

18Jun72 Spectre 11 SAR

Today in Gunship Air War History ➤ Sunday, 18 June 1972

Cc: CMSGT William Walter

Forty nine years ago in Spectre history, we lost Spectre 11 (Odin) and twelve crewmen while flying an interdiction mission on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Three crewmen survived the ordeal...in a way that can only be described as miraculous. This is their story:

Spectre 11's objective was to ambush trucks on a strategic intersection and block it for as long as possible without straying into AAA range of guns at the nearby logistics center. Arriving over the target area at 11,500 ft. altitude escorted by fighter escorts under the light of a half moon, sensor operators began to search. Weather conditions remained surprisingly good while Spectre 11's IOs scanned for AAA from the open the cargo door. Within minutes of establishing an orbit, sensor operators located two trucks and the crew prepared to fire, but accurate AAA caused them to break out of orbit. After re-acquiring the targets, SSgt Patterson noticed the tell-tale ground flash of an SA-7 launch, then announced "STRELA! BREAK RIGHT!" but instead of a hard break maneuver, the pilot initiated a slow roll to the right. Patterson continued to call "BREAK RIGHT, BREAK RIGHT", but the missile kept coming. When the missile was about two or three seconds away, Patterson fired a LUU-2 flare to decoy the missile, but it continued to speed towards the aircraft. In a flash, the missile hit Odin's #3 engine, producing a bright flash and muffled explosion. The impact caused the aircraft to shudder, rise slightly, then settle back down. Pilots retained control of the aircraft, and it seemed as if the situation was under control. About ten seconds later, SSgt Patterson scanned the right wing and saw burning fuel and debris trailing from the aircraft. He immediately advised the pilot, "we are hit bad and on fire." Capt Wilson activated alarm bells directing the crew to prepare for bail out. Spectre 11's objective was to ambush trucks on a strategic intersection and block it for as long as possible without straying into AAA range of guns at the nearby logistics center. Arriving over the target area at 11,500 ft. altitude escorted by fighter escorts under the light of a half moon, sensor operators began to search. Weather conditions remained surprisingly good while Spectre 11's IOs scanned for AAA from the open the cargo door. Within minutes of establishing an orbit, sensor operators located two trucks and the crew prepared to fire, but accurate AAA caused them to break out of orbit. After re-acquiring the targets, SSgt Patterson noticed the tell-tale ground flash of an SA-7 launch, then announced "STRELA! BREAK

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“During this sequence of events, the AC seemed to have had control of the aircraft. I then observed two crewmembers, whom I believe to be gunners, leave the booth area and run out the separating door (between the booth & aft of the aircraft). I then heard the emergency alarm bell ring and the red light came on, indicating that evacuation procedures were in effect.” 2 Lt Robert Reid.

Less than 30 seconds after being hit, both IOs disconnected their restraining cables and began to clip on their chest pack parachutes. While gunners and sensor operators were assembling behind the booth, the aircraft began to roll hard to the left. Capt Gilbert and co-pilot Capt Robert Wilson fought hard to keep the aircraft in control, but were unable to. Flight engineer TSgt Richard Cole advised the crew they were quickly losing altitude. Sensing the aircraft was out of control, SSgt Patterson looked towards the front of the cargo compartment to see a gunner standing by the 40mm guns with his back on fire while other crewmen were reaching for their parachutes. Suddenly, a large explosion caused #3 engine to break off. The aircraft rolled hard to the left, then inverted. Now while floating in a negative-G condition, SSgt Patterson pushed himself away from the edge of the ramp, scraping his back along the tail section on exit. As soon as he cleared the aircraft, a large explosion caused the right wing to break off. The aircraft tumbled wildly towards the ground while crewmen were pinned against the inner side of the fuselage, unable to move.

In the booth, as soon as 2 Lt Reid stood up, he was forced into the FCO seat by strong G-forces, unable to move as he watched the altitude indicator and altimeter gauges spin. Certain he was looking death in the eye; all he could do was wait for impact. Odin’s tumbling trajectory caused

extreme wind loads on the tail of the aircraft, causing it to break off. As the aircraft continued to spin and tumble, 2 Lt Reid and Capt Gordon Bocher were ejected from the aircraft into the darkness.

“Both the TV and myself did not get very far when the wing fell off. I surmised later we were pinned against the 40mm ammo rack. The G forces were so great that I could not move. I saw bodies all over the aft cargo compartment. Everything was orange. Then the bird exploded and all I saw was a white flash and then black. I reasoned, not felt, that I was falling and I pulled my parachute (back pack) rip cord.” Capt Gordon Bocher

Patterson, Reid and Bocher were the only crewmen to escape Odin before three major sections of the aircraft crashed onto the jungle floor. While the survivors descended under parachute, Reid’s parachute “streamered” for most of his fall as he frantically used a leg movement technique taught in survival school called “bicycling.” Fortunately, his chute fully inflated just prior to landing. Now with all three survivors on the ground, Reid was dangerously close to a manned AAA site as all three survivors concealed themselves in jungle foliage. Though the PAVN-controlled Vietnamese jungle was not a welcome place for Spectre crewmen, they had no choice other than to sit tight and wait for daylight. During the night, Bocher and Reid made voice contact with one of the F-4 escorts, but Patterson’s radio was damaged on bailout. Later, a NAIL FAC arrived overhead to pinpoint all three survivor locations. Tragically, there were no signs of any other parachutes.

At first light, a 37th ARRS rescue force supported by A-1 Skyraiders was launched from Da Nang, Vietnam. While the HH-53 “low bird” commanded by Capt Donald Sutton picked up survivors, A-1s dropped BLU-52/B CS Riot Control powder on the periphery of the area to reduce enemy movement. Navy fighters also bombed a nearby airfield to squelch any activity that may be emerging from there. By mid-morning, all three were onboard an HH-53, then flown to Da Nang for medical checks.

1972 - June 19; A HH-53C from 37th ARRS, crewed by Capt. Donald A. Sutton (P), Todd H. Hohberger (CP), Ronald W. Blackwell (FE), Cole E. Panning (PJ) and Kenneth W. Cakebread (PJ), rescued three AC-130A crew members, Capt. Gordon L. Brocher, 2nd Lt. Robert V. Reid and SSgt. William B. Patterson after they bailed out of their SA-7 missile damaged aircraft on 18 June 1972, near the A Shau Valley about 25 miles southwest of Hue, RVN. The remaining 12 AC-130A crew members, Capt. Paul Faris Gilbert, Capt. Robert Allan Wilson, Maj. Gerald Francis Ayres, Maj. Robert Herman Harrison, Capt. Mark Giles Danielson, MSgt. Jacob Edward Mercer, TSgt. Richard Milton Cole, SSgt. Donald Herman Klinke, SSgt. Larry Jerome Newman, SSgt. Richard E. Nyhof, Sgt. Leon Andrew Hunt and Sgt. Stanley Lawrence Lehrke, were KIA. **"Vietnam Air Losses" by Chris Hobson & JRCC Save Form & "PJ's in Vietnam" by Robert L. LaPointe**