

# The Scent of Pine, Yankee Station, 1972

An A-6 Intruder launched from the carrier at night to attack a truck park near Haiphong Harbor, where the North Vietnamese were off-loading material from Chinese Communist ships onto trucks in the target area. Allied aircraft were prohibited from bombing the ships, so they had to wait until the cargo was on the trucks. As the A-6 was ingressing, the crew of an outbound Intruder reported heavy antiaircraft artillery (AAA) and surface-to-air missile (SAM) activity in the area. The Intruder sped toward the trucks at 200 feet altitude, its 500-pound Snakeye bombs at the ready. Approaching the target, as the A-6 popped up to 300–400 feet for the drop, AAA fire erupted around the plane.

The A-6 sustained several light hits on the bottom of the starboard wing. Pulling off target after releasing the bombs, the bombardier navigator (BN) noted that two SAMs had been fired at the Intruder. The A-6 was so low that the SAM radar could not track it, so the enemy missile crew was guiding the missiles manually. Because the bomber was under a low, thin overcast, the pilot and BN could see the flame from the rocket motors as the North Vietnamese guided the SAMs. If one of the missiles could be guided close enough to the A-6, the enemy would detonate its warhead manually. The BN concentrated on the SAMs as the pilot flew the Intruder, and as best he could kept his eye on the AAA that streaked and flashed by the A-6. As a result, neither the pilot nor the BN was watching the terrain avoidance radar. They observed a slight break in the overcast at the same time the refueling probe of the Intruder was struck by shells from a 23 mm gun.

Because there was a full moon that night, visibility was good on top of the overcast as well as low to the ground through breaks in the clouds. Suddenly, as they raced along hugging the deck, the crew saw a ridge directly in front of them, illuminated by the moonlight. A collision was imminent, so the pilot hauled back on the control stick as hard as he could. The A-6 angled sharply upward. The two manually guided SAMs had so distracted the crew that they nearly slammed into the ridge. “We cleared most of the ridge,” the pilot said later, “but not everything on it.” The Intruder had plowed through the treetops, causing significant damage to the wings and fuselage.

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The pilot zoom-climbed to altitude to ensure the aircraft was flyable, then rapidly descended to the deck for the run out to “feet wet” and escape from the SAM envelope. The two SAMs were no longer a threat, but the pilot noted, “We knew there were more where they came from.” Once clear of land, the A-6 climbed to altitude so that a second Intruder crew could examine it.



Photo courtesy Jerry “Moon” Mullins.



Because of the damage, the second A-6 recommended the first make a no-flap, no-slat landing on the carrier. The crew jettisoned all external stores, including the multiple ejector bomb racks. All wing fuel had been lost due to punctures caused by impact with the trees, but the main tanks had plenty, so gas was not a major concern. One of the two main hydraulic systems was disabled. En route to the carrier, the crew slow-flighted the A-6 and determined they could fly without flaps and slats at 22 knots above the maximum speed for engaging the cross-deck pendants. The air boss and skipper gave the Intruder permission to trap.

All airplanes were pulled forward, and the deck was cleared of all personnel except the landing signal officers because the A-6 had to land at a speed much higher than normal. There was fear the arresting cable might break and whip across the deck, causing a severe hazard. Fortunately, the pilot made a good landing—although catching the number one wire—considering his forward vision was obscured by tree sap and leaf stains on the windscreen. The battle-weary Intruder was taxied forward and taken below where it was parked in a corner of the hangar bay.

It remained there for the rest of the deployment. “The Intruder reeked of pine trees,” noted the pilot, “which was a welcome seasonal touch much appreciated by the troops, since it was near Christmas. The damage to the airplane was so severe that it was later struck from the inventory. You have probably heard of the Grumman ‘Ironworks.’ Well, this was a great example of how Grumman builds tough aircraft!”

Grampaw Pettibone says: “And an even greater example of the tough aviators who flew the A-6 in Vietnam combat.” (Amen, Gramps!)

#### **Editor's Comments:**

*Published years ago in Naval Aviation News, this story made the rounds last spring amongst the VA-176 'Sunday Punchers'—courtesy of Rat Sanford. Naturally, the truth is beginning to get larger, and this is such a great example of why we all need to continue to share our stories. Here are some recent updates to the story:*

*They landed with no flaps or slats due to a pine tree limb about 12-18 inches long and 3-4 inches in diameter embedded in the left wing leading edge slats. The pilot, Mike Schuster, had the piece mounted on a plaque and hung it in his kitchen. B/N Jerry “Moon” Mullins provided the accompanying photo along with the following comment: “Prodded by your description of Mike’s plaque, I went looking for my souvenirs. Pulling down a dusty box from the top of my closet, I located the plastic bag with the piece of wood in the attached photo. The bag notwithstanding, it’s very dried out now, and, while it was pink with hydraulic fluid when I pried it out of the wing, there are now only some very faint gray stains to show for it. The metal fragments in the picture are from the jacket of an AAA round that went through the top of the nose one day while Graustein and I happened to be inverted. Please note, as we went over it about 18 months ago, that the Grampaw Pettibone article has more than a few inaccuracies. The one which is definitely not a function of fuzzy memories is that the aircraft was struck from the inventory after we got back. In fact, it was repaired and flew off the Forrestal as late as Desert Storm, and in a final indignity, its tail hangs on the wall of the Oceana Club in commemoration of VA-176!”*

*To quote Rat—*

*“All in a night’s work for a Sunday Puncher crew.” ■*