



An epic tale
of survival and
a mission that
might have
ended the
Vietnam War

MIDAIR

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CHAPTER ONE

THE B-52 IS A GREAT BEAST OF A PLANE. IT WAS DESIGNED BY MEN with the end of the world on their minds—conceived amid the fallout of Alamogordo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. It was built for destruction—a destroyer of nations packed with a nuclear arsenal—always aloft, always alert. It lumbered to life in the fifties, ascended to the skies, and flew headlong into the dark maw of the Cold War.

Roughly the size of a 747 with twice the number of engines, the B-52 has a slender fuselage and long wings with tips that droop nearly to the tarmac when the plane is loaded with weapons and fuel. It has an angular shark fin of a tail that rises four stories and slices ominously through the air. Within its fuselage and wings are vast reservoirs holding the equivalent of three residential swimming pools of jet fuel. It accommodates a flight crew of six, plus an entire backup team, who can fly in shifts. It can be refueled in midair. Should the end of the world be nigh, the plane and its crew can circle the skies continuously for days, weeks, or even months.

My first encounter with a B-52 came at Mather Air Force Base near Sacramento. I was five years old in the summer of 1966, riding on the back of my uncle Don Harten's Honda 500 motorcycle. We roared across the black tarmac that was already sending up shimmering waves of heat beneath the early morning sun. I clutched my uncle's shirt, and the engine rumbled beneath me. I leaned to the right and blinked with watering eyes into the hot wind that blew tears back across the sides of my face.

In the distance was an entire fleet of B-52s, parked wingtip to wingtip, nose to tail—football fields full of weapons of war, bristling beneath a scorching California sun.

With a twist of his wrist, my uncle gave the motorcycle one last full throttle as we approached his plane. We then coasted before racing past the B-52's nose, banking hard left and circling counterclockwise around the jet. My uncle rolled to a stop under the shade of the plane's wings, turned off the engine, stomped the kickstand into place, and dismounted. He lifted me beneath the armpits and swung me to the ground. Though the motorcycle's engine no longer roared, it sat smoldering and hissing inches from my arm. I walked in awe, staring upward at the plane, which stood some ten feet above me, as though I were looking at the ceiling of some soaring cathedral.

My uncle was a top-gun pilot before there were top-gun pilots. He was Tom Cruise before there was a Tom Cruise. In addition to his motorcycle, he drove a red MG convertible with silver-spoked wheels. I recall him on leave, roaring up to our house in the MG with his dark, wavy hair and aviator sunglasses. The entire neighborhood would step onto their porches and walk to their lawns to catch a glimpse. He was Hollywood handsome and a magnet for beautiful women. At five feet nine, he was the perfect size for a plane jockey. His vision was 20-15. He had the strength of a wrestler, the reflexes of an athlete, and the timing of a musician. His ego was as large as the planes he flew. He once told me, years hence, with matter-of-fact sincerity that he was the best fighter pilot in the world. I reflexively laughed. His eyes seethed. I then thought about it. Maybe there was some Russian MiG pilot who was better. Maybe another hotshot American. Maybe not. Regardless, there was a time when my uncle could make an authentic claim to be king of the sky.

We walked toward the front of the plane. I pounded my fist into the rubber wheel that looked small from a distance but was taller than I was. My uncle pointed out bomb bay doors and the two Hound Dog missiles attached beneath the wing on either side of the fuselage. The front third of the plane was emblazoned with ten-foot-high block lettering that spelled U.S. AIR FORCE, beneath which was the number "034" and the insignia "PARKER'S PRIDE," for one Col. Van Parker, Commander of the Strategic Air Command's 320th Bombardment Wing, for which my uncle flew. Bomb silhouettes were painted beneath the official markings, signifying the number of missions the plane and its crew had completed

over North Vietnam. My uncle explained that in addition to its missiles, the plane could carry a full capacity of twenty-four bombs on its wings and twenty-seven in its bomb bay.

As a child, I had always possessed an intense interest in large machines. Every time I saw a locomotive chugging across the Nevada desert pulling a one-mile length of freight cars, I would yell and point with glee. But to see and touch an actual leviathan of the sky and to really know someone who had commanded it in flight—well, that was an almost mythical experience.

After about fifteen minutes of inspecting the plane from just about every angle, my uncle led me back to his motorcycle and lifted me onto the rear of the seat. He straddled the bike in front of me, checked to see that I was holding his shirt tight, and accelerated with a roar across the tarmac. We rumbled across the wide-open blacktop, slowed to salute the checkpoint guard, swerved onto a nearby residential street, and then sped north, racing beneath a cool canopy of elm trees.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MILKY WAY STRETCHED IN A GLIMMERING BAND AGAINST THE black-ink darkness that pressed against Don's cockpit window at forty-five thousand feet above the South China Sea. Above, a waning moon, nearly full, gleamed icy white. Below, Super Typhoon Dinah, a category 5 storm with winds of 185 mph, spun in a massive counterclockwise spiral, denuding tropical islands and churning mountainous waves. Its thunderheads pulsed ominously with flashes of light.

From his copilot's seat, Don scanned the night sky and marveled at what he could see of the great storm below. Though the view was otherworldly, Don found that flying B-52s for long distances was an exercise in boredom. He may as well have been driving a bus. Nothing ever happened for hours on end.

The flight from Andersen Air Force Base in Guam to the squadron's target in the jungles northwest of Saigon was about 2,500 miles. The mission called for radio silence, midair refueling, and nonstop flying. It would be like flying from New York to Los Angeles, circling once, and then flying back.

In front of Don were two sets of white knobs. Each knob was connected to throttles that controlled each of the plane's eight engines. The only times Don actually touched the knobs and flew the plane were during takeoff and landing. Once cruising altitude and speed were set, the plane essentially flew itself. The only thing left to do was monitor fuel levels and engine performance, which were displayed on a large panel of forty round, glass-enclosed dials—five dials per engine. But even that was a mind-numbing redundancy. In its nearly decade of service and millions of hours of flight time, there had been only a handful of times that a B-52 had lost power to an engine.

And so the plane droned on toward its target.

“Gunner,” Don said flatly over the intercom. “Copilot. Oxygen check.”

Another of Don’s duties was to make verbal contact with the gunner in the rear of the plane to ensure that oxygen was properly circulating and that the gunner wasn’t slumped over from hypoxia.

Don waited. Nothing.

“Ah, gunner,” Don repeated. “Copilot. Oxygen check.”

He waited again. Nothing.

Don wasn’t alarmed in the least. Crew members routinely took turns sleeping on long runs. The gunner had probably nodded off.

Nevertheless, the gunner was Don’s responsibility. No one was dying of oxygen deprivation on his watch.

“Gunner. Copilot. Oxygen check.”

Still nothing.

Don gave the rudder controls two hard taps that made the back of the plane waggle sharply.

Then he waited.

After about five seconds, Don’s intercom roared to life.

“Goddamn it, copilot,” yelled the gunner. “I just pissed all over my leg. Jesus.”

Don glanced left at Maj. Jim Gehrig. They laughed.

“Speaking of piss,” Don said as he unbuckled his harness.

“Take a leak for me, too,” Jim said, nodding.

The major lowered the plane to thirty thousand feet as it approached its refueling rendezvous. On his way back to the cockpit, Don stopped to talk with the navigators, who were usually either drowsy or asleep. This time, however, they were busy with calculations, chattering numbers back and forth and cursing the mission’s meteorologist, who had forgotten to include the impact of Typhoon Dinah on the squadron’s airspeed. As a result, their plane would be arriving nine minutes early to the aerial refueling center southwest of the Philippines’ Luzon Peninsula. The navigators were trying to figure out how best to lose nine minutes in a behemoth jet loaded with fifty thousand pounds of bombs at thirty thousand feet.

Don quickened his pace, clambered upstairs, and hopped back into his copilot seat. Fastidious about standard procedure, he cinched his parachute straps, clicked his seat harness, and checked that his ejection pins had been removed.

But Jim was irate. He threw off his harness and scrambled downstairs. The major was an old hand with thousands of hours of combat flight time. He'd flown fighter jets in Korea, KC-135s during the Cold War, and now B-52s in whatever conflict they were now heading toward. If Jim was alert and antsy, Don thought he should be, too.

"Gunner," Don said over the intercom. "Copilot. Oxygen check."

"Roger," the gunner replied.

"And, gunner," Don continued, "we're about to begin refueling."

"Roger," the gunner replied, and then went back to sleep.

The B-52s traveled in cells of three. When cruising, they were staged a mile behind and five hundred feet above one another. It was June 18, 1965. Don's wing of thirty bombers was on a top-secret mission that would thrust the B-52 into combat for the first time and place America squarely, firmly, and irrevocably into what would become the Vietnam War. Instead of circling the Arctic with nuclear weapons, the planes had been retrofitted to carry dozens of conventional bombs each. They'd been repurposed for something for which they had not been designed. No B-52 had ever dropped a bomb in combat. The crews and the mission planners had all been trained in the art of nuclear deterrence. And for that reason, Maj. Jim Gehrig was uncomfortable and on edge.

Don peered into the blackness, no longer bored. He studied the beacon lights from the two planes in his cell that were ahead of him. The first plane banked hard left. The second rolled left with him.

"Hey, radar," Don called over the intercom. "What are they doing up ahead? A 360?"

"Rog," answered radar technician Terry Lowry. "Where have you been?"

"Just got back to my seat," said Don.

The maneuver didn't feel right to him. It just wasn't something that was typically done prior to refueling. Though irritated, he rolled the autopilot knob into a thirty-degree bank and followed the cell leader.

Don began doing calculations in his head. Each cell was flying four minutes apart. Don's plane was locked into a twenty-five-mile-diameter circle that would take eight minutes to complete. At the four-minute mark, they would be flying in the exact opposite direction before continuing their bank that would bring them, full circle, back to their current location.

"Radar," Don called out to Terry. "You do realize that if there's another cell four minutes behind and on the south track, there's a good chance that we'll pass by them head-on?"

"Rog," replied Terry. "Keep your eyes open."

Don liked this maneuver less and less as each second ticked by. It was outside the scope of standard procedure and disturbed his fastidiousness.

Jim jumped back into his seat, angry.

"What the hell are they doing?" he bellowed. "A 360?"

Don nodded. He then recinched his parachute straps, rechecked his seat harness, and reinspected his ejection pins.

He leaned over to Jim and pointed to the major's seat harness. Jim had a habit of regularly walking around the plane and checking in with his crew. Don had chided him on previous occasions for not buckling his safety harness immediately after returning to his seat. But Jim was clearly upset, and his attention was elsewhere. He was the ranking officer, so Don shrugged, tried to ignore Jim's unbuckled harness, and didn't press the issue.

The intercom then blasted to life, flooding the cockpit with the sound of high-decibel fear.

"We've got beacons at four miles and closing fast," yelled Terry in near panic.

Adrenaline surged through the pilots.

Don bolted erect in his seat. Time dilated. Seconds became minutes. He intently scanned the inky blackness and could see only starlight. He focused straight ahead in the direction that posed the most danger. And then he saw it. A light bigger than anything in the backdrop of stars. And it was stationary, meaning it was approaching head-on.

The two planes were each traveling at 450 knots, which meant that their closing speed was 1,058 mph, giving the pilots in each plane roughly thirteen seconds to react.

Don studied the oncoming light. Two additional lights were on either side of his peripheral vision. One was above to the left, the other below and to the right. But the center light didn't budge. It just kept coming, kept getting bigger.

"We're on a collision course," Jim yelled over the radio. "We're going down."

The major plunged the plane into a dive. Don realized in an instant that Jim was looking at the wrong light. He'd fixated on the jet above and to the left, and didn't see the center light coming head-on. Diving was the wrong maneuver.

Don instinctively reached for the yoke and desperately wanted to override the major's orders and issue a new radio call. But his training and the chain of command made him hesitate. The big plane was already committed and beginning a stomach-fluttering drop. The only thing to do now was watch.

The planes came together faster than a rifle shot. But for Don and his adrenaline-flooded mind, time unfurled in ultraslow motion.

The oncoming light spread into two—one for each wingtip—and a great, gray shadow filled the windscreen as the other plane appeared to be flying directly into the cockpit. Don stared at the fuel tank that hung under the plane's right wing. It was headed straight for his face.

His mind raced through a series of emotions. First was denial. This was surely some sort of surreal dream from which he would soon wake. His second was anger. Who the hell thought a three-sixty maneuver was a good idea? His third was acceptance. That fuel tank would be in the cockpit soon. There was no escape. But at least it would be quick, hard, and painless. Zap. And then nothing. After acceptance, he felt total peace. It was as though he were out of his body, watching with complete fascination his own death.

B-52s are anything but nimble and are very slow to respond. Though Don's plane had only just started reacting to its dive command, the oncoming B-52 had been plunged into a dive perhaps two seconds sooner. And so the fuel tank fell from Don's view, and the great, gray plane floated beneath him like a whale passing in the dark of an ocean depth. To his right, Don watched the towering tail fin glide gracefully by, thinking, "Whew, that was close."

And then the plane bumped like a car hitting a pothole. Lights flickered, and the cockpit went black.

“Well, I guess I’ll be dead after all,” Don’s mind thought. “So far, death doesn’t seem so bad. And it doesn’t appear there’ll be any pain.”

The two B-52s had almost averted collision, except that the huge tail—or vertical stabilizer—on the oncoming plane sliced off the outer third of the right wing on Don’s plane, cutting open the fuel tank.

A blinding flash filled the cockpit. The plane rumbled and shuddered. An orange fireball bloomed in the night sky and could be seen by trailing B-52 cells from over two hundred miles away.

Don instinctively grabbed the yoke to get a feel for the plane. His first thought was to bank ninety degrees left and head for Clark Air Force Base north of Manila in the Philippines.

“If we’re missing just a wingtip, we could make it,” he thought.

He looked for the flight instrument panel to see whether the plane was still level, but the flash from the explosion had temporarily blinded him.

“Still,” he thought, “there’s a chance to keep it airborne long enough to get back to Clark and land at the airstrip.”

Such thinking, however, is almost always fatal for pilots. A cardinal rule of flying is to never stay with an out-of-control plane. Yet Don wasn’t certain that the plane had been severely damaged and began pulling on the yoke. He didn’t yet know that the entire right wing had been blown off by the fuel tank explosion.

His vision returned enough to make out the outline of the plane’s altimeter. From that reading, he could determine which way was up. Don leaned forward and peered at the dial.

A loud bang shook the cockpit. The sharp smell of cordite—a smokeless gunpowder—filled the air, and the instrument panel fogged instantly. The major had ejected. And Don should have already ejected, too. His first thought was that he felt bad for Jim because the major hadn’t buckled into his seat and was now free-falling thirty thousand feet into the ocean without a parachute. His second thought was that he may have already cost his own life by squandering precious seconds trying to fly a mortally wounded plane.

Don resorted to his pilot training. He bolted upright in his seat, flight helmet hard against the head rest, butt firmly against his parachute, back straight, legs tucked, hands on the armrest ejection handles.

He took a deep breath and pulled up on both handles. Only the left handle moved into position. He squeezed the ejection trigger and waited to be slammed by the fifteen g's of force that would catapult him into the night.

But there was nothing.

Don squeezed the left trigger again. Still nothing. He squeezed yet again. The ejection mechanism wasn't firing.

He swallowed his panic and cursed the plane's maintenance crew. He pulled hard on the right handle, but it wouldn't budge. He squeezed the left trigger one more time, and still nothing happened.

He thought of one final option. Inside his armrest was another handle that would release his parachute from the back of his seat. He would have to leave his survival kit, which was built into the seat, but could grab the parachute, climb downstairs, and jump out of one of the navigator's hatches. No one had ever manually bailed out of a jet at thirty thousand feet and lived. And once he did land in the water, he'd be exposed in the ocean without a raft, food, water, or supplies. His mind quickly nixed the idea. There simply wasn't enough time, and the odds against him were astronomical. No, he would press the eject trigger one more time and then calmly await death. Again.

Don looked down at the trigger in his hand. He gave it a desperate jerk. With a bang and a hiss, the seat rocketed him through an overhead hatch and into the dark.