam at will, the enemy having expended the last of his surface-to-air missiles.

Causing little appreciable collateral damage, Linebacker II devastated the intended targets and inflicted severe psychological damage on the North Vietnamese leadership and population. American prisoners of war (POW) noticed a marked change in the demeanor of their captors, who were visibly shaken by the aerial onslaught. North Vietnam returned to the peace talks on 8 January 1973, and an accord was in hand by the 27th of that month. The battle lines were temporarily frozen, remaining US forces departed Vietnam, and 591 American POWs were released to come home.

Some historians have tried to belittle the effectiveness of Linebacker II by asserting that the North Vietnamese simply wanted to bide their time and let the Americans leave before they “finished off” the South. In fact, however, the Northerners lived in fear of a repeat performance of Linebacker II up until President Nixon’s resignation of the presidency. In any event, the South Vietnamese were able to defend their sovereignty for an additional two years—until US congressional appropriations for munitions and spare parts virtually dried up. The overwhelming majority of general officers who actually fought the war assert that Linebacker II was the model of what the air campaign should have been—right from the start in 1965.

To Learn More . . .

Eschmann, Karl J. *Linebacker: The Untold Story of the Air Raids over North Vietnam*. New York: Ivy Books, 1989.

McCarthy, James R., and George B. Allison. *Linebacker II: A View from the Rock*. USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series, vol. 6, no. 8. Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Airpower Research Institute, Air War College, 1979.

Thompson, Wayne. *To Hanoi and Back: The U.S. Air Force and North Vietnam, 1966–1973*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000.