

20 March 1969

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Special Combat Mission Briefing

OL-8 Operation

I was fortunate to be able to attend a special briefing to review the combat and intelligence part of this operation including routes flown, targets observed and sample sensor pictures. I recommend that arrangements be made to provide a similar briefing for our engineering people at Burbank who are connected with the program.

Photos of North Viet Nam are generally not as good as obtained from missions operating at Beale. The Beale mission photos are about 30 percent better than obtained from OL-8. The reason for this is that the atmosphere in the target areas is relatively dirty compared to domestic areas.

The users of the sensor takes are generally very happy with the data which they are obtaining. The photos which are being provided by the SR-71 and the resulting data are the backbone of intelligence information for the entire North Viet Name area. The only complaint we have heard concerns the fact that sensor vendors promised higher resolution than is being obtained. The worst offender is the TEOC camera which is generally obtaining 18" to 20" resolution instead of 9" resolution promised. The complaints, however, are biased by the fact that information gathered is available from no other sources; and even though our photos are below what was expected, they are far better than nothing at all.

The SR-71's are the only manned aircraft being used north of the 20° line. There are no other aircraft which could live in the hostile environment in that area. There are some reconnaissance drone aircraft being used at low altitude, however, they are being shot down quite often. Drones are sometimes launched together with our missions.

Our combat missions are never run on the same track twice. The routes flown by every mission are different. There are some important target areas which are usually flown over, however, the routing and direction of the flight is changed every flight.

High surveillance is being maintained on the Hai Phong harbor area. Sixty percent of the goods used by North Viet Nam in their war effort goes through this harbor. It is interesting to note that following the bombing haults, the amount of goods going through this harbor increased by 500 percent. Every ship entering the harbor is identified and categorized from our photos. There are five main airports with MIG-21's which are maintained under close surveillance. There is one new airport which has been under construction for several months which has a very long runway that is expected to be used by a new high performance fighter aircraft. There are no aircraft at this facility yet, and close surveillance is being maintained. Bomb damage on the other airports has all been repaired since the bombing hault.

Close surveillance has also been maintained on key Chinese access points for possible build up of forces. Certain areas in Laos and Cambodia are also closely watched.

During 1968 there were 65 "hard" SR-71 combat sorties. During this period, there were 8 confirmed SAM firings at SR-71's. The best shot was a 12,000 foot miss.

Several typical, recent missions were also reviewed as follows:

January 27, 1969 Sortie

The mission had an objective of 18 photo targets, 10 SLR targets and 8 Search targets. During the mission, the RSO observed two DEF "R" lights, one for 3 minutes and the other for 3.5 minutes. He observed two "M" lights, one for 2.5 minutes and the other for 2.0 minutes. He also had one "L" light for 1.5 minutes and three other "L" lights lasting for 5 to 10 seconds each. There were three SAM firings during this mission. The crew observed contrails from two of the firings. The closest SAM was 12,000 feet low and to the right. The OOC obtained good inflight pictures of the SAM which were displayed. The mission was successful in obtaining photos of 135 target areas and 36 mission objectives. During this mission, photos were obtained of 79 SAM sites. There are 8 significant changes in the SAM sites since the last observation.

January 28, 1969 Mission

The objectives on this flight were 11 photo, 12 SLR and 15 Search targets. During the mission, the RSO observed five "R" lights of 3 to 4 seconds each and one "M" light of 35 seconds. The mission was successful in obtaining 83 target objectives and obtained photos of 25 SAM sites. Thirty-three new installation items were noted.

January 29, 1969 Mission

The objectives on this mission were 15 photo, 15 SLR and 5 Search targets. This mission flew a reverse type route where the airplane came in through the back door which apparently surprised the SAM ground crews. The RSO observed only one "R" light for 30 seconds. The mission was successful in obtaining 84 target objectives and 25 mission objectives. Pictures were obtained of 37 SAM sites, and 6 new installation changes were noted.

The Hai Phong area and the industrial areas west of it is a most heavily defended area. They have the largest concentration of ground-to-air weapons of all types that has ever been assembled. There are 195 active SAM sites plus 46 inactive SAM sites under surveillance. There are 4700 antiaircraft guns of 87 MM and larger with a capability of 30 to 40 thousand feet. There are more SAM sites in this small area than are installed in all of China and Russia.

The MRS "B" Deck data has become essential to IP photo interpretation. If at any time there is a delay in the MRS data due to MDRDE malfunction, there are very loud complaints from Washington because it results in serious delay in photo interpretation work. The IP personnel have developed a new computer technique whereby MRS data is computerized so that their work is speeded up. Speedy interpretation of the tremendous volume of sensor take obtained in the SR-71 would be impossible within any reasonable period of time without the MRS data. SAC is being severely criticized by the IG team for not providing a back up for the MDRDE equipment. They point out that for every combat mission there is a back up SR-71 and many back up KC-135 tankers at a tremendous cost for each sortie. However, the benefit of the mission can be lost by a single failure in the MDRDE unit available at OL-8 for processing the correlation data needed for rapid interpretation of the intelligence information.