

The Northeast Railroad Bridge

**In 1966 I was a young man, and there was a railroad bridge
Northeast of Hanoi in some very rugged mountains.
It crossed a deep valley near a long black ridge.
After a half century, I'm no longer young but it's still there, that bridge
Sometimes wandering, my mind looks back, and I imagine**

**That we could rise once more, well before the sun
And with max load, take off heavy, one by one
In radar trail into the murk, we'd lumber to the ridge
Joined up on top, in combat spread, we'd make a run
To the Northeast Railroad Bridge**

**The tankers are on station; weather almost clear enough to see
Testing tanks, we tap them early, two and four, then one and three
We drag them on well past their line, northward toward that ridge
Hook up late for last top off; one, three, two, four, hoarding every drop
For the Northeast Railroad Bridge**

**It's a long trip north, and the minutes pass so slow,
Eyes scan unblinking for threats ahead, behind, above, below
The leg seems endless, and there's way too much time to think
But its every head on a swivel when you're haulin' iron
To the Northeast Railroad Bridge**

**If the weather breaks enough, we'll find the sucker hole
And split the flight, with elements committed, downward roll
Ducking under, to skim in low, and charge against the ridge
Where every gun crew knows our jets are coming
To the Northeast Railroad Bridge**

**The Thud Fives have been here, come and gone
Early TOT, they made their run, and blew through right at dawn
They did their best, flinging death along the ridge
But every battery missed is wide awake, and those gunners really pissed
At the Northeast Railroad Bridge**

**The sky lights up with fire, and now we see the tracks
We streak in hot, in close sequence, with every burner maxed
Wing tips trailing vapor smoke, we pop up steep before the ridge
Now max rate rolls inverted, and onset buffet pull downs
On the Northeast Railroad Bridge**

**We carry lots of smash, in case we have to zoom
Windscreen's full of streaking goofballs, yet the target starts to loom
Aimed fire from hoses spraying red the length along that ridge
And my wildly dancing pipper, now steady, relentless forward
Tracks the Northeast Railroad Bridge**

**Press in too close, and the bombs will never arm
And if they do, you'll frag yourself, and surely buy the farm
Pull too slow or late and you'll never clear that ridge
But you got to press in really tight, if you dare to do some harm
To the Northeast Railroad Bridge**

**Tracking fire in torrents, there's no place here to hide
You flaunt Hell's gauntlet when taking this wild ride
Tall cliffs to left of bottomless gorge, and to the right that stinking ridge
Now! Ripple off that dumb bomb string from wing mount either side
On the Northeast Railroad Bridge**

Button pressed, seven G's hard left, and jink back right around
Check back six and scan the black-orange boiling ground
Wings clean, my galloping Rhino rockets by that ridge
Look! The great iron center span is down
On the Northeast Railroad Bridge

Throttles bent outboard, egress eastward to the sea
Adrenaline surging, and each jet lunging headlong on to flee
With needles pegged, escapes untouched across the sparkling ridge
Forgive us God! There's no greater fun than to cheat the guns
At the Northeast Railroad Bridge

Right two o'clock low! A white telephone pole arcs into the sky
An SA-2, just gone blind, and ballistic, sails on harmless by
Mach waves buffet surging inlets, leaving far behind the ridge
And there's the beach...feet wet now, it's not our day to die
At The Northeast Railroad Bridge

Low buzz job initial, a right echelon to steep left pitch up pass
And victory rolls to downwind; we all really shine our ass
But in our heads still visions of that lurking awful ridge
And counting the days before; we know they will restore
The Northeast Railroad Bridge

Fast taxi in, grins and handshakes, and thumbs up all around
All we really want to scramble to the bar, and buy ourselves a round
Before our minds, exhausted, will recycle to the ridge
We joke, and drink, and slap some backs, trying not to think
About the Northeast Railroad Bridge

And then everyone stands tall for a gallant toast
We raise our glasses to those souls before gone lost
And hate that Pat, and Frank, and Bob, and John, and even more
Young lives lost, fool-traded in exorbitant cost
For the Northeast Railroad Bridge

Today, once keen eyes grow dim with age
While late found wisdom leaves one very much less brave
Old minds endlessly revisit that dark and waiting ridge
And once bold hearts now weep for each new batch of kids
Their own Goddamned Railroad Bridge

I now go for many months without these visions in my head
They come on waking late at night, while lying sweating in my bed
I know it will be there for all eternity, that ancient evil ridge
Standing guard forever, long after we're all dead
O'er the Northeast Railroad Bridge

Perhaps again before I die, I will rise before the sun
And once more head way up North, to make my final run
I'll take some kids, and ride the tourist bus high up along that ridge
I'll take a walk, and toss a rock...and maybe some flowers
From the Northeast Railroad Bridge

Brent P. Maxon