Nguyen Van Bay and the Aces From the North

As an F-4 Phantom pilot, I had tried to kill these men. And they had tried to kill me. I thought it was time we had a talk

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The MiG-17 was flown by only a few of the North Vietnamese aces, including Bay. (NASM photo 7A33704)

Many of my trips to Vietnam have run together in my memory, including some of the 180 I made in McDonnell F-4 Phantoms during what the Vietnamese call "the American war." But one I took in 1997 will always remain distinct. On that trip I met North Vietnamese ace Nguyen Van Bay (pronounced "win von by").

I was on a kind of mission, one that really got started seven years earlier when I went to Hanoi with state department official Ken Quinn, later the U.S. ambassador to Cambodia from 1996 to 1999. Quinn was searching for information about U.S. servicemen who were classified as missing in action, and one of them, Major John "Robbie" Robertson, was a friend of mine, a squadron mate. In 1966 we both flew F-4Cs from Ubon Royal Thai Air Base in Thailand during the Rolling Thunder bombing campaign. On a strike mission on September 16 that year, Robbie's flight was ahead of mine. He didn't return. The squadron could get very little information about his crash, and Quinn and I were hoping to find out more. There was a rumor that Robbie had survived, based mainly on a soon-to-be infamous photograph, which Quinn had brought with him, of three POWs alleged to be alive and captive in Laos.

The Vietnamese officials we talked to promised to investigate the photograph, which turned out to have been a hoax. They also eventually put me in touch with several fighter pilots from the Vietnamese People's Air Force, the air force of North Vietnam. That's how I came to be sitting across a table from two VPAF pilots in 1997: Do Huy Hoang (pronounced "doe wee wong") and Nguyen Van Bay. I was the first American pilot either of these men had ever met.

Bay is credited with seven kills. At 63, he is a small, frail-looking man with a deeply lined face. He grows mangos and raises fish for a living on a small farm near Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), the capital of the South, where he moved after the war ended. He's a heavy smoker, and I noticed as I sat down across from him the brand he was smoking was 555, the same number as my old squadron, the Triple Nickel. We regarded each other through a haze of blue smoke. I turned on the tape recorder, thinking that we'd go through his seven claims first and then I'd see what I could find out about Robbie.

Bay read from a tattered piece of paper, which, according to the interpreter, listed all his dogfights, including seven victories. He began the description of each engagement by reading off the date, then he described the details of the air battle—the location, flying conditions, number and types of aircraft, maneuvers and counter-maneuvers, and how the fight ended. The interpreter tried his best to keep up, and as he spoke, I checked Bay's narrative against the reports I had brought with me from official U.S. records and North Vietnamese documents. It's difficult to sort out the melee of a dogfight after the fact, and I was surprised to find how well his reports correlated with the official ones.

I had been intently taking notes and checking documents for about two hours when Bay began describing incident number 6.

"Sixteen September 1966," said the interpreter.

I stopped writing and looked up. Bay also looked up from his paper, and hesitated for a moment. Then he nodded, and I could sense that he knew he was about to describe a fight already familiar to me in some way.

"I was there...almost," I said. The interpreter leaned toward Bay and spoke.

Another puff from the 555. Another nod. Then Bay read from his list the description of how he had killed Robbie.

The alarm to scramble sounded at Gia Lam airfield near Hanoi in the early afternoon. Bay flew the third position in a flight of four, led by Ho Van Quy (pronounced "ho von kee"), who had one F-4 kill to his credit. By this time, Bay had one of each: an F-4, a Navy Vought F-8 Crusader, and a Republic F-105 Thunderchief. Luu Huy Chao (pronounced "loo wee chow") flew as the lead's wingman. Chao also claimed three kills at this date and eventually became an ace.

Bay was the first to spot Robbie's flight. When he asked permission to attack, Quy expressed doubt that the slower MiGs could catch the F-4s up ahead. But as the MiGs tried in vain to close the distance, Bay saw the Phantoms make a mistake. He saw them begin a climbing turn.

A few months after I met Bay, I talked to Robbie's backseater, Hubert Buchanan. They were also flying at the number 3 position in their flight. It had been Buchanan's 17th combat mission and one of the bigger strike packages he'd been part of. "We were trying to avoid radar detection," he said. "We were down kind of low, but not real low where we'd get the ground fire, and the big strike was going on. Planes all over the place. And somewhere between Haiphong and Hanoi, I guess more toward Hanoi, one of our flight members yelled that there were MiGs, six o'clock low.

"At that point, everything, all the ordnance and fuel tanks we had, everybody dropped those and then went into combat trail and began a climbing left turn…which is not a good plan. The MiGs began to cut off our flight in the turn and climb also."

Bay had all three of his guns armed by this time. "I rolled in behind the Phantom," he said. "Our gunsight was poor. What I had to do was close to within 100 to 150 meters and begin firing. I would make adjustments from watching the tracers."

Buchanan remembered telling Robertson, "This guy's pulling right in on us. He's going to shoot any time now!"

At that moment, a salvo of orange golf-ball-size rounds flashed over Buchanan's canopy. Robertson pulled hard, then eased his turn. Buchanan saw the MiG closing again. He said, "This is going to be it. He's corrected the problem."

Bay lined up, fired again, and saw a wheel come out from beneath the F-4's wing and sail past his canopy. For Buchanan, everything went black. "It could be from so many G-forces pulling the blood away from my eyes, not sure," he said. "My helmet is bouncing around. I don't really have a clear memory of ejecting; however, I do sort of have like a dream. I can kind of imagine pulling the handle the F-4 had between your legs. I also ejected, so I must have done it. I could hear booms, like the canopy blowing off. And I felt wind. The next thing I knew, my parachute was opening.

"When I got down low, I could see people running around on the ground in a little village. I could see a guy off to the right, looked like he had a uniform on and a rifle, running in my direction."

Buchanan was captured and remained a prisoner until 1973.

Bay sped away from the burning Phantom, then rolled back to look. He watched the aircraft pitch down in flames. "I saw one chute," he said.

Of the 16 VPAF pilots who have claimed ace status, only three, including Bay and Luu Huy Chao, flew MiG-17s. The other 13 flew the later model MiG-21, a delta-wing aircraft equipped with radar and heat-seeking missiles and considered the equal of the F-4 and F-8 in maneuverability and acceleration. The 1950s-vintage MiG-17 was difficult to control in roll and pitch at high speeds. It had no radar and no missiles. It was armed with one 37-mm. and two 23-mm. cannon, and its lead-computing gunsight had no radar for ranging; that's why Bay had to watch his tracers and adjust his aim accordingly. The MiG-17's advantages were its good

visibility and superb turn rate, but these aircraft were heavily outnumbered by the more modern U.S. Phantoms, Crusaders, and Thunderchiefs.

The Americans claimed 103 MiG-17s and -21s between June 17, 1965, and January 12, 1973. For a MiG pilot to survive nearly eight years of war was an achievement in itself. Becoming an ace in the process made him a national hero. As I talked to Bay, and later to MiG-17 ace Luu Huy Chao, about the conditions of their training and their combat experiences, my understanding of their particular kind of courage grew.

Bay was born in 1937 near Saigon, the seventh of 11 children. He went north at 16 to join the army and fight against the French, and when that war ended in July 1954 with the peace agreement that partitioned the country, he chose to stay north. He had by this time lost contact with his family.

He volunteered for flight training in 1962 and was among the first pilots sent to China to learn to fly fighters. As he told it, he "went from the bicycle to the airplane with no stop in between." He learned to drive a car only long after he began flight training.

The trainees started with Yak-18s, moved on to MiG-15s, and finally flew MiG-17s. "It took four years to train, all of it in China," Bay said. "We had Russian instructors." Other trainees, including Do Huy Hoang, who joined up the same time Bay did and went with him to China, followed the first year of training in China with two years in Russia. Like U.S. pilots, the North Vietnamese typically flew 200 hours in training before going into combat. Bay, Chao, and Hoang got about a hundred of those hours in the MiG-17.

Getting his wings did not come easily for Bay. "I got sick all the time during the early part of my training," he said, "so I cut off the top half of a soccer ball, tied it with a string, and wore it around my neck when I flew. Whenever I had to vomit, I filled the soccer ball."

Bay was still in training in 1964, the year the North first came under attack by U.S. aircraft. On August 5, two U.S. aircraft carriers launched strikes against coastal targets, so-called reprisals for a North Vietnamese torpedo attack on a U.S. destroyer gathering signals intelligence in the Gulf of Tonkin. The VPAF had just received a gift of 36 MiG-17 fighters and MiG-15UTI trainers from the Soviet Union, but strategists feared squandering aircraft and pilots against the U.S. strikes. They sat tight and sought more recruits for flight training. The following year, Bay was back home, U.S. aircraft had initiated the sustained bombing campaign Rolling Thunder, and the VPAF was ready to send MiGs to attack them. From April through December 1965, VPAF aircraft challenged U.S. fighters in 156 dogfights and claimed 15 victories.

Bay's first engagement came on October 6, 1965. He was attacked by an F-4, almost certainly that of U.S. Navy pilot Dan McIntyre and Radar Intercept Officer Alan Johnson, who reported firing an AIM-7D missile at a MiG-17 and claimed a "probable." Bay remembered a missile detonating off his left wing. "I felt the heat from the explosion," he said. "The aircraft pitched down and began vibrating." He immediately turned toward Noi Bai airfield, just north

of Hanoi, and nursed the airplane to a safe landing. On the ground, he counted 82 holes in his aircraft.

"I felt like a light boxer who confidently walked up to the ring and tried to knock out the super heavy boxers," Bay said. "It was not a single fight but dozens of dogfights. We were outnumbered four or five to one. Our thoughts were on survival, nothing more."

Luu Huy Chao remembered that F-4s dominated his thoughts in training. Chao, 67, lives in retirement in Hanoi, where I spoke with him in 1998. Like Bay, he had also fought the French and learned to fly an airplane before he learned to drive a car. "Our training included a lot of discussion about fighting the F-4," he remembered, "which was considered the gravest threat due to its advanced features."

"The American fighters flew faster than ours," said Bay. "We had to force them to turn. When they turned, the speed did not matter. We could change the center of the [circle] and cut the diameter to chase the enemy. We just made use of an appropriate angle to cut their [circle] and our guns became effective."

Bay's guns first became effective in late April 1966. When the radar network indicated that U.S. aircraft were approaching Bac Son and Dinh Ca, districts near the coast where a strike package was heading, an officer scrambled four MiG-17s to meet them: Bay, Chao, and Tran Triem followed Ho Van Quy's lead. Shortly after takeoff, Bay spotted eight F-4s. One of them swung wide as the formation turned. Bay cut him off and closed to firing range. "When I saw the whole F-4 in my windscreen, I fired," he said, "and the F-4 went down." He wrote to his new bride, an accounting student at the university in Hanoi, that this was "the first U.S. aircraft I shot down."

Bay had been married just over a week, he remembered. The wedding had taken 15 minutes. "I took off my flightsuit, put on civilian clothes, had the ceremony, and had time for one cigarette," said Bay. "Then I got back in my flightsuit and went back on alert. I flew combat for 12 straight days before I saw her again."

Chao recalled that the pilots sometimes slept under the wings of their aircraft when they were on alert. "On a typical day, we were at the planes by 8 or 8:30 a.m. and got ready to scramble," he said. "Sometimes the scramble order came by shooting a flare. Other times, a bell was used.

"The bells were made from U.S. bomb casings that had the explosives removed. The bell was hung from a tree and a hammer was used to sound the alarm for scramble."

By the summer of 1966, U.S. forces were launching regular strikes against Hanoi, Haiphong Harbor, and other military and industrial centers in the north, and MiG-21s had joined the fight. Bay shot down another aircraft, an F-105, in June and remembered what he and his comrades were thinking as the waves of U.S. aircraft kept coming: "The Americans are well-equipped. Their planes are more modern and bigger in number. We all know their strength. Their weakness is to fly from far away. All of them feel thousands of eyes looking up

at them and thousands of guns shooting them from the ground. Their eyes cannot concentrate 100 percent on our planes; therefore we usually discover them before they [discover us]."

When I met Bay again years later, he elaborated on his strategy. "The most important thing was to discover the enemy first," he said, "to gain higher speed and height, to get better position. We learned a lot of lessons and studied many famous dogfights from World War II between the Soviets and the Germans, and also the dogfights in the Pacific with propeller planes and guns. Whoever fires first, wins."

VPAF pilots got help seeing their attackers by Ground Control Intercept (GCI) radar installations located on the outskirts of Hanoi and close to the coast near Haiphong. The radar showed a picture of the unfolding air battles to ground control officers, who managed the intercept missions from a primary radar van in Hanoi. Ground control officers ordered the scrambles, kept the surface-to-air missiles, or SAMs, from firing on VPAF aircraft, and made the final decision on whether to commit aircraft to an attack. They were helpful but fallible. Bay remembered returning to Kep airfield in a flight of four when he saw a SAM coming toward them. "We thought it was going to protect us from American fighters who were reported behind us," said Bay. "The missile exploded right in front of the lead MiG. The pilot ejected."

On September 5, 1966, the senior ground control officer was a former MiG-17 pilot, Le Thanh Chon (pronounced "lay tan chon"). He vectored Bay and his wingman Vo Van Man out of Gia Lam airfield at around 4 p.m. toward an unknown target to the south. As Bay headed due south, he glimpsed a flight of A-4 attack jets heading away from a smoking bridge. Directly in front of him, he spotted two F-8s approaching the A-4s from the right of a large cumulus cloud toward which Bay and Man were headed. The MiGs jettisoned their drop tanks in preparation for battle. "[The F-8s] rolled toward the A-4s and took up position behind them to escort them from the target area," he said. The whole package began moving around the left side of the cloud mass. Chon saw all this happening on the GCI radar, ordered Bay to continue straight ahead, skirting the right side of the cloud, and gave Bay permission to engage. Bay attacked the trailing F-8. "I made two firing passes, the second from 80 to 100 meters away," Bay recalled. "I watched my tracers and adjusted my aim. The rounds hit the Crusader near the canopy. The plane started coming apart. Pieces came flying back at me." Bay pulled away and was maneuvering for a third pass when he saw the F-8 pilot eject and the airplane crash. The engagement had lasted 45 seconds. When Bay landed, the maintenance crew found pieces of Plexiglas in his engine inlet. He later learned, he said, that the F-8 pilot was captured. (U.S. Navy records report that on September 5, 1966, Wilfred Keese Abbott was shot down over North Vietnam while flying an F-8 Crusader at the exact location cited by Bay. Abbott was captured and survived the war.)

Although the GCI radar had given Bay the advantage in this engagement, a few weeks later, on September 21, the GCI failed him. Directed by the ground control officer to a target 10 miles ahead of the four-ship flight he was leading, Bay, after about seven minutes, saw two F-105s at around 10,000 to 13,000 feet. He banked in pursuit, then eased out of the turn

behind one of the pair but was still well out of shooting range. Knowing that the Thunderchiefs usually traveled in packs of four, Bay scanned the sky for the others. Usually they were easy to spot—at the end of long black smoke trails that spewed from their engines. Their dark green and brown camouflage, difficult to see against a jungle background, stood out sharply against blue sky. But Bay saw nothing. Satisfied, he gave his wingman, Do Huy Hoang, permission to attack one of the two Thuds.

American pilots, who flew without the benefit of ground radar, tended to stay together in what they called the "welded wing"—a defensive position requiring a wingman to stay close to the leader in order to provide visual cover of the rear of the formation, while the lead concentrated on what was ahead and did the shooting. However, the tactic of splitting the wingmen to operate separately was an accepted procedure for the VPAF.

Hoang spread wide to the left, lined up behind the second F-105, and, with Bay, waited for the targets to turn. The two Thuds ahead rolled into a shallow bank.

Flying low—too low to be picked up by the GCI radar—and well behind the lead F-105 element were First Lieutenant Karl Richter and Captain Ralph J. Beardsley. As the lead element maneuvered in search of SAM sites to attack, Richter and his wingman stayed low, preparing to follow them to the target. Then Richter saw the MiGs. He later wrote in the November 1967 issue of Airman magazine, "They slid in front of us beautifully—about a mile and a half or two out. It was funny. We have so few contacts [with MiGs], it takes probably a full second before it jogs your mind.... Those are not airplanes like any we fly."

Richter jettisoned his rocket pods, armed his M-61 Gatling gun, and lined up on the left MiG. "He made an easy turn," Richter wrote. "I moved the pipper [aiming device] out in front of him and started firing."

Richter kept firing 20-mm. rounds at the rate of 100 per second. "I thought Boy, this is going to be embarrassing if you miss this guy, then Beardsley called, 'You're hitting him! You're hitting him!' " Richter saw fire coming out of the back end of the MiG, "but he still seemed to be moving through the sky pretty good."

Hoang heard a thump. The airplane rolled on its own to wings level. Alarmed, he lit the afterburner as the airplane continued rolling right while he tried to regain control. The aircraft responded, but something was wrong. Hoang glanced around and saw that the outer portion of his left wing was in tatters. "I was still flying though, so I just concentrated on staying under control."

Richter fired again.

Hoang had just finished checking his engine instruments. The VK-1A turbojet was running fine. "I thought I was going to be okay, when all of a sudden the plane started to come apart." The instrument panel shattered. Hoang felt pain in his side and back. He reached between his legs for the ejection handle.

Just as Richter ran out of ammunition, the MiG's right wing broke off. Pieces flew off the tail and another big chunk flew loose from the airplane. As Richter pulled up to avoid the debris,

he saw the MiG pilot eject and heard Beardsley announce, "He's got a good chute." The two Thuds departed at high speed.

Good chute or not, Hoang's troubles were far from over. VPAF pilots carried their national flag in the back of their parachute harness to use after ejection. The idea was to wave the flag as they descended in the parachute to alert the ground forces that they were friendly pilots. More than one North Vietnamese pilot had been accidentally fired upon by his own countrymen.

"I was bleeding from shrapnel in my side and back, and my arm was broken," says Hoang. "I couldn't reach behind for the flag."

Meanwhile a flight of F-4s entered the fray. Alone, Bay evaded one missile after another. He used hard turns to defeat the attackers, but the maneuvers were costing altitude and fuel. "I could avoid the missiles," he said, "but was in a very serious situation. Fuel nearly finished. At first I intended to eject, but when I dropped lower I suddenly saw the Americans flying away. Then I saw [Vo Van] Man in front of me. I followed Man [and landed safely]."

Hoang came down in a rice paddy. When he shouted that he was on their side, the local villagers heard his southern accent and thought he was a South Vietnamese pilot, even more hated than the Americans. "They stripped off my flightsuit and tied my hands behind my back," Hoang says. "One farmer began beating me until the soldiers made him stop."

Hoang was in no shape to walk, so the soldiers put him on a two-wheel buffalo cart to be pulled into town. It took an hour for his captors to verify his identity. Once they had done so, they quickly untied him and rushed him to the hospital. After recovering from his injuries, Hoang began flying a MiG-21 and was shot down again on September 29, 1967.

Hoang's left arm and throat still show the scars from Richter's attack. Richter was killed 10 months later.

In the first four months of 1967, Bay claimed three more U.S. airplanes. His victories made headlines. He had become famous. A favorite of Ho Chi Minh, he dined regularly with the leader and was grounded, at first sporadically and then permanently, for no reason other than to protect his value as a symbol of triumph.

In 1990 Hubert Buchanan went back to Vietnam to visit the village where he landed after ejecting from his stricken F-4. "I found the guy who got the award for capturing me," he told me. "I found the guy in the uniform, who I'd seen off in the distance running toward me. He said he was so frustrated. They only had two rifles in the village and he knew he would never get there first."

At one point in our conversation, Buchanan said out of the blue, "If we had accelerated straight ahead, they would never have gotten us. It was only after we started to turn were they able to cut us off. Otherwise we'd have left them in the dust."

Robbie's daughter Deborah Robertson Bardsley tried for years to find her dad—her quest was the subject of a 1993 Discovery Channel documentary. According to the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, fragments of remains discovered at

the crash site in 1992 and again in 1997 have not been confirmed as those of John Robertson but provide strong circumstantial evidence that he died in the crash. I believe that is the case and told Bay so when I visited his home recently. I think he was hoping, as I was, that the family had finally been able to say goodbye. During my visit, his wife said of him, "He is a hero in my opinion because the people still come to see him."

Later at a nearby restaurant, Bay and I behaved like all good fighter pilots, challenging each other to drinking games. It grew late, our driver got antsy, and finally Bay stood. Our crowd got up and headed for the car. When the driver pulled to a stop on the main road near the lane to Bay's farm, Bay hopped out and I followed. He gave me a bear hug, smiled, and headed home.