

Lieutenant Colonel Bob Pardo, USAF

US fighter pilot who performed a daring feat of aviation, later known as 'Pardo's Push', to save his wingman during the Vietnam war



Pardo, left, with his rear pilot, Steve Wayne

On March 19, 1967, Captain Bob Pardo took off from the Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base in Thailand in his F-4 Phantom jet as part of a US strike force charged with bombing a North Vietnamese steel mill north of Hanoi. He was accompanied by 1st Lieutenant Steve Wayne, his rear pilot. His wingman in another F-4 Phantom was Captain Earl Aman, accompanied by 1st Lieutenant Robert Houghton.

Both planes were hit by anti-aircraft fire as they approached the heavily protected mill. Pardo completed his bombing run, but Aman pulled out and climbed to 30,000ft, haemorrhaging fuel from a ruptured tank.

Pardo realised his wingman would not make it back to the relative safety of Laos, let alone Thailand. “I knew if I didn’t do anything they would have to eject over North Vietnam into enemy territory, and that would have resulted in their capture for sure,” he said. “At that time, if you were captured by civilians, you were probably going to be murdered on the spot.”



F-4 Phantoms, 1965

And so Pardo proceeded to perform one of the great feats of aviation history, a scarcely credible rescue that became known as “Pardo’s Push” and entered US air force legend. “My father taught me that when your friend needs help, you help,” he said. “How can you fly off and leave someone you just fought a battle with?”

The first thing he tried was to stick the nose of his plane into the rear port of Aman’s to “push” it back to the safety of Laos roughly 90 miles away. That failed because Aman’s Phantom was causing too much turbulence. He then tried flying

his plane up beneath Aman's and essentially giving it a piggyback ride. That also failed due to the turbulence.

Pardo then tried a manoeuvre that had been employed only once before — during the Korean war 15 years earlier — and had since been banned by the US air force.

He radioed Aman and told him to cut his engines and drop his tail hook, a heavy-duty steel hook that Phantoms used to catch cables and arrest their landings on aircraft carriers. As Aman did so Pardo, flying at 300mph, inched his plane forward until his windscreen kissed the swaying tailhook and began propelling Aman's Phantom forward.

It was an extraordinarily dangerous operation: had Pardo pushed too hard, his inch-thick canopy would have shattered and the tailhook would have smashed through his cockpit.

Miraculously, the manoeuvre worked. It stretched the planes' glide range and slowed their descent rate to 1,000ft per minute. But the tailhook kept slipping off the canopy. "I can't remember how many times the tailhook slipped off the windshield, and I had to fight to get it back in place," Pardo said.

Then Pardo's damaged left engine caught fire. He had to shut it down, meaning that for the next ten minutes the two planes were being propelled over enemy airspace by a single engine and losing altitude at 2,000ft per minute.

Desperate, he briefly restarted his left engine but had to shut it down a second time. The two planes finally crossed the border at an altitude of just 6,000ft with barely two minutes of flying time left. Both crews swiftly ejected, and were picked up by US rescue helicopters.

“It was phenomenal flying, nothing less,” Houghton said. Yet if Pardo expected a hero’s welcome back at the Ubon Air Base, he was disappointed. “They didn’t know whether to court-martial me or pin a medal on my chest,” he said.

He was reprimanded for failing to save his own aircraft. Lt Gen William Wallace Momyer, commander of the 7th Air Force in Vietnam, wanted to court-martial him, and had to be dissuaded by Colonel Robin Olds, commander of Pardo’s 8th Tactical Fighter Wing.

Twenty-two years passed before the US military re-examined Pardo’s case and, in 1989, belatedly awarded him the Silver Star for his heroics that day. “I was very surprised. I thought it was ancient history,” he said.



Pardo visiting a USAF base in 2014

Robert Pardo was born near Waco, Texas, in 1934. After high school he enrolled at the University of Houston, using his prowess at pool to help pay his way, but dropped out before earning a degree. He started helping his father, William, lay gas

pipelines but it was hard physical labour and in 1954, aged 19, he jumped at a chance to join the US air force.

Pardo was a natural pilot. He received his pilot's wings the following year and was sent to Vietnam in 1966 after serving at various bases across the US. He flew 132 missions during that tour of duty, and served 20 years in the US air force before retiring in 1974 with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Thereafter he worked in corporate aviation, married twice and had a son, John, and a daughter, Angela.

There was a curious postscript to his rescue of Aman. After Vietnam the two men went their separate ways and did not meet, but in the mid-1990s Pardo learnt that Aman was suffering from Lou Gehrig's disease and had lost his voice and mobility. He duly set up the Earl Aman Foundation and raised enough money to buy him a voice synthesiser, a motorised wheelchair, a computer and a van. He thus came to his wingman's rescue twice. "If one of us gets in trouble, everyone gets together to help," he said.

Bob Pardo, US air force pilot, was born on March 10, 1934. He died in College Station, Texas, on December 5, 2023, aged 89