

B57 Canberra

May

Day . . .

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by: Don Poss

FORWARD: In June of 1965, the U.S. Air Force 3rd Bomb Group had moved to Da Nang to carry out night interdiction operations over North Vietnam and Laos. Principal targets were trucks, storage and bivouac areas, bridges, buildings and AAA sites. When deployed at Da Nang, the 8th and 13th Squadrons came under operational control of the **6252nd Tactical Fighter Wing** which became the **35th TFW** about a year later.

*"Combat attrition
in the B-57 force,
plus the
increasing availability
of higher
performance fighters
to carry out the air
war against the
North, caused the 3rd
BG to be withdrawn
from operations against
the North in October
of 1966 and relocated
to Phan Rang, just south
of Nha Trang and Cam
Ranh Bay." [Courtesy of
B-57]*

*"However, it
appears that B-57
night missions over
North Vietnam did
continue until at least
Oct 1967. It carried
out attacks
against Communist forces
in the Central*

**Highlands and supported
US ground troops in the
so-called "Iron
Triangle". [Courtesy:
8th Attack Sqdn Assn**

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the 8th continued North operations at night past Oct. 1967 from Phan Rang. Most North missions were flown at night from Phan Rang.

Out of the 94 B-57s that were assigned to the Southeast Asia theater, 51 were lost in combat (including 15 destroyed on the ground). This is the story of the deaths of USAF Captain Leon Boyd Smith II (pilot) and Major Elijah Goar Tollett Jr (crew), who crewed one of the 51 B-57's lost.

**[History and current
status of the**

57 Canberra

Martin B-

]

**Da Nang Flight line, January 12, 1966:
6252 Combat Air Police Squadron, 366th SPS (K-9)**

As the sun sat in the west, a dozen K-9 sentry dog handlers, including tentmates A2C Gary Eberbach and A2C Tom Baker, waited at the north end of Da Nang's only active runway for a B57 Canberra to complete its taxi and rolling take off.

Photo: Left, A2C Tom Baker. 2nd Rt. A2C Don Poss, Rt: Gary Eberbach.



As soon as the tower gave us the green-light we could cross to the east side perimeter and take up our posts every thousand feet. My sentry dog, Blackie (129X), was at heel, sitting patiently on my right side.

I watched for the pilots of the Martin B57 Canberra, a tactical fighter bomber, to glance up from their preflight, as they almost always did, so that I could wave a thumbs- up. But this time, both were intently focused upon their instruments, glancing neither left or right. *Something was wrong.*



The bomber was heavily armed, including wing bombs, and its nose seemed to dip slightly lower than the normal nose- down *rake* attitude. When it began to roll forward, the nose sagged even further. The B57 Canberra fighter-bomber lumbered down the runway with dual engines roaring. All of us sentry dog handlers followed its acceleration--we sensed that it was not a typical take-off, and we were right.

After 2,000 feet, the bomber should have already reached a point of no return, committed to take off, and began its vertical rotation lifting the nose to a high attitude. Suddenly the nose gear seemed to collapse onto the asphalt runway--trailing fireworks, like a thousand sparklers burning at once. We knew the B57 pilots could not eject at ground level because it had the old cannon shell ejection seats that would literally blow the pilots out of the cockpit and throw them onto the runway in front of the still accelerating aircraft.

The pilot was obviously fighting to control the aircraft and lift-off the runway, and as he was rolling down the runway he began jettisoning his unarmed bombs which planed like rocks across an asphalt pond--some bouncing higher than the aircraft and others tumbling and spinning end-over-end. For several seconds the nose lifted high, then settled back to a screeching shower of sparks like a comet's tail skipping across a lake of fire. Racing ever closer to the south end of the runway, it was *lift off* or die-time for the pilots. A C-130 *Flare bird*, returning to base, was flying directly overhead at that moment and helplessly observed the unfolding tragedy far below.

Please God . . .
into the air.

I prayed, willing the fighter-bomber

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