

Major Knight and Cambodia (Part II)

Date: March 17, 1969

Time: 2130

Place: Bien Hoa Air Force Base, South Vietnam

In 1969 Air Force Major Hal Knight commanded a “Skyspot” radar center, providing close-in ground control for B-52 raids launched from Guam, Okinawa, and Thailand. Bombing missions were designed and approved in Washington and the target lists were cabled to Knight's commanding officer, Lt. Colonel David Patterson at Bien Hoa Air Base. Patterson passed them on to Knight, or to one of three other Skyspot radar centers in Vietnam.

Knight's duty was to compute the particulars of each bombing run and communicate them to the planes' crews as they entered the war zone. He and three controllers he supervised matched the position, altitude and airspeed of the planes to the ballistics of the bomb load and the coordinates of the drop site.

As the B-52s entered the war zone sometime between nightfall and dawn, Knight and his men picked up each plane and established radio contact, gave the navigators the coordinates for their missions, tracked the planes as they proceeded to their target zones, and laid down a narrow radar beam to guide the planes precisely over the targets. The controllers watched on their screens as the planes formed up into cells of three for the bombing run, then counted down for the bombardiers to give the precise instant to release the bombs.

When the mission was complete, Knight filled out a post-strike report form and entered the coordinates of the bombed sites into the computer system of the Strategic Air Command, and thus into the official record system of the Pentagon and the official history of the war.

By March of 1969 the Air Force had been conducting “continuous limited air strikes” for four years and one month. The North Vietnamese had long before moved their main supply line, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, west across the border into Cambodia, and although Cambodia was nominally neutral, Prince Sihanouk, the Cambodian head of state, had long ago yielded to a mix of bribes and threats and looked the other way when they brought in supplies through the port of Sihanoukville and set up permanent base camps in Cambodia's eastern fringes.

In 1967 and 1968, Americans and South Vietnamese had conducted numerous reconnaissance missions across the Cambodian borders, some of which Sihanouk had protested and others he had ignored. In January of 1968, the North Vietnamese launched the Tet Offensive, and in November Richard Nixon was elected on a platform promising Vietnamization of the war and an American withdrawal. It was widely speculated that action against sanctuaries in Cambodia would buy time for Vietnamization.

Hal Knight was aware of all this, and he had spoken to veterans of the Long Range Patrols or “Daniel Boone” crews – special forces teams who had crossed into Cambodia and come back with reports of underground hospitals, weapons and supply caches and regiment-sized concentrations of troops.

On the evening of March 16, Major Knight was called into Lt. Colonel Patterson's office and informed of a change in procedure. The next day at 1500, he was to be at the edge of the runway to meet a special courier plane which would bear a sealed envelope for him. He was to guard the envelope carefully, to open it at 2100 and to follow the instructions it contained.

At 2100 on the 17th Knight opened the envelope and discovered a set of target coordinates which he recognized as being along the far side of the border with Cambodia. He was instructed to calculate bombing runs for those coordinates and have his controllers direct the B-52s to those sites for the predawn raids on the 18th. Other coordinates would be cabled from Washington as usual, but that target list was to be set aside. His controllers were to say nothing of the change in procedures that night.

When the bombing mission was complete, Knight was to gather up every scrap of paper and tape with which the bombing runs were plotted and lock them up until daytime. All computer files used in the calculation were to be erased. In the daylight, when there would be no danger of dropping a piece of paper, he was to shred and incinerate every record of the mission. Finally, he was to refer back to the set of coordinates that had been cabled in the usual manner from Washington, and he was to enter that set in the Strategic Air Command computer system, designating them as having been bombed that night.

When Lt. Colonel Patterson gave Major Knight the envelope earlier that day he had said firmly and finally, “Follow the instructions it contains.” It’s 2130. The bombers will shortly be overhead.

Imagine it is the night of March 17, 1969, and *you* are Major Knight. Write a specific list of the steps you would take. Briefly explain *why* you would take each step. Be candid and complete.
