

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

One Magic Moment

Battered by high waves and without a life raft, Linebacker II veteran navigator Capt. Myles McTernan refused to give up. At last, fortune smiled on him.

IN December 1972 after repeated attempts to negotiate an end to the war in Southeast Asia while following a strategy based largely on counterinsurgency, President Richard M. Nixon ordered strikes on strategic targets north of the 20th parallel. The campaign, known as Linebacker II, which began on Dec. 18, 1972, threw all Air Force and Navy aircraft capable of operating in that environment against those targets.

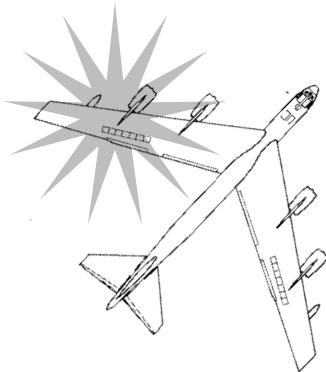
The centerpiece of the campaign was the B-52 bombers that flew more than 700 sorties during the 11-day bombing campaign that ended on Dec. 29 and led to a cease-fire agreement effective on Jan. 28, 1973. While final negotiations were under way, USAF strikes continued at a reduced rate and against only targets south of the 20th parallel.

Thus ended significant US participation in the longest war in our history. It was second only to World War II in dollar costs and fourth in casualties if our own Civil War is included.

This is the story of the last B-52 lost in the SEA conflict as recalled by Lt. Col. Myles McTernan, then a captain and navigator in the 307th Strategic Wing based at U Tapao, Thailand. Its target that night of Jan. 4 was near Vinh, about 150 miles north of the DMZ. It was expected to be a milk run. This was McTernan's 121st mission, including Linebacker II and two earlier Arc Light tours in B-52s.

While they were releasing their 500-pound bombs at 30,000 feet, a SAM was reported on a collision heading with the B-52, which still had its bomb bay doors open. The missile exploded just to the left of the B-52 as the last bomb dropped. The No. 1 engine was knocked out immediately,

followed by No. 2. The pilot's flight controls and the hydraulic and electrical systems were damaged. All of aircraft commander Lt. Col. Gerald Wickline's windows were shattered, adding to the difficulty of controlling the damaged B-52. Following rapid decompression, both McTernan and the bombardier were soaked with leaking JP-4 fuel. Unable to maintain altitude, Wickline descended to 10,000 feet over the South China Sea and ordered the crew to bail out. When he was satisfied that the entire crew had ejected, he followed, first trimming the aircraft nose down on the southerly course, about 10 miles off the coast and heading toward Da Nang.



Unknown to the pilot, there still was one man aboard—navigator McTernan. His seat, which ejected downward, was jammed, probably as a result of the SAM explosion. A partial ejection left him in a position where he could not be seen by other crew members, nor could he reach up to the foot-operated microphone switch on the floor of his compartment.

After what seemed an eternity, McTernan managed to struggle out of the ejection seat, forced to leave his survival kit behind. He was unable to find a soft-pack survival kit that contained a life raft. Only his survival vest remained to keep him afloat if he survived to reach the water. McTernan bailed out through an open escape hatch into the pitch-black night and the turbulence created by the diving aircraft. He suffered deep lacerations

of his face, hands, and arms and a fractured bone on the side of his face. Because he was in a semiconscious state, he did not remember pulling his rip cord or landing in waves that were from 8 to 10 feet high. It was some time later, and daylight, before he regained full consciousness.

Meanwhile the other crew members had been rescued. None of them suffered serious injuries, except Wickline, who was painfully injured in ejecting. All members believed that McTernan had bailed out and should be in the general area where they had been rescued. A search for him would continue.

McTernan knew that the chance of his being rescued was slim. He had left the aircraft many miles from the rest of the crew, landing in high seas in which the tiny dot of orange that was his life preserver would be extremely difficult to see from above. He was to be blessed by good fortune, however. After several hours, a search plane scanning the general area where the others had landed reached bingo fuel and was forced to turn back to its base. In one magic moment, a member of the search crew spotted McTernan as he was at the top of a wave and briefly visible.

His rescue was a multiservice affair. The Navy directed the search from USS *Saratoga*. He was spotted by an Air Force search aircraft, picked up by a Marine chopper, and flown to the Da Nang Army hospital, where his injuries were treated.

After his close and terrifying brush with death, Myles McTernan was determined to complete his B-52 tour, which he did at Dyess AFB in Texas. He then served as an instructor in navigator-bombardier training at Mather AFB, Calif., and completed his military career as chief of navigation training for Joint navigator training at Mather.

Lt. Col. Myles McTernan retired from the Air Force in February 1991, ending a valiant military career that he can look back on with pride. He now lives in Folsom, Calif. ■