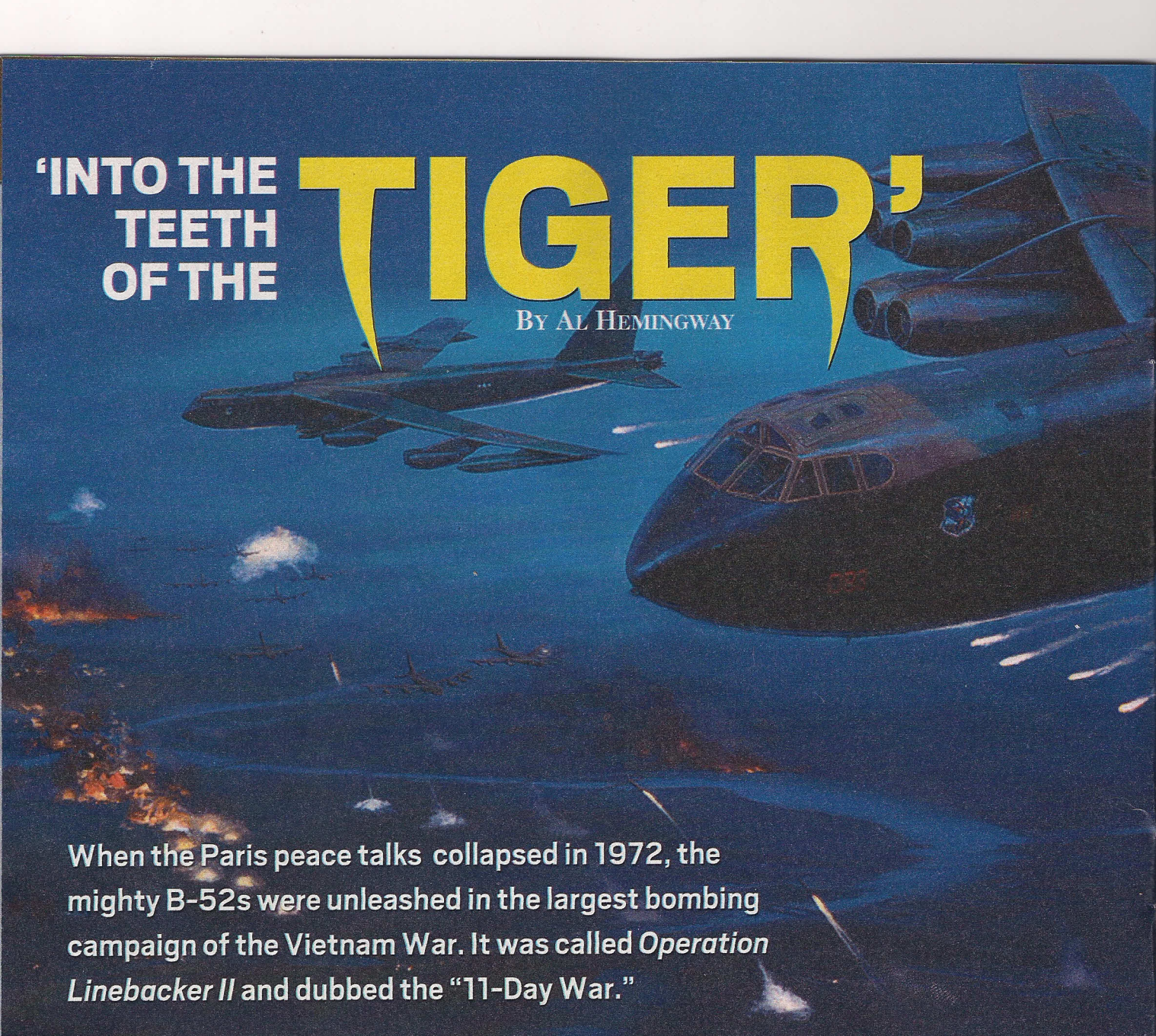




**'INTO THE
TEETH
OF THE**

TIGER'

BY AL HEMINGWAY

When the Paris peace talks collapsed in 1972, the mighty B-52s were unleashed in the largest bombing campaign of the Vietnam War. It was called *Operation Linebacker II* and dubbed the "11-Day War."

In October 1972, Henry Kissinger, the chief U.S. negotiator at the Paris peace talks, publicly declared to the American people: "Peace is at hand." However, Kissinger's counterpart, Le Duc Tho, head negotiator for the North Vietnamese communists, relayed that peace was indeed at hand—under their terms—or there would be no peace at all.

Several weeks before Christmas in 1972, the North Vietnamese made good their threat when they walked out of the negotiations. Furious, President Richard M. Nixon quickly dispatched an ultimatum to Hanoi demanding it return to the bargaining table or else. The communists arrogantly refused. Unfortunately for Hanoi, Nixon was not bluffing. He had a bold plan to force Hanoi back to the talks.

LINEBACKER II COMMENCES

On Dec. 17, 1972, a message from the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) was forwarded to all operational commanders in the 7th Air Force: "You are directed to commence at approximately 1200Z, 18

December 1972, a three-day maximum effort, repeat, maximum effort, of B52/TACAIR strikes in the Hanoi/Haiphong areas" *Operation Linebacker II*—the "11-Day War"—had begun.

This was the first time the B-52

Stratofortress was allowed to go "downtown" (pilots' nickname for Hanoi) during the Vietnam War. Until now, the B-52s, or BUFs (Big Ugly Fellows) as they were called, were utilized primarily for ground support, hitting suspected enemy



"HIGH ROAD TO HANOI" by Jack Fellows. B-52s strike Hanoi as SAMs streak toward the aircraft. Operation Linebacker II was a massive bombing campaign over North Vietnam during December 1972.

U.S. AIR FORCE ART PROGRAM

supply bases and supply routes in South Vietnam.

Pilots and crewmembers, for the most part, were excited about their new role and finally using the aircraft for its original purpose—that of a strategic bomber. Lt. Gen. Gerald W. Johnson, commander of the Strategic Air Command's (SAC) 8th Air Force on Guam, said: "We were finally called upon to go right into the teeth of the tiger and get the toughest targets in the toughest environment."

Linebacker II targets included storage

and supply complexes, railroad yards, transshipment points, repair facilities along the northwest and northeast rail lines, communication installations and MiG airstrips.

Some 140 planes, 80 from the 43rd Strategic Wing (SW), located at Andersen AFB on Guam, dubbed "The Rock," and another 60 from the 307th SW, situated at U-Tapao AFB, Thailand, along with aircraft from the 72nd SW (Provisional), were poised and ready to commence the operation.

B-52s normally fly in cells of three with the call sign for each cell designated a different color. Due to the massive scope of the bombing, 43 various shades had to be used. "They'd gone clear down to peppermint and bronze," laughed one pilot.

Within hours the operation was under way. Ground crews hustled to ready

metallic foil) to jam enemy radar.

Another vital component of the air campaign was "Combat Lightning"—five specially outfitted KC-135s that provided communications support between the 7th Fleet and 7th and 8th Air Forces. "Crew members flew 24-hour support missions for 11 days," recalled former Air Force Master Sgt. Doug Maurstad.

BUFS GO DOWNTOWN

On Dec. 18, 1972, at 2:41 in the afternoon, 27 B-52s lifted off from Andersen AFB. Another 21 BUFs took off from U-Tapao and headed in an easterly direction to link up with the Guam-based planes. After this was accomplished, the 70-mile long string of BUFs began their flight to Hanoi.

F-111s, or Aardvarks, flew ahead of the B-52s and hit four MiG airstrips. Right behind them, F-4s sowed chaff corri-

One pilot looked on in awe and remarked:

"THE VALLEY [WAS] ALMOST AS BRIGHT AS DAY."

the big birds. Aircraft mechanics had to check the engines and do whatever it took to get the massive planes airborne to complete their missions. Crewmen loaded 750-lb. and 500-lb. bombs—60,000 lbs. of additional ordnance in all.

Planners became increasingly concerned with the tough aerial defenses that the B-52s would encounter once they entered Hanoi's air space. The massive planes, already burdened with the extra weight from the bombs, would have a difficult time in maneuvering away from the SA-2 surface-to-air-missiles (SAMs) the communist gunners would be firing at them.

At an altitude of 30,000 feet, the BUFs would be flying at the SAMs optimum effective range. Also, they were ordered to fly an exact course to improve the accuracy of their bombing runs.

To counter this, the BUFs did have their own radar jamming equipment on board. To further assist them, EB-66 and EA-6 Electronic Counter Measures (ECM) aircraft flew with the B-52s to confuse the SAMs. As an added measure, F-4 Phantoms dropped chaff (strips of

dors. However, a 100-knot wind blew the metal strips away prior to the arrival of the B-52s.

As the first cell of BUFs neared Hanoi, they were greeted with a salvo of 50 SAMs. One plane was damaged so bad from the flying shrapnel it was forced to abort its mission and fly back to base.

Two SAMs found their mark and sent one B-52 crashing to the earth. Fortunately, three crewmen escaped injury when they successfully ejected before the 150,000-lb. fuel tanks erupted into a gigantic fireball. This was the first Stratofortress to be lost to hostile fire and only the second damaged in the entire Vietnam War to date. One pilot looked on in awe and remarked: "The valley [was] almost as bright as day."

At midnight, 30 more B-52s arrived over Hanoi. In all, 121 sorties were flown against the Kinh No and Yen Vien complexes, three MiG airfields, railroad repair facilities at Gia Lam and the Hanoi radio station. This temporarily put "Hanoi Hannah," the North Vietnamese "Tokyo Rose," off the air.

Another first was recorded that eve-



A U.S. Air Force B-52G Stratofortress from the 72nd Strategic Wing waits beside the runway at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, as another B-52 takes off for a bombing mission over North Vietnam during Operation Linebacker II on Dec. 15, 1972.

ning. Staff Sgt. Samuel Turner, a tail gunner on the *Brown 03*, downed a MiG-21 with a burst from his .50-caliber machine gun. He was the first tail gunner since the Korean War to do so.

Relatively few MiGs were airborne that night. The real threat to the B-52s were the SAMs. In all, it was estimated that more than 200 SAMs were launched against the big targets. Three BUFs were shot down with another two sustaining serious damage.

From his lonely berth in the rear of his plane, Tech. Sgt. Peter E. Whalen, the bombers' fire control operator, peered out. He described the scene later: "When the SAMs come up through the clouds, you can see a bright glow as the rocket fire reflects on the cloud. The clouds magnify the light and make the SAM look bigger than it really is."

'EVERYONE WAS PROUD'

Despite the success of the first day, the pilots and crews started grumbling. The chaff support was woefully inadequate because of the strong prevailing winds. The sharp turns the pilots had to make were placing them directly into the 100-knot winds, causing the bombers to lose

considerable speed, enabling the enemy radar to find weak spots in their jamming barriers.

Also, the B-52s had to utilize a single point for a post-target turn. By doing this, NVA gunners could zero in on the first wave of B-52s when they finished their laborious turning maneuver.

Ignoring the pilot's complaints,

ing. Despite the initial euphoria over the Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA) reports, some were distressed. "Many people in Washington were worried that the Air Force would fail," said Maj. Gen. Harry N. Cordes, SAC chief of staff.

Dec. 20 saw another six B-52s lost in aerial combat over North Vietnam's capital city. Morale hit rock bottom. There

One pilot flying in Blue Cell, said:

"IT LOOKS LIKE WE'LL WALK ON SAMs TONIGHT."

Linebacker II proceeded on schedule. On day two, 93% of the aircraft struck their targets with only one bomber receiving minor damage. However, Day 3 was different. Two of the G-model planes were hit while performing their post-target turn and sent earthbound. Also, a D-model was hit but managed to limp back to U-Tapao before it could finish its run.

SAC headquarters was troubled when word reached it that the BUFs had been lost. Regardless, the decision was made to press forward with the bomb-

was a notable increase in sick call from the crews. Imaginary mechanical problems suddenly arose. And one officer even refused to fly. One pilot referred to the 70-mile stretch of BUFs as a "baby elephant walk."

Indeed, Dec. 20 proved to be the deadliest day of the operation with 17 airmen KIA—52% of total deaths in the aerial "11-Day War."

Continuing to neglect the pilots' concerns, 30 bombers headed toward Hanoi

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Flight Path of the "Big Ugly Fellows"



Flight paths for the B-52s stretched an amazing distance from Guam and Okinawa to North Vietnam and South Vietnam, then back. However, during *Operation Linebacker II*, no bombing missions originated from Okinawa. KC-135 refueling aircraft flew from Kadena Air Base.

'Teeth of the Tiger'

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on Dec. 21. One pilot, flying in Blue Cell, said: "It looks like we'll walk on SAMs tonight." His premonition was correct. His aircraft was struck by two missiles, which caused one of the wings to catch fire.

Another BUF in Scarlet Cell fell victim when a SAM scored a direct hit. Capt. Robert E. Wolff later commented: "We had a formation approximately 70 miles long of one aircraft behind the other lumbering toward North Vietnam all using the same route, altitude and heading. If 36 aircraft turned at a certain point to a certain heading, it does not require much of an educated guess to decide where to aim at number 37."

Although there was much vocal opposition to the strategy used during *Linebacker II*, the pilots and crews supported the bombing operation. "At last it seemed that we were going to attempt to end this war," said Wolff, "and everyone was proud to have some part in that operation."

'WHISPERING DEATH'

A 36-hour cease-fire was called on Christmas Eve. Planners immediately went to work to alter the strategy of the bombing runs. SAMs were the biggest obstacle to the vulnerable Strato-fortresses and it was decided to eliminate as many SAM sites as possible.

To do this, the F-111 "Aardvark" was called upon. With its terrain-hugging capabilities, and its Mach 1 speed, it was

virtually invisible to North Vietnamese Army (NVA) radar. Soon, the F-111s were flying an average of 24 times a night over Hanoi, releasing their 500- and 700-lb. Snake-eye ordnance. The NVA referred to it as the "whispering death."

Meanwhile, during the daylight hours, attack aircraft were pounding other important targets in the city. Railway lines, supply depots, and the Doumer and Canal Rapide bridges, were constantly bombed. Airmen flew almost 100 sorties daily, which prompted one pilot to say: "[The aircraft] were sitting nose to tail all the way out."

Additional safety measures were employed to protect the BUFs as much as possible. The number of support aircraft was increased substantially to 113

North Vietnamese personnel scramble to ready an SA-2 missile to engage American aircraft. U.S. F-111s, flying under NVA radar, eliminated many of these sites, making it safer for later bombing runs.

with the chaff being released in cloud-like formations to confuse the NVA gunners. Also, the BUFs were given different altitudes to enter Hanoi's air space and leave by diverse routes. The G-model B-52 was assigned lightly defended targets because of its inferior jamming equipment.

When these changes were implemented, morale quickly improved. Now, the pilots and crews felt they had a chance against the dreaded SAMs.

STRATEGY IS SUCCESSFUL

Dec. 26 saw the largest bombing raid of the Vietnam War. A meticulously planned and coordinated air assault was levied against Hanoi to bring the com-

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U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO



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munists back to the bargaining table. The air armada consisted of 120 Strato-fortresses with seven waves of the big birds hammering 10 different targets in the city within 15 minutes.

More than 100 support planes accompanied the BUFs. The Aardvarks strafed airstrips while U.S. Navy A-6 Intruders struck SAM batteries near Haiphong. The massive bombers diverged on Hanoi from northwest and southwest through Laos. The other cells, aimed at Haiphong and Thai Nguyen, flew in from the north-east and southeast.

The new tactics paid off. Some 4,000 tons of ordnance were released, destroying their targets. However, two B-52s were lost with six KIA to the barrage of SAMs. *Ebony 2* suddenly erupted into flames when it was hit by one of the projectiles. *Ash 1* crashed as it approached U-Tapao when it attempted to return to base after sustaining serious hits.

Salvos of SAMs blasted up to meet them. One returning pilot was asked how many missiles he had spotted: "Hundreds," he said.

Another pilot vividly described the way the missiles looked:



Col. James R. McCarthy



Capt. John D. Mize

"Hold your hand at arm's length, fingers bunched and pointed toward your eyes," he said. "Now imagine that your fingertips are little points of light, and each one of those lights is a rocket motor on a missile. Now move your hand toward your face, fast, and spread your fingers. Those damned SAMs look like that going by."

Yet 43rd SW airborne mission commander Col. James R. McCarthy was awarded the Air Force Cross for leading his mission through "intense anti-aircraft fire and heavy salvos of surface-to-air missiles" on Dec. 26 "without sustaining a single loss."

Two days after Christmas, another 60

Anti-war protestors were quick to capitalize on the air campaign over North Vietnam. They coined the phrase "Christmas Bombings" and accused the U.S. of "carpet bombing" and inflicting indiscriminate destruction and casualties on the people of North Vietnam.

Sen. George McGovern (D-S.D.) said it was "the most murderous aerial bombardment in the history of the world" and "the most immoral action that this nation has ever committed in its national history."

One example used by left-wing activists was the bombing of Bach Mai hospital. Anti-war leaders reported that the medical facility was "razed to the ground." Soon, the media, notably *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, were quick to side with the anti-war protestors.

Nothing could have been further from the truth, but that didn't stop the press.

The hospital was not "razed to the ground" as some of anti-war activists

had claimed. One wing of the building was hit when one of the BUFs inadvertently let loose its bombs early.

The carpet bombing claim was another lie concocted by the anti-war movement. In fact, it tried to persuade Hanoi's mayor to tell the media that the city suffered over 10,000 killed because of *Linebacker II*. In an ironic twist, the city official refused, saying, "The government's credibility was at stake."

In all, 1,624 civilians lost their lives in two cities due to *Linebacker II*. This compares to the nearly 84,000 people killed in a single night during the bombing runs over Tokyo in March 1945.

B-52s struck Hanoi. Capt. John D. Mize, a B-42 commander in the 307th SW, after seeing his aircraft severely damaged by SAMs on Dec. 27, "remained at his station to ensure that his crew had the best opportunity for safe egress over friendly territory," according to his Air Force Cross citation.

On the 28th and 29th, the mighty

POWs vs. Press

In the final analysis, *Linebacker II* was a great U.S. victory. North Vietnam suffered material loss and psychological defeat.

POWs held at the Hanoi Hilton prison knew this firsthand. The guards were very quiet during the 11-day air campaign with " ...no joking, no laughing, no acts of defiance, or reprisal....," said one former prisoner.

Air Force Capt. Frank D. Lewis, a POW in Hanoi, later said, "I prayed for the men, the crews, and the aircraft they flew. To me they had become the hand of God that had reached out to bring me an inner peace and strength with which I could endure this cruel land."

Another POW, Air Force Col. Fred Cherry, recalled, "When the bombing



POWs Col. Fred Cherry and Col. Jon Reynolds both felt the bombings aided in drawing the war to a close.



stopped, we knew they didn't have any more missiles. And that the agreements were going to be signed."

U.S. Air Force Col. Jon A. Reynolds, held prisoner for many years, commented: "Some, perhaps

most, will suggest that the negotiations did not result from the B-52 strikes. From my vantage point, however, the reason the North Vietnamese negotiated was obvious."

Nevertheless, airmen who waged the bombing campaign were especially castigated by the anti-war movement. Yet as President Ronald Reagan put it: "Who can doubt that the cause for which our men fought was just? It was, however imperfectly pursued, the cause of freedom." As CBS's Dan Rather even later admitted, "Those Americans may have gone to the wrong war, but they went for the right reasons."

birds were on Hanoi's doorstep again with another bombing run. However, only a small number of SAMs greeted the attackers. It looked as if the NVA's aerial defenses were beginning to weaken. Right after that, the communists sent word that they wanted to resume the peace talks. *Linebacker II* was over.

Linebacker II lasted a mere 11 days, but

in terms of firepower and destruction, it was awesome. In all, the B-52s flew over 700 sorties with tactical aircraft logging some 1,000 missions. A total of 15,000 tons of ordnance was dropped, destroying or crippling 1,600 military installations, 372 pieces of rolling stock, 80% of Hanoi's electric generating power, 25% of its petroleum supply and numerous airfields and roads.

The NVA also had eight MiGs shot down—two by B-52 tail gunners. Despite the magnitude of the bombing raids, civilian casualties were light: 1,318 deaths in Hanoi and 306 in Haiphong.

Linebacker II's complex tactics in combat "will eventually be recognized as one of the most outstanding feats of airmanship in strategic bombing operations in the history of aerial warfare," maintains retired Brig. Gen. James McCarthy.

The success of *Linebacker II* came at a high price, though. Some 15 B-52s and 11 tactical aircraft were lost with an additional nine BUF's damaged. Of the 98 Air Force crewmen shot down, 33 were KIA; 26 rescued; and 39 captured and subsequently released.

The breakdown for the total U.S. 37 KIA was 15 in the 72nd SW, 15 in the 307th SW, three in the 43rd SW and four naval aviators flying from the carriers *Saratoga*, *Ranger* and *Enterprise*.

The airmen killed have not been forgotten. On Guam at Andersen AFB in Arc Light Memorial Park they are forever remembered. On Dec. 18, 2012, a *Linebacker II* monument was scheduled to be dedicated in front of the B-52D in the airpark at the Eighth Air Force Museum at Barksdale AFB, La.

'THEY WERE AT YOUR MERCY'

In the end, it was the devastation of U.S. airpower that brought the communists back to the negotiations.

According to Vietnam War expert, the late Douglas Pike, "Hanoi officials experienced true, all-out strategic air war for the first time. It had a profound effect, causing them to reverse virtually overnight their bargaining position at the Paris talks."

Earl H. Tilford, author of *Crosswinds: The Air Force's Setup in Vietnam*, wrote that *Linebacker II* "had a psychologi-

cal impact on Hanoi's leadership. That, coupled with the destruction of North Vietnam's air defense system, finally compelled a return to meaningful peace negotiations."

In *The Lessons of Vietnam*, British military authority Robert Thompson wrote: "In my view, on December 30, 1972, after eleven days of those B-52 attacks on the Hanoi area, you had won the war. It was over! They had fired 1,242 SAMs; they had none left, and what would come in overland from China would be a mere trickle. They and their whole rear base were at your mercy."

Historian George Herring concluded that "the U.S. position in South Vietnam was stronger at the end of 1972 than at any previous point in the war."

On Jan. 27, 1973, a month after *Linebacker II* ended, Le Duc Tho, and his negotiating team, signed the Paris Peace Accords. The communists paid Nixon the ultimate compliment: "Nixon proved to be extremely obstinate and reckless, and did things Johnson never dared to do." ❖

EDITOR'S NOTE: The original version of this article appeared in December 1997.