

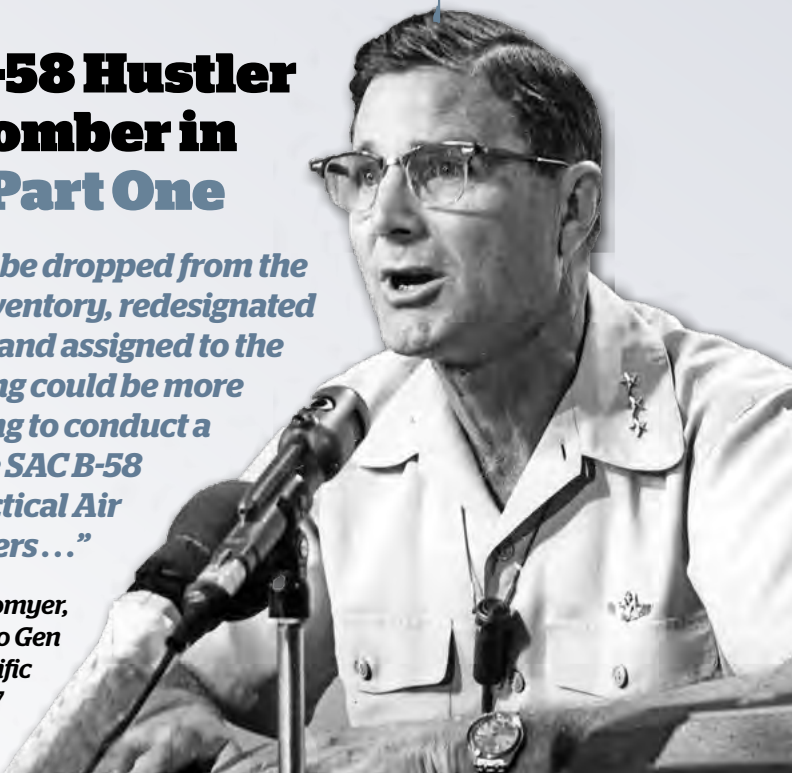


COMBAT BULLSEYE

The Convair B-58 Hustler as a tactical bomber in Vietnam..? / Part One

“These ‘RB-58s’ should be dropped from the Strategic Air Command inventory, redesignated as tactical bombers and assigned to the Seventh Air Force... Nothing could be more cumbersome than trying to conduct a tactical strike with one SAC B-58 leading a handful of Tactical Air Command fighter-bombers...”

— Lt-Gen William M. Momyer, Commander Seventh Air Force, to Gen John D. Ryan, Commander, US Pacific Air Force, August 1, 1967

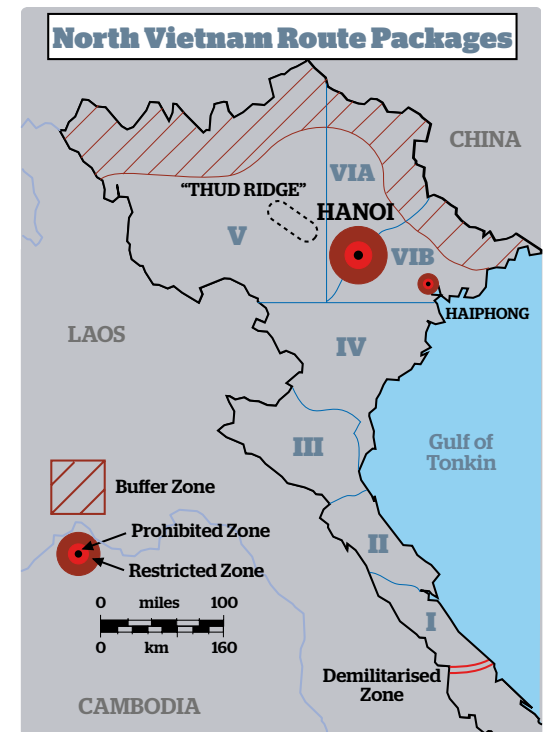


The USAF’s Convair B-58 strategic nuclear bomber re-roled as a conventional “mud-mover” and pathfinder for Tactical Air Command’s F-4s and F-105s in Vietnam? Intriguing. **CHRIS GIBSON** opens a two-part series on *Combat Bullseye*, the little-known 1967 USAF project in which Strategic Air Command’s mighty Hustler was evaluated as a potential tactical asset

ARGUABLY ONE OF the most spectacular aircraft ever to serve with the USAF, Convair’s B-58 Hustler had a controversial career. Beloved by its crews and denigrated by its critics, it was designed to deliver nuclear weapons on targets in the Soviet Union by means of high-altitude/high-speed penetration. Its time with the USAF’s Strategic Air Command (SAC) came to a predictable end in 1969 as Soviet defences — notably the S-75 Dvina (Nato designation SA-2 *Guideline*) surface-to-air missile (SAM), in service since 1957 — had long forced SAC to switch to low-altitude operations, with a corresponding reduction in the Hustler’s range and an increased emphasis on survivability dependent upon “budget-busting” electronic countermeasures (ECM).

Lessons learned in Vietnam

From its first appearance in the South East Asia (SEA) theatre during the spring of 1965, *Guideline* had prompted deep concern among American airpower planners and crews. As losses to North Vietnamese air defences mounted, the accuracy of weapons-delivery decreased. By early 1967 the USAF and US Navy (USN) had two years’ experience of offensive air operations against North Vietnamese targets during Operation *Rolling Thunder*. The USAF and USN divided North Vietnam into zones known as Route Packages (RPs), numbered I to VIB, with the USAF assigned RPs I, V and VIA, while the USN was responsible for operations in RPs II, III, IV and VIB that abutted the coast. Certain RPs were more heavily defended, such as RPs V and VIA north of Hanoi that included the Tam Đảo range of hills — known to the Americans as “Thud Ridge”, after the nickname of the USAF’s Republic F-105 Thunderchief fighter-bomber.



MAP BY CHRIS GIBSON

The USAF’s Tactical Air Command (TAC) was deeply disappointed with the results of its air strikes, particularly where fighter-bomber aircraft such as the McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom II and F-105 were concerned. The former was an air-defence/interceptor type pressed into service as a strike aircraft, and the latter was essentially a tactical nuclear bomber designed for use against the Soviets in Europe. Dropping conventional weapons on point targets such as bridges and command centres was not exactly the intended role of either type.

Consequently, in February 1967 the Commander of Pacific Air Forces (PACAF), Gen John D. Ryan, issued a new and “urgent requirement for an all-weather bombing capability using tactical aircraft”. This prompted the establishment of an evaluation programme designated *Combat Target*, which was further split into a three-phase operational test project named *Combat Bullseye* to evaluate tactics and equipment that would enable USAF strike aircraft, mainly fighter-bombers, to operate in RPs V and VIA with fewer losses and improved precision. In response, TAC turned to an organisation whose *raison d’être* was delivering weapons in heavily defended areas — SAC.

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP Convair B-58A serial 59-2460 was one of the unofficially designated “RB-58” Hustlers used for formation trials with TAC fighter-bombers during Project Combat Bullseye in 1967. OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM Lt-Gen William M. Momyer, Commander of the USAF’s Seventh Air Force during 1966–68. TOP: TERRY PANOPALIS COLLECTION