

In his book "Takhli Tales", Billy Sparks tells about the first mission specifically planned to take out a SAM site. The story relates how the Johnson administration delayed the strike for a week and imposed suicidal rules of engagement on the pilots who were to fly the mission. The mission was "Iron Hand One" and the rules of engagement were dictated by SecDef McNamara's "whiz kids" in the Pentagon. They came up with exact routes, times, speeds, and armament for each flight. That these planners had no direct knowledge of the threats faced by the fighter pilots seemed to make no difference to senior USAF commanders. When the first SAM firing resulted in the loss of an F-4 on 24 July 1965, President Johnson ordered a retaliatory strike on the SAM site. The plan called for the 563rd TFS to strike the site with four flights of Thuds in one minute trail, dropping a mix of CBU and napalm from 50 feet at 360 knots. Though squadron commanders requested changes, including varying routes of ingress, timing, and airspeeds, they were denied permission to make any changes. In the event, the squadron officers changed the airspeed restriction to 540 knots, but held to the published routes, altitudes, and timing of the attack. Given the poor security of the South Vietnamese headquarters of 7th Air Force, it was not surprising that the North Vietnamese were well prepared for this attack. They had sited numerous AAA guns along the route. The attackers flew from the IP to the target at 50 feet. The larger AAA guns could not be depressed enough to detonate at that altitude, and their shells exploded above the attackers all along the route to the target. The hundreds of smaller caliber weapons peppered the Thuds. Sparks' F-105 was hit 12 times with .30 and .50 caliber bullets between the IP and the target. The North Vietnamese, sufficiently warned by the published coordinates of the SAM sites, had removed the equipment and replaced it with dummy missiles. The attack resulted in the loss of six F-105s and 2 RF-101 recce birds. Three of the F-105 pilots were killed, two were captured and one was rescued. The tactics dictated from Washington were illogical and resulted in unnecessary losses. They also highlighted a problem that would persist throughout the war. Running the war from Washington, while ignoring the recommendations of the military who were doing the fighting and dying was a recipe for disaster, militarily, politically, and in the "domestic tranquility that political leaders are sworn to provide. My painting depicts the low-level attack.