The B-2 Bomber in NATO’s First War

On March 24, 1999, over the former Yugoslavia, the B-2 went to war

Twenty years ago.... The military power of the NATO alliance is on the line. Russia is watching. The province of Kosovo is in flames. 600,000 ethnic Albanian Kosovars flee. For the first time, NATO will go to war. And so will the B-2.

That’s how Operation Allied Force began on March 24, 1999. Three days of pre-planned strikes turned into an all-out air war after Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic sent military forces into Kosovo. NATO determined to pay back his brutality with an air campaign to punish leadership, degrade military forces and force the Serbs out of Kosovo. “It’s a major campaign on the part of the United States Air Force,” said Secretary of Defense William Cohen. Few realized it would also reset the future security environment of Europe.

At the center of Operation Allied Force was the B-2 bomber and its all-weather, satellite-guided precision weapon, the Joint Direct Attack Munition or JDAM. Only B-2s carried JDAMs in this war. The B-2 flew in combat for the first time on night one of the campaign.

Serbia’s tight air defenses posed significant risks. Stealth did not make the B-2 invisible. Stealth made the B-2 harder to detect and track. “There’s no assurance we won’t lose aircraft trying to take on those air defenses,” warned Air Force Chief of Staff General Mike Ryan on March 18, 1999.

Eric Single and Steve Basham, and Steve Sicking and Darrell Davis flew the first night’s missions. Davis recounted the mission in detail.

What was it like to fly the first B-2 combat sortie? No Chariots of Fire overture, no Top Gun chaos on the radios. We took off in the dead of night. Night turned to day. Day turned to night. Some 15 hours prior, we had left our family and friends, the first employment of a combat sortie from the central part of the United States. Left the teams that got us airborne and the friendly voices of aircraft controllers. We met tankers, got our gas, and left them behind as well. And then it was just the two aircraft.

As it got dark and the last speck of light was in the air we drifted apart and went on our separate ways...
We checked in with airborne command and control. They said the picture’s clear, green light. From that point on we knew it was real.

We turn inbound. The right-seater’s managing the mission. The left seater’s looking inside and outside for threats. You have that job between you.

It was pitch black in the cockpit. We’re both packed in our seats. Dim glow of the displays out in front of us. It was a beautiful night, you could see every star in the sky. Gorgeous. They didn’t know we were coming. Every light was on. You could see every urban center, every highway. Very surprising. That said, it was very quiet and it was just the way we wanted it.

That didn’t last. Eventually, blistering, boiling balls of orange light began emanating from the ground. The TLAM strike was on...

Now we were hyper-vigilant. Here we are flying 300,000 lbs. of steel and composite and they’d be looking for us. Things remained quiet. We proceeded inbound. Down below I see the corkscrew trajectory of a missile firing.

Below their B-2, a Dutch F-16 had shot down a Serbian MiG-29. Pilots realized the B-2 was nearing the point of maximum risk. Tension grew. Davis continued: “you open the weapons bay doors and present angles to radars. When radars have angles they get hits. When they have enough hits they can build tracks and pass them on to target tracking radars and cue other radars. If they get a good track they can launch against you.”

It’s the most dangerous part of the mission. To release weapons the B-2 must enter the launch acceptability region. The LAR. An invisible cone in the sky that goes down toward the target itself. You have to fly into that cone. The systems give you some confidence but you never really know until you get inside that basket. Would we be detected? Would our weapons delivery be successful?

We got into the LAR, our systems came alive and said we had a good weapons delivery solution. Just a few seconds before release, the weapons bay doors open. You hear the rush, the noise changes in the cockpit and then 3-2-1 the weapons begin kicking out.

Doors shut. Okay, now it’s on. They didn’t know we were here before. We’ve given them every reason to know we are here now. You’re checking inside, checking outside. Things remain quiet. Your confidence begins building that this could go well.

Unlike bombers dropping unguided bombs in the past, the B-2s have multiple targets in different locations for their precision weapons. We had several more sets of targets we went through. We essentially S-turned our way through the country, got all our weapons out, then departed. As soon as we were clear of Serbian airspace, we both confirmed that, then we dropped our masks and turned to each other and high-fived.

The B-2s departed Serbian airspace and sought tankers flying out of Spain for their dark, post-strike refueling and return to Missouri.
**Results**

At Whiteman AFB, the command post reads the message: *Darth 01 and 2, clean and green.* The first B-2s are on the homeward leg of their 30-hour mission. “The real hero of that night was the platform itself. That is one awesome jet,” summed up Eric Single.

For the next eight weeks, the B-2s struck regularly. Just six B-2s generated a mix of two-ship and single-ship sorties. Fifty different pilots flew the missions. The B-2 flew 37 of the 53 air tasking orders generated for Operation Allied Force. “Sixteen quality DMPIs no matter how bad the weather was,” recalled Lieutenant General Mike Short, Combined Forces Air Component Commander.

“We went from World War II–style bombing… to a single bomber striking multiple target areas, individually hitting points in those target areas and moving to the next one,” said Sicking.

It was never easy. Many pilots saw anti-aircraft fire. “You could see tracers in the distance coming up,” said pilot Andy Sanchez, after releasing weapons on a later combat mission. Serbian surface-to-air missiles often hid and “kept that element of doubt out there,” said General John Jumper, Commander, U.S. Air Forces Europe. Surface-to-air missile launches actually increased during the first few weeks of the war and an F-117 stealth fighter was hit. Maintainers launched every B-2 in pristine condition: with all low observability features meeting high combat standards.

All told the 509th dropped 650 JDAMs on targets ranging from strategic sites in downtown Belgrade to a mobile SA-3 picked up by off-board sensors and the B-2’s own synthetic aperture radar. A B-2 also dropped the massive span of the Zezelj railway bridge over the Danube at Novi Sad on April 23, 1999. Analysis after the war found the B-2 strikes scored a stunning 84% success rate.

By early June, the pressure worked, and peace talks began. British military historian John Keegan wrote with some awe, “Now, there is a new date to fix on the calendar: June 3, 1999, when the capitulation of President Milosevic proved that a war can be won by airpower alone.” The B-2 helped NATO airmen give the people of Kosovo a better chance for peace.

“The B-2 can’t be whipped,” added Lt. Gen. Short. “It is an incredible capability for the nation that we verified in this conflict.”

“The point of every combat mission is to kill and survive,” concluded Davis. “We were successful in proving this aircraft could do both.”