

DUEL OVER THE DRAGON'S JAW

by Michael O'Connor

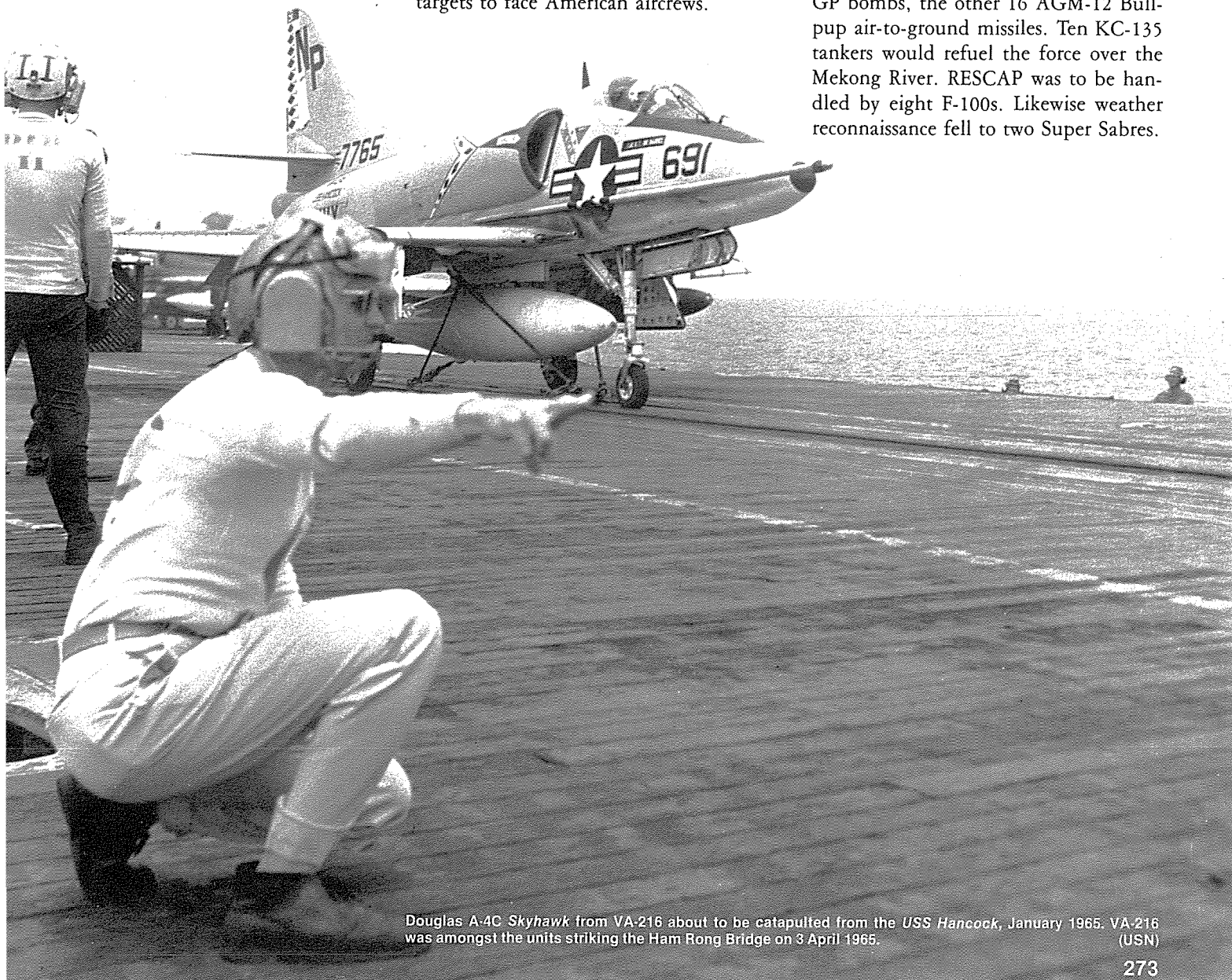
On 3 and 4 April 1965 the first air battles of the Vietnam War took place over a massive steel and concrete bridge known to the North Vietnamese as the Ham Rong (Dragon's Jaw). The skies over North Vietnam would witness many air battles but none more historic than these first duels over the Dragon.

In March 1965 the Johnson Administration ordered air attacks on the North Vietnamese rail system south of the 20th Parallel. In part these attacks were designed to sever all lines of communication (LOC) in this area. The attacks were also aimed at discouraging the North Vietnamese from continuing their sup-

port of Viet Cong guerrillas in the south. Priority was given to destroying the Ham Rong Railroad and Highway Bridge located some 70 miles south of Hanoi.

Completed in 1964, the Dragon's Jaw was an enormous 540-foot-long structure spanning the Song Ma River. As American strike forces would soon discover, the Dragon had been grossly overbuilt. Twin steel thru-truss spans rested on nine concrete piers, the center pillar being some 16 feet in diameter. Concrete abutments 30- to 40-feet thick anchored the structure at either end. The bridge was ringed with 37mm AAA positions.¹ The Dragon would be one of the toughest targets to face American aircrews.

The 78 aircraft that made up Rolling Thunder Mission 9-Alpha climbed into the Vietnamese skies shortly after noon-time on 3 April 1965, their target the Ham Rong Bridge. The 9-Alpha strike force was led by Lt. Col. Robinson Risner who had also planned and coordinated the strike. Risner, a widely respected career officer with eight Korean War MIG-15s to his credit, had a mixture of aircraft under his command. The strike force, drawn from Risner's own 67th TFS and the 355th TFW, consisted of 31 F-105 Thunderchiefs. Fifteen additional F-105s and seven F-100s would suppress flak. Thirty of the F-105s carried 750-lb. GP bombs, the other 16 AGM-12 Bullpup air-to-ground missiles. Ten KC-135 tankers would refuel the force over the Mekong River. RESCAP was to be handled by eight F-100s. Likewise weather reconnaissance fell to two Super Sabres.



Douglas A-4C Skyhawk from VA-216 about to be catapulted from the USS Hancock, January 1965. VA-216 was amongst the units striking the Ham Rong Bridge on 3 April 1965.

Pre- and post-strike photo runs would be made by an RF-101. MIGCAP was assigned to four F-100s which would orbit to the north of the target.²

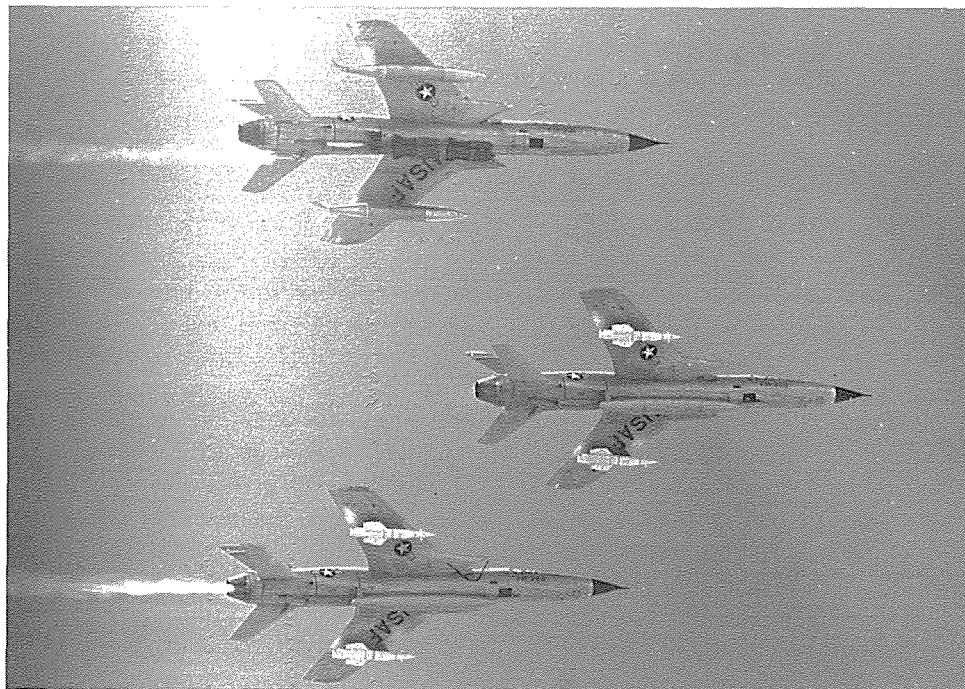
Although they possessed some 70 MIG-15s and -17s, the North Vietnamese Air Force had yet to oppose the American strike forces. Since the first strikes on the North however, the North Vietnamese had been training with their Ground-Control-Intercept (GCI) controllers. Clearly they were biding their time, gaining experience before committing their fighter force.

At 1400 hours on 3 April 1965 the first flak suppression aircraft made their runs on the Dragon. Explosions were still rippling through the target area as the Bullpup carriers came up from the south and rolled in. The Americans quickly learned how tough the Dragon was. Bullpup missiles, trailing bright orange flames, streaked earthward to explode harmlessly on the heavy bridge superstructure. Realizing the ineffectiveness of the Bullpup attack, the bomb-carrying Thuds pressed their attacks to below minimum release altitude. Strings of 750-lb. bombs walked across the bridge superstructure and roadway. As the strike force turned homeward, the Dragon stood unscathed. Moreover, the bridge had claimed its first victims—an F-100 flak suppressor and an RF-101. A restrike would be needed.

Several hours after the Air Force strike, the Navy had its turn at the Dragon. At 0300 hours the carrier CORAL SEA launched a strike force made up of six A-4Cs, 10 A-4Es, eight F-8Es and four F-4Bs. Simultaneously the HANCOCK flew off nine A-4Es, 10 A-4Cs and eight F-8Es.³

As the Navy aircraft registered on their radar screens, the North Vietnamese at last committed their fighter force. They scrambled a flight of MIG-17s from the 2nd Company. The MIGs were led by Capt. Ho Van, the Company commander. Top cover was furnished by MIG-17s from the 1st Company led by Capt. Tran Hanh. The MIGs sped southward.

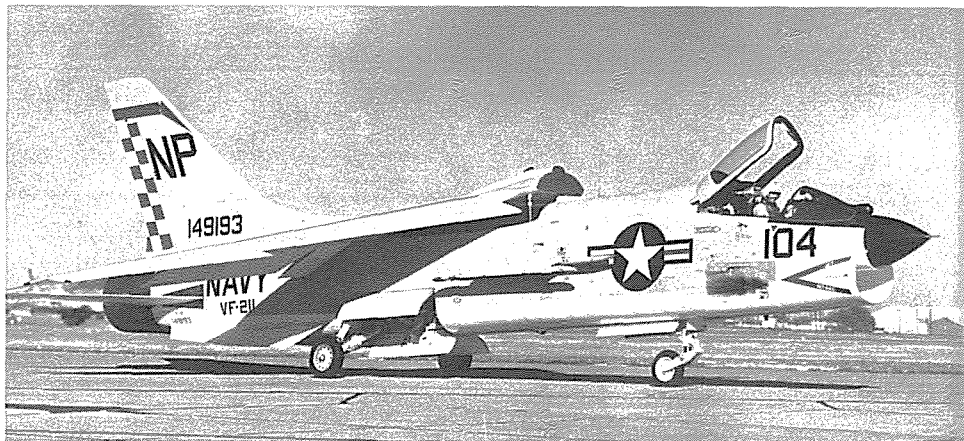
Just as the strike force from the HANCOCK came off the Dragon, the MIGs swept through the target area. A three-plane element from the 2nd Co. caught an F-8 Crusader unawares. One of the MIGs—flown by Ho Van—pulled into the F-8's blind spot and fired several bursts of cannon fire, scoring hits on the



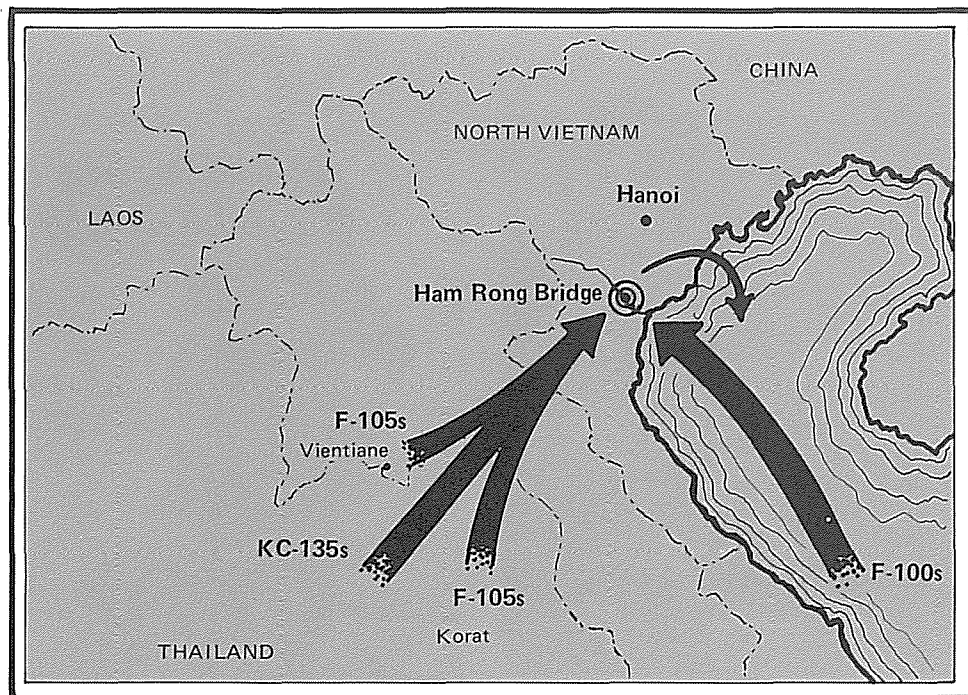
Trio of F-105s from the 18th TFW head out for a North Vietnamese target, October 1965. Two of the Thuds are carrying AGM-12 Bullpup air-to-ground missiles which proved useless against the Ham Rong Bridge. Third F-105 is armed with six 750-lb. bombs. (USAF)



Cdr. Warren Sells (left) briefs Lt. Dick Evans on board USS Hancock, March 1965. Sells, Commander Air Wing 21, led the Navy strike on the Ham Rong Bridge on 3 April 1965 and briefly engaged North Vietnamese MIGs in combat. (USN)

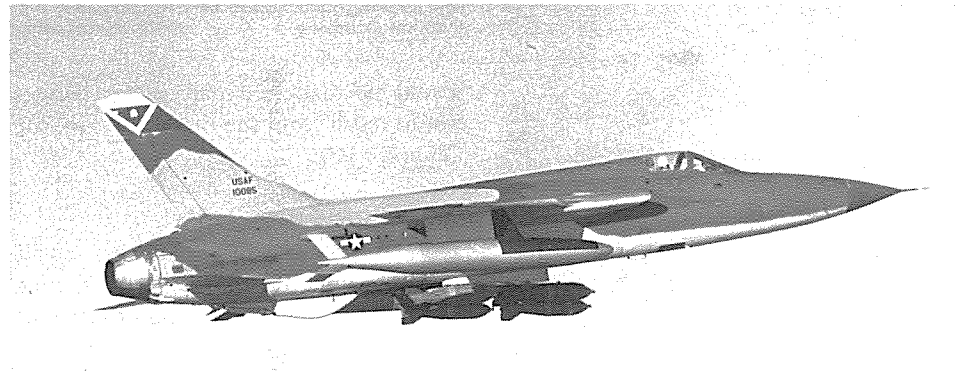


Vought F-8E Crusader from VF-211. VF-211 was the first Navy squadron to engage North Vietnamese MIGs. Action took place on 3 April 1965 when three MIG-17s bounced Lt. Cdr. Spencer Thomas. (Vought Corp.)



Ingress routes for the Ham Rong Bridge, 3 April 1965.

(Adapted from *The Tale of Two Bridges*)



Skypoint I. Camouflage-painted F-105 Thunderchief en route to target in Vietnam, 25 Nov. '65. (USAF)



North Vietnamese MIG-17 pilots stage a practice scramble for the local press. Unit is believed to be the Second Company which briefly engaged the 3 April Navy strike. (CIA)

left wing. The Crusader pilot, assuming he had been hit by ground fire, broke right and climbed out at 400 knots. Upon reaching the coast he again came under attack. Tracers swept past the left wing. Spotting an unidentified aircraft at his seven o'clock position, the Crusader pilot cut in afterburner and accelerated away at

Mach 1. The North Vietnamese optimistically claimed two F-8 kills, one by Ho Van. In fact, only one American aircraft had been attacked and, although damaged, had safely diverted to Danang. In their first interception the North Vietnamese had done poorly. Within 24 hours the MIG drivers would demonstrate

how dangerous they could be.

At 1057 hours on 4 April 1965 Robinson Risner turned north at the IP and began searching for the Dragon. The Americans had learned from their mistakes of the previous day and had made changes in force composition and ordinance. Risner now had 35 F-105s and 23 A-1H strike aircraft, eight F-100s assigned to flak suppression and two F-100 weather ships. All strike aircraft carried 750-lb. GP bombs. Once again the Thuds were drawn from the 18th TFW and 355th TFW.⁴

By 1120 hours the attack was 25 minutes old. Refueling problems and hazy visibility had thrown the attack off schedule, causing the Thuds to bunch up over the target. Several flights of F-105s were orbiting to the south awaiting their turn to bomb. Disaster was just moments away.

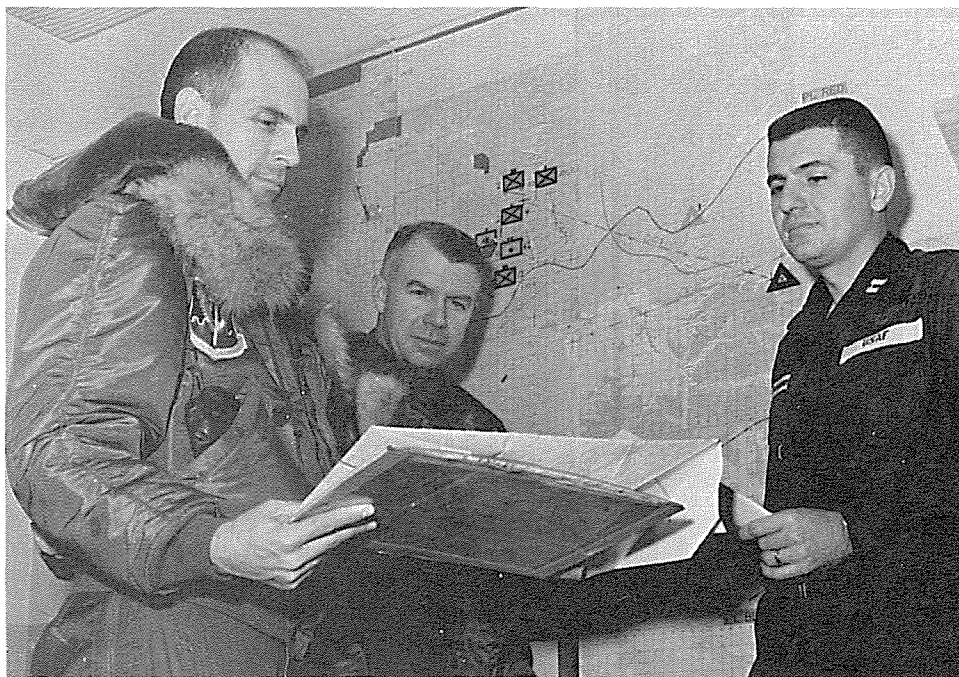
Unnoticed by the Americans four MIG-17s broke from cloud cover to the south. The MIGs had been ideally positioned by GCI and pounced on Major Frank Bennett's Zinc Flight. Caught at low speed with a full load of eight 750-lb. bombs, the Thuds—from Korat's 354th TFS, 355th TFW—were meat on the table. Zinc Three and Four spotted the danger. Identifying the approaching aircraft as MIGs, they radioed a frantic warning. Transmission was garbled. Bennett and his wingman, Capt. James Magnusson, never received the call.

The lead MIG element—led by Capt. Tran Hanh of the 1st Co.—accelerated and closed on Zinc Lead. The second element bore down on Zinc Three and Four, who broke into the attacking MIGs.

Meanwhile Hanh pulled in behind Zinc Lead's element and opened fire at a distance of 1500 feet. Hanh later reported that "I shot at the nearest plane [believed to be Magnusson] and hit its left wing. It staggered but tried to catch its formation. I sent another volley of bullets which hit the plane right in its body. It crashed to the ground, wrapped in black smoke and flame."⁵

Simultaneously fire from Hanh's wingman tore into the second F-105.⁶ The MIG closed to 800 feet, scoring repeated hits on the Thud's aft section.

Having fatally crippled the two Thuds the MIGs now chose to disengage. They rolled wings level and dove past, escaping to the north. Magnusson went down in the target area. Bennett managed to reach



Maj. Frank Bennett led the ill-fated Zinc Flight which tangled with NV MIGs on 4 April 1965. Bennett (center) is shown here being debriefed during the Polar Siege Exercise held in January and February 1965. (USAF)



Mission commander for the initial strikes on the Dragon's Jaw was Lt. Col. Robinson Risner, CO of the 67th TFS, 18th TFW. Risner is shown here receiving the Air Force Cross from Gen. John McConnell for his heroism on 3 and 4 April 1965. (USAF)

the Gulf of Tonkin only to drown after ejecting. First blood had been drawn in the Vietnam air war.

In addition to the two losses to MIGs, the Dragon had claimed a third victim—another F-105, downed by AAA fire. Over 300 bomb hits had been scored but the Dragon would not go down.

In many respects the attacks on 3 and 4 April 1965 marked a turning point in the air war. For the first time the North Vietnamese demonstrated their ability to

make effective use of their GCI system. The single, high-speed diving pass made by the MIGs exemplified the hit-and-run tactics which would be used so successfully by the North Vietnamese throughout the war. When the Americans next appeared over the Dragon they would be protected by a MIGCAP of F-4 Phantoms. Strike forces would be reduced in size while carrying improved ordnance. Far-reaching changes in tactics, formations, ordnance and mission planning



Capt. Tran Hanh scored the first victory of the Vietnam air war. Hanh, shown here in 1967, flew with the First Company. (NVDM via author)

would be made. In part these changes would result from the first duels over the Dragon's Jaw.

POSTSCRIPT

On 10 May 1972 F-4 Phantoms, using 2000- and 3000-lb. laser-guided bombs and conventional 750-lb. bombs, would finally knock the Dragon out of the war.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Following the attacks on 3 April, the North Vietnamese bolstered the bridge's AAA defenses by moving in 57mm weapons.
2. Accounts differ on the composition of the Air Force strikes on 3 and 4 April 1965. The figures cited herein were supplied by the Albert F. Simpson Historical Research Center.
3. Information on the Navy strike on 3 April 1965 was furnished by the Naval Historical Center.
4. Simpson, *Op. cit.*
5. *Fire trial: Reportages*, Hanoi, Foreign Languages Publishing House, p. 56.
6. North Vietnamese accounts identify Hanh's wingman only as Comrade Da.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An AAHS member since 1969, Mike O'Connor has been interested in aviation history all his life. O'Connor, 28, received his B.S. degree in history and M.S. in library science from the University of Wisconsin.

Since 1972 he has been researching the Vietnam air war, with special emphasis on the development of the North Vietnamese Air Force. His two-part article on North Vietnam's aces, published elsewhere, was the first comprehensive article on the subject to appear in the West. Anyone having information on the NVAF is requested to contact Mike at 406 7th St., Mosinee, WI. 54455.