

141700Z

In the days leading up to the attack the USS America (CV 66) and USS Coral Sea (CV 43) deliberately made as much noise as possible to focus the world's attention on Sixth Fleet.

While Qaddafi and the world focused on the U.S. Sixth Fleet, the Air Force completed staging of its strike, support, and tankers in England.

Then, on the morning of 14 April the two battle groups terminated flight operations, imposed strict emissions control, and commenced high-speed runs to their launch points off Libya. The USS America went around the western tip of Sicily, while the USS Coral Sea made maximum speed through the crowded Strait of Messina. As soon as they were out of sight of land the two carriers began to arm the aircraft on their flight decks.

The S-3A's of VS-32 "Maulers" from the USS America were detached to NAS Sigonella, Sicily. They, along with the P-3C squadron stationed there, swept ahead of the two battle groups searching for Soviet surveillance ships.

The two carriers left their Soviet trawler shadows bobbing in their wake as they disappeared over the horizon. In addition, they avoided a Soviet Sovremennyy-class and a Kashin-class destroyer operating near Sicily as they raced to their launch positions.

On 14 April European foreign ministers met to discuss what to do to discourage Libyan support for terrorism. The resulting package of sanctions fell far short of the United States wanted. Unbeknownst to them, as the sun set in the west, the time for talk and handwringing was over.

141710Z

As the tankers and F-111's taxied from their ramp parking and TAB-V's at RAF Mildenhall and RAF Lakenheath the press and plane-spotters that had been camped out along the base runways for the last several weeks were now strangely absent.

From a security standpoint, the immediate concern was if the raid was going to be revealed on the evening newscast in England. However, nothing was reported. At least a few plane-spotters did watch the launch process.

No one called the news, or if they did, the news channels showed discretion in their reporting. Total surprise is impossible when accompanied by unusual movements of large numbers of aircraft being observed by knowledgeable observers.

142100Z

At 1600 Washington time President Reagan and his national security team briefed members of Congress on Operation Eldorado Canyon. After the briefing and congressional members had a chance to ask questions, Reagan asked if anyone thought the operation should be cancelled. None did. Reagan thanked them for their support and cautioned them about the operational security concerns regarding the information in the briefing.

The Reagan administration waited until the mission was well underway before notifying the Soviet government. Secretary of State Shultz met with the Soviet chargé d'affaires at the State Department. Shultz showed him evidence of Libyan involvement in the West Berlin terrorist bombing, informed him of the operation, and assured him it was not directed in anyway at his country.

Several news agencies inevitably began to piece the evidence together; Two carriers where at sea in the Mediterranean; Ambassador Walters, the U.S. Ambassador the United Nations, recently completed a tour of allied capitals in Europe, and Reagan had just conducted a high-level meeting with members of congress; and concluded that an attack was imminent.

They began to discuss U.S. military options and potential targets in Libya. Fortunately, they were discussing these in very general terms and focusing on the Sixth Fleet with no mention of the Air Force aircraft that had taken off from England.

142330Z

Radar operators in several countries detected the F-111's and their support aircraft on their long flight to Libya. While France, Spain, and Portugal kept quiet, Italy did not.

Depending on the rumor, about thirty minutes before the strike either the Italian government directly warned Tripoli about the formation of U.S. aircraft; or Italy alerted Malta, a country sympathetic to Qaddafi and the Maltese warned Tripoli. Either way, this warning caused Qaddafi and his immediate family to evacuate to his private bunker just before the strikes started but had little apparent impact on the readiness of the Libyan air defenses.

The city lights in both Tripoli and Benghazi were on as the strike force approached and the runway lights at Benina Airfield were still alive.

The element of surprise did not last long. The Libyan air defenses responded shortly after the first bombs exploded.

150000Z

Secretary of Defense Weinberger and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Crowe waited at the Pentagon for reports from CINCEUR Headquarters in Germany and Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean. While they waited, they listened to CNN reports from Tripoli. The reporter described the city as calm and quiet but very tense. Suddenly the reporter shouted, "I'm hearing bombs and gunfire! . . . I can see rockets! I think there's an attack going on!" The strike was right on time.

150013Z

At approximately 1913 Washington time, Weinberger and Crowe received the first post-strike report from CINCEUR stating that all aircraft were "feet wet". Everyone in the command room was thrilled as it appeared that the raid had been carried out with no American losses.

The mood was quickly doused when a follow-up report reported that an aircraft may be missing. A third report confirmed one of the F-111's was missing.

The Navy immediately began combat search and rescue (CSAR) efforts to locate the missing F-111, KARMA 52.

150020Z

At 1920 Washington time, Larry Speakes, Reagan's press secretary officially announced the raid to the White House press corps and national audience watching on television.

150114Z

By 0213 Tripoli time, all Air Force and Navy strike aircraft, except the missing KARMA 52, reported feet wet to the E-2C's and for the F-111's to the command KC-10A.

The main concern after clearing the gauntlet of Libyan SAMs and AAA was pursuit by Libyan fighters. Libyan pilots rarely flew at night; however, the LAAF often employed contract pilots from Syria and elsewhere, who may have been night qualified. There are reports that the commander of Benina Air base disobeyed orders to attack the departing Navy aircraft.

The delousing plan, distinguishing the returning strike aircraft from any trailing Libyan fighters, had been worked out between the Navy and Air Force ahead of time. The F-111's would head north on a pre-briefed flight plan toward the delouse ship, the guided-missile destroyer USS Farragut (DDG 37), at a set altitude and speed and avoiding a direct overflight. After flying another few miles further north they would begin to climb to their tanker. To conserve fuel some aircraft slowed and started their climb soon after passing the ship.

Expecting detailed instructions to their tankers from the E-2C's, the F-111 crews were surprised to only be directed to "head north," which they had already figured out on their own. However, with need to maintain operational security now gone, they were able to use their radios to aid in rejoining with the tankers if needed.

Many of the F-111's were low, some desperately so, on fuel due to the use of afterburners during the strike. After a few hair-raising moments all the F-111's rejoined a tanker, although not necessarily the planned one, and began to take on fuel.

By 0253 all Navy and Marine Corps aircraft, other than the aircraft supporting the search for KARMA 52, were reported safely back on deck.

After multiple calls it was confirmed that KARMA 52 was missing. The Air Force aircraft orbited near Sicily for more than an hour in the forlorn hope KARMA 52 would rejoin. At 0314 the strike force reluctantly began the long flight back to England.

150200Z

At 2100 Washington time, President Reagan appeared on television from the Oval Office and informed the American public that Air Force and Navy aircraft had conducted air strikes "against the headquarters, terrorist facilities, and military assets that support Muammar Qaddafi's subversive activities," and according to the preliminary reports the operation was a success.

150710Z

At 0810 U.K. time on 15 April, the last F-111F landed at RAF Lakenheath. After fourteen hours and thirty-five minutes, the longest fighter mission in U.S. history was over.