

Pardo's Push: An Incredible Story of Bravery and Extraordinary Airmanship

"When I was on that mission, there was no decision process – no delay – and I attribute that fact to my dad ... he taught me that when your friend needs help, you help." – Bob Pardo

The 10th of March, 1967 saw bright and clear skies over Vietnam. A steelworks facility at Thai Nguyen, thirty miles north of Hanoi, was brimming with activity while men with AK-47 rifles stood around, some smoking casually, while idly scanning the workers and occasionally glancing up at the sky. Scattered near the steel mill were more soldiers, some of whom stayed in close range to large hulking Soviet-built anti-aircraft guns pointed up, ready to fire at a moment's notice.

Less than a hundred miles and closing fast was a formation of several US Air Force F-4 Phantom IIs and F-105 Thunderchiefs, loaded for bear. Their target- the mill, north of Hanoi, which served as the primary manufacturing plant for munitions and weaponry used by North Vietnamese forces in their fight against South Vietnam and the United States. Under the leadership of Air Force legend Colonel Robin Olds, this strike flight would unload their bombs on the mill, thus destroying a vital asset to the North's war machine.

Flying in one of the strike flight's Phantoms was Captain J.R. "Bob" Pardo, and his backseater, 1st Lieutenant Steve Wayne. It was Pardo's birthday that day and he ordinarily didn't fly on his birthday, but in the hustle and bustle of combat ops, he had forgotten. Flying nearby was his wingman, Captain Earl Aman, and Aman's backseater, 1st Lieutenant Robert Houghton. These two Phantoms were slated to protect the jets of the main strike force from any enemy MiG fighter interceptors that would potentially show up and throw a wrench into the gears of the attack plan. If no MiGs were encountered, Pardo and Aman were given follow-up orders to drop their own sets of bombs on the mill as well.

Back at Thai Nguyen, cigarettes were hurriedly thrown to the ground and steaming bowls of rice were cast aside as soldiers picked up their helmets and rifles, running to the anti-aircraft guns. Surface-to-air missile stations also went active at the first sign of the incoming American strike force. To the temporary pleasure of the gunners on the ground, the strike force's flight leader became slightly disoriented and pushed his aircraft into a dive shallower than originally planned. The rest of the strike force, with their unguided "dumb" bombs followed suit and immediately paid a price. Flak (anti-aircraft fire) erupted in the air around them, exploding near their aircraft or outright striking and damaging them. The angle they had assumed in their attack run made them bigger targets for the North Vietnamese gunners.

Pardo and Aman watchfully maintained a distance from the rest of the flight, along with the other Phantoms tasked with the MiG screening mission. Wayne and Houghton periodically checked in with their pilots, reporting that their radars weren't detecting any inbound MiGs. Both pilots, listening to the chatter on their radio frequency from the other pilots and their backseaters in the strike force, decided that it was time to add their own bombs to the fray. Both Phantoms were equipped with six 750-pound dumb bombs for just that purpose.

Throttling down, Pardo and Aman swooped in, 75 miles away from Thai Nguyen, their bomb stations selected and ready, the weapons armed to dish out a world of hurt. Flying through a maelstrom of flak, Aman felt his Phantom shake violently while loud thumps reverberated his helmet. Houghton, animatedly moving around his ejection seat to analyze the aircraft's flight systems and avionics as much as the machines would let him, got on the ICS (intercom) let Aman know they were most definitely the unlucky recipients of North Vietnamese anti-aircraft

shell fragments. After briefly running through their options, both agreed to carry on with the bombing run after which they'd point their Phantom's nose home to Ubon Royal Thai Air Base in Thailand, home to the forward-deployed 433rd Tactical Fighter Squadron, Pardo and Aman's parent outfit.

The main strike force had already take a considerable number of casualties, but had dealt a hell of a lot of damage to the mill in the process. The North Vietnamese gunners, by then, upped their volume of fire, filling the air so thick of flak that a pilot could just step out and walk across the sky on the shells lobbed upwards if he so chose.

Well, not really, but you get the point. It was bad.

Very bad.

Pardo and Aman pushed forward, regardless. Flaps extended, their heads-up displays (HUDs) lined up with their target, they were committed to the attack and wouldn't entertain backing out now. Now at the ideal weapons release point, both thumbed the switch on the center-stick control columns in their jet, unleashing 9000 pounds of olive drab-painted American fury on the beleaguered mill below. This time, Pardo and Wayne felt it too. Their Phantom was rocked by flak, just as they pushed their throttles all the way forward to climb away from Thai Nguyen. Pardo and Wayne had their wings shredded, and shrapnel from the airburst anti-air shells riddled their engines.

Aman and Houghton weren't in any better shape than when they first got hit. In fact, their situation worsened. Their fuel cells were emptying out rapidly thanks to a brand new gaping hole on the underside of their Phantom, and they were losing power in engines. Both pilots radioed in their predicament immediately to the attack flight's leader, in command of the entire mission, who in turn directed them to a predetermined rendezvous point to link up with an Air Force KC-135 Stratotanker. There, they would be able to refuel with enough gas to get them to the nearest friendly base at the very least.

Pardo, Wayne, Aman and Houghton knew they wouldn't make it that far.

Training kicked in, and both pilots added power, pulling back on the stick, to bring their stricken Phantoms to 30,000 feet. This would allow them to glide for at least a fair distance after their engines finally flamed out when there wasn't enough fuel left to feed them. Now southwest of Hanoi, though still deep in enemy territory, the two flew together, nursing their fighters away from the city and surrounding paddies and jungles which were full of North Vietnamese forces who would have a field day parading them on TV, torturing them, and possibly even gruesomely executing them.

Crossing under Aman's Phantom, Pardo and Wayne noticed a thick spray flying out from underneath the aircraft. There was no way this fighter would make it back to Thailand that fateful day. But, Aman and Houghton couldn't eject, or they would be subjected to the worst the North Vietnamese Army could come up with. Time was running out, leaving Aman and Houghton little to no room in terms of options to pursue. This was when Pardo came up with the idea to push his wingman and his backseater out of harm's way to safety, using his F-4 to literally use his aircraft to keep the other's airspeed up, generating lift and keeping it flying... at least temporarily so.

There was a precedent to this crazy move. During the Korean War, decorated combat pilot James Robinson Risner of the United States Air Force used his F-86 Sabre to push his wingman away from North Korean/Chinese-controlled airspace. However, that was over a decade and a half prior to these events, in an aircraft with hugely different design than the F-4 Phantom II, an aircraft which was often described as the triumph of thrust over aerodynamics. To complicate matters, Pardo's electrical and hydraulic power was significantly limited. For some odd reason, the aircraft was handling well enough, even after its wings and engines were turned into flying Swiss cheese.

Pardo got on his ICS and relayed his plan to Wayne, who agreed. The upside was that they would have a chance to save Aman and Houghton. The downside was that this plan, should it fail, would result in the deaths of all involved. Their sense of duty and their devotion to saving their brothers in arms led them to carry on with this downright insane and near-impossible course of action.

Pardo climbed back up to Aman's altitude, matching his speed to pull into a loose formation. He explained his plan to the bewildered and airmen in the Phantom flying next his, adding that it was worth a shot. His first instruction was for Aman to deploy his Phantom's drag chute and jettison it. Pardo would then try to slot the tip of his Phantom's nose into the empty container in the back of the aircraft which once held the chute. Aman, wasting no time, did exactly what was asked of him while Pardo bled off speed, maneuvering behind his wingman's Phantom.

Carefully pushing his Phantom in slowly, Pardo made it to the empty container briefly.... Before his aircraft was forced out and away, thanks to the jetwash coming from Aman's engines. Pardo was worried that the wash would cause him to lose control of his own Phantom. Refusing to give up, Pardo maneuvered his Phantom underneath Aman's jet once more, this time nudging up against it from below to "push" the other forward. This didn't work as well, thanks to jet wash once again. Running out of time, he has one more trick up his sleeve before giving up and ejecting became the only option.

On the Department of Defense's request, McDonnell Douglas built the Phantom with a reinforced tailhook for arrested landings. The Navy version would use the tailhook for naval aviation operations aboard a carrier, while the Air Force version would be able to use it to make an emergency recovery on an airstrip. Pardo and Aman flew Air Force F-4s, both of which had tailhooks attached to the rear between the two engine nozzles. Pardo's last-ditch effort involved repositioning his cockpit directly behind Aman's tailhook and coming up flush against the flat surface of the hook. He would then be able to push Aman forward to safety, or so he hoped.

As you can imagine, this was insanity personified.

The slightest misstep would mean certain death for Pardo, Wayne, Aman and Houghton. If Aman or Pardo lost their concentration for even just a second, Aman's tailhook could smash through Pardo's windscreen, killing him immediately and "tangling" both aircraft together to the point where they'd both just fall from the sky like rocks. The plan still went ahead.

With less than 400 pounds of fuel left in Aman's Phantom and thrust slipping away gradually, they began dropping at a rate of 3000 feet per minute from their earlier altitude of around 30,000 feet. In 9 minutes, if they didn't bail out, they would be toast. Pardo, once more moving his Phantom behind Aman's told his wingman to cut power to both engines, eliminating the jet wash. Just then, in a move that can only be described as extraordinary airmanship, Pardo made

contact with the center of his canopy windscreen and the extended tailhook in front of him. Aman's rate of descent was now halved to 1500 feet per minute. The glass began to crack, so Pardo gently repositioned the aircraft so the hook rested on the metal joint where the canopy was noised to the nose section on the Phantom's fuselage.

Thus began Pardo's Push.

Every fifteen to thirty seconds, the hook would slip, forcing Pardo to move his fighter to maintain the push. Aman and Houghton were wrestling with their Phantom, trying to keep it steady and pointed towards Laos — relatively safe territory for a brief wait and pickup. Just a few minutes later, Pardo and Wayne realized their left engine was acting up. If the problem was left unchecked for any longer, an uncontrolled flame would have potentially ignited the aircraft, killing all four airmen. They were forced to shut the engine down.

Now fifty eight miles away from where Pardo initially began pushing Aman, the unseemly duo of Phantoms were collectively flying with just one engine functioning between the two aircraft (of four engines combined). Ten minutes after Pardo powered down his left engine, and after twenty minutes of the push (for a total of eighty eight miles), both aircraft crossed the border into Laos. Pardo's fuel was dangerously low, and the two Phantoms were below an altitude of 6,000 feet and decreasing. It was now time to eject.

Pulling away from Aman, Pardo moved a safe distance away before Aman and Houghton ejected. Noting the location of an Air Force top-secret Lima Site nearby, Pardo and Wayne banked away and attempted to make for the station's runway strip in the hopes of a belly landing. Then, their right engine cut. They had run out of fuel, and it was time for them to punch out too. All four aviators were now on the ground and running for their lives when they realized they were being tracked by pro-communist militia and stray North Vietnamese soldiers in the area. A-1E Sandy attack planes were already in the air, thundering towards the last known position of the downed pilots to provide air cover. Making contact with Pardo via his survival radio, he directed a pair of Sandys to an element of irregulars making their way towards the airmen. The attack planes strafed the militiamen without hesitation, sending the remaining fleeing. One by one, Pardo, Wayne, Aman and Houghton were picked up by helicopters scrambled to rescue them, and were subsequently flown to safety. Their ordeal was finally over.

One would think that Pardo's extraordinary feat of airmanship and courageousness would have immediately earned him and Wayne the highest accolades the Air Force had to offer. They were, after all, responsible for saving the lives of their wingman and his weapon systems officer (WSO/backseater). The Air Force saw it differently. In fact, Pardo received a formal reprimand for the loss of his Phantom, and leadership suggested that he should have been more concerned with saving his multi-million dollar fighter jet instead of doing what he did to save Aman and Houghton.

When a general in Saigon found out that he lost two more Phantoms (Aman's and Pardo's), he blew a fuse before he could be told that there was no real way either jet could have been recovered. Word came down that Pardo would be court-martialled spelling out the end of all of

his chances of a career as a fighter pilot in the US Air Force. Upon hearing about the predicament one of his pilots was facing, Colonel Robin Olds, arguably one of the most legendary fighter pilots in Air Force history, flew over to Saigon to negotiate. Olds, Pardo's Wing Commander, was unwilling to let Pardo be thrown under the bus for his act of bravery which wound up saving the lives of Aman and Houghton. The incensed general agreed to drop the matter as long as Pardo and Wayne didn't receive any recognition for what they had done.

Neither Pardo nor Wayne cared about recognition anyways. "We have both said it time after time ... we already had what we wanted, which was simply to get our two buddies out of there. We had our reward the day of the push and it should have all ended right there, but it didn't." In the 1980s, Pardo found himself golfing at a military reunion with a number of men he served with, and political representatives. An aide of US Senator John Tower was appalled to hear from Pardo that nobody involved in the Push earned awards because of their bravery. Pardo, once again, made it known that he didn't really care for the awards.

Tower used his political clout to make the case that they deserved the Air Force Cross at the very least, second only in hierarchy to the Medal of Honor. However, due to a bunch of Air Force administrative personnel apparently still unhappy with the loss of those two Phantoms, the four airmen of Pardo's Push were awarded Silver Stars instead. Aman and Houghton for completing their attack run against the steel mill despite having sustained heavy damage to their aircraft, and Pardo and Wayne for their heroic effort to save Aman and Houghton.

All four aviators eventually retired from military service, Pardo and Aman as Lieutenant Colonels, Wayne as a Colonel and Houghton as a Major. Their story didn't end there, however. In 1994, Aman was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease. Aman couldn't afford the medical bills and was unable to work. Soon, ALS overtook him and paralyzed him. Pardo, having heard about his old wingman's affliction, kicked into high gear once again. Establishing the Earl Aman Fund, he brought in numerous donations that would pay for Earl's medical bills, a voice synthesizer to allow him to communicate, an electric wheelchair. As Pardo says, "If one of us gets in trouble, everyone else gets together to help."