



Photo of A84-247 returning post sortie Phan Rang, date unknown,
Photo: http://www.adf-gallery.com.au/gallery/Canberra-A84-247/AWM_P03654_017?full=1

BELIEVE IT OR NOT – A WHEELS-DOWN BOMBING MISSION

Day 239 of my one year tour in South Vietnam produced one of the more bizarre experiences of my bombing operations, in fact I believe - unique.

It was Tuesday 20 January 1970 and I was teamed with No 2 Squadron Commanding Officer, Wing Commander Jack Boast, tasked for an early morning bombing mission in Canberra A84-247 down in IV Corps.

We duly went through our normal pre-flight briefing, aircraft and bomb-bay checks and clambered aboard. We taxied out and I read out our speed each ten knots as we accelerated slowly down the Phan Rang runway. Reaching take-off speed Jack pulled back on the stick to leave the ground and once clear of the runway, proceeded to raise the undercarriage.

Uh oh, the cursing from up front told me that we had a problem. Sure enough, we did – the wheels wouldn't come up. Staying in the vicinity, we gradually climbed a few thousand feet as Jack moved the gear lever, hoping that our undercarriage would rise, but to no avail.

Having gone through the whole process of preparing for our bombing sortie, I wasn't pleased to contemplate the fact that we may have to abort the mission and land with a full set of six 750lb live bombs on board. So I looked up my bombing tables to see if I could extrapolate (i.e. "guess") a suitable bombing angle for what I knew would be a much lower air speed than the normal 270 knots indicated air speed that we were used to.

I knew that, even if we were to contemplate disgorging our bomb-load, then in order not to damage our suspended undercarriage, and open bomb-bay doors, we would have to fly at 150 knots or less. My bombing tables didn't go that far down, but I was able to make what I believed was a reasonable estimate of the correct bomb-sight angle setting for flying at such a low air speed.

We duly notified our ground controllers that we had to cancel our pre-arranged rendezvous with our distant Forward Air Controller (FAC). Most of our 8am take-offs were planned for the IV Corps region, as the USAF's 7th Air Force Tactical Air Command Center (TACC) staff very much respected the RAAF Canberra's good endurance. It meant that we had the ability to reach the southern tip of the Mekong Delta and still have enough fuel to bomb and return to Phan Rang, without having to divert to another air base to refuel. Most USAF fighter jocks had to have air tankers or land to refuel in order to get back to their home bases.

Jack and I discussed our situation as we circled lazily not far off Phan Rang. I was keen to give it a try – bombing with our wheels down, which, as far as we knew, hadn't been done before. Neither of us wanted to return with our bombs unleashed, so we eventually agreed to ask our local tactical controller to see if he could contact our Phan Rang FACs – with call-sign "Walt".

We often bombed close to Phan Rang, enjoying deterring the enemy from raining down mortars and rockets on us at night-time. We knew many of the Walt FACs personally, having shared a few beers with each other in respective hooches. We also knew that they would probably have on their lists nearby active targets, such as known enemy base camps, which could be suitably attacked.

After a little while, we were called up by a Walt FAC, who was already on stand-by duty, and he led us over to a known target area, not far from our departure base, where we could drop our bombs with some purpose.

Grudgingly willing to give it a go, the CO maneuvered our lumbering machine into our normal race-track bombing pattern, but at a much lower airspeed than usual. He was worried about too much drag resulting in a stall situation and with the Canberra's nose pointing up so high, compared with normal, he had to rely on my directions as the bomb-aimer lying on my stomach, peering through the adjusted bomb-sight. Once we were into our final approach on the bombing run, Jack couldn't see past the Canberra's nose and sight the target – it was totally up to me.

After several dummy runs to get used to our awkward configuration, we agreed with the FAC to drop a single bomb as a sighter, to see how close we could get to the target. The Walt FAC rolled in and launched his smoke rocket marker. It was an accurate shot and he told us to aim for the smoke as it started to rise through the undergrowth below. We ambled in on our bomb run at 3,000' above the ground, selecting Start and Stop for Bomb Number One, as I steered Jack towards the smoke source.

He continued to mutter as to whether we should be doing this, but he persevered. With Master Arm Switch ON, I pressed the bomb release button as the smoke passed beneath the cross-hairs of my bomb-sight. Lo and behold! I had guessed right – the result was virtually a direct hit (DH).

This was important to me as I was No 2 Squadron's Bombing Leader, and I was sick and tired of assessing the daily bombing photographs that our crews returned with, to see that they were bombing better than I was. They were denying me the opportunity to be named as "Top Gun" of the month.

We were unique with our Top Gun awards, compared with our fellow USAF brother squadrons who judged their best by the amount of Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA) that was achieved. We preferred to do it based on bombing accuracy and, within No 2 Squadron, competition amongst the bomb-aimers was fierce.

I now knew that if Jack and I could continue to drop the other five bombs with the same degree of accuracy, then I would be able to submit six separate photos, and if they were DHs or close to it, then I (we) would stand a great chance of becoming Top Gun for the month

And this we did – with Jack cursing each time under his breath, we staggered around our race-track bombing pattern and impressed the Walt FAC with our continued accuracy – 4 DHs out of the 6 dropped. Our last bomb gone and results recorded, we returned to base, landed and handed the

aircraft back to our hard-working maintenance staff. We left it to them to figure out what might be wrong with the aircraft and also left the bomb camera for our duty photographer to collect and take the film back for over-night processing in the photo lab.

That afternoon I flew on another mission, only this was merely to assist US controllers to calibrate their ground-based radar. So it was a busy day for me, and my diary further notes that as I was walking back from the Mess after dinner, I saw two explosions – sparks and loud bangs. They were not far away and were from incoming enemy 107mm rockets – not very nice.

The following day I was looking forward to receiving the processed photos from Photographic Section knowing that the ones that I would be examining that day would prove beyond all doubt Jack's and my prowess at bombing so well in such an unusual and challenging situation.

To my horror, I discovered that the film processing had been taking place right at the time the rockets came in after dinner. In accordance with standard practice, as the alarm siren screeched away remorsefully, the duty photographer immediately headed for the nearest shelter. When the all-clear signal sounded, he returned to the lab and, sure enough, the film was so over-exposed as it sat in the mixture that there were no photos at all to give me to be assessed. I had been cruelly cheated and thus never became No 2 Squadron's Top Gun for the month.

Moreover, I can't recall whether or not our maintenance guys found out that 247's wheels didn't come up because the locking pins were not removed or due to just another electrical fault, not too uncommon in hot, tropical weather conditions. Perhaps the maintenance records for 20 January 1970, if available, might tell.

Finally, to add to my chagrin, with no records to prove my claim, with Jack now deceased, and with my fruitless efforts to find the Walt FAC who controlled our bombing mission on that day, I am unable to verify the above.

You could be forgiven for considering it all to be just another unbelievable wartime yarn.

Bob Howe

Recommended reading - Dreadful Lady over the Mekong Delta

A book authored by Bob Howe. The book titled "**Dreadful Lady over the Mekong Delta**" describes operations in which 2SQN aircraft were involved in the area of the Mekong Delta.

<http://airpower.airforce.gov.au/Publications/Details/649/Dreadful-Lady-over-the-Mekong-Delta-An-Analysis-of-RAAF-Canberra-Operations-in-the-Vietnam-War.aspx>

Bob, through his own experience and also extensive research of available records, describes this activity.