



Those Amazing B-26s

By James H. Winchester

From the April, 1952 issue of SAGA magazine. Courtesy of Donald Prettyman and Harrison ("H") Lobdell Jr., Maj General Retired.

A combat pilot reports on the outdated light bomber whose startling performance makes it the hottest plane in Korea. Shortly after 10 AM on June 28th, 1950, three days after the North Korean Reds pushed south across the 38th Parallel, a mixed group of tired, ragged soldiers and refugees was moving along the crowded roads below Seoul. What happened then was graphically described by Frank Gibney, a U.S war correspondent:

"...as we entered a town suddenly a shout went up from Kororan soldiers on tops of jeeps and from dirty, wearied refugees. Wildly cheering people ran into the dusty roads and pointed at the sky. All traffic stopped. Never had I seen such a heartfelt manifestation of joy. Above us, flying northward in neat formation were six American B-26s."

It was the Far East Air Force's first aerial strike at the enemy and it was appropriate that the raid should have been made by twin-engined, propeller-driven B-26 light bombers. For from that moment to this, the Baker two-sixes, as these versatile jack-of-all-trades are known in Air Force lingo, have never been far away from the shooting war in Korea.

Since that first strike of combat, the B-26s have failed to take the air against the Reds on only three days. All three of those occasions were in November, 1950, when UN forces had driven the North Koreans to the Yalu River and there were no targets to strike.

In round figures, these planes, regarded as obsolete in the jet-minded Air Force even at the end of World War II, have flown more than 65,000 combat hours, destroyed nearly 10,000 Red supply vehicles, over 350 locomotives and roughly 3000 railroad cars.

The versatility and might of their striking power is demonstrated by a typical night interdiction mission flown several months ago by Lieutenant Dick Prettyman, a slight mustached pilot from Star City, Indiana.

Taking off from southern Japan at midnight, he ranged the west coast of Korea in the area of Seoul and south to Kunsan. In four-and-a-half hours, Prettyman and his gunner, Staff Sergeant Eddie Bankus, using rockets, 260-pound fragmentation bombs and 6000 rounds of .50-caliber machine gun ammunition, knocked out a vital pontoon bridge at Seoul, caught 25 Red trucks parked bumper-to-bumper on a highway and destroyed them. They later blew up two more trucks on a highway near Suwan and knocked out a third vehicle, believed to be a gas truck, south of there. Then they went on to sew up the night's work by strafing Red-held Kunsan.

As effective as such battering of Red supply lines has proved to be, the B-26s have played an even more important role. They have shown our own Air Force planners the need for a newer, faster, harder-striking, light, all-weather attack bomber to fill the hole between our fighters and our big bombers. It was only after the B-26s in Korea demonstrated what an already obsolescent plane could do that the Air Force awoke to the fact that—by today's jet standards—we didn't have an up-to-date light bomber in our aerial stable.

As a result, we've had to reach across the Atlantic to buy Canberras, light, twin-engined jet bombers, from the British. These British bombers are to be manufactured in the U.S. under license. Production difficulties are now holding them up. Until they start rolling off the factory lines, to be followed in two or three years by a light jet bomber of our own design, it'll be the full-time job of the over-age, out-moded B-26s to fill this gaping hole in our tactical air system.

The B-26s, ranging between the fast fighter types and medium bombers like the B-29s, are quick on the pick-up and long on stamina. Built to carry a substantial load, they can dart and dodge about on the deck like fighters or shoot upward to altitudes of 20,000 feet to radar-bomb targets from high above the clouds, just like the B-29s. There are around 100 of them—two full wings—in Korea as this is written.

Known as the "Invader," the present-day B-26 is an offspring of the World War II light attack bomber known as the A-20. Both were designed by Douglas Aircraft



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Company. Less than 50 feet long and with a wingspread of 72 feet—some of our newer jet fighters are almost as big—the B-26 is a flying arsenal. It has 14 forward-firing .50-caliber machine guns controlled by the pilot. The gunner, using a General Electric central control sight, can fire four more .50s from the top and bottom turrets in the rear.

In addition to 6000 rounds of .50-cal. ammunition for the machine guns, the plane can carry eight five-inch high velocity rockets beneath the wings and two tons of bombs in its belly. Four of the rockets may be replaced by two 110-gallon napalm tanks attached to external wing racks. The plane's two Pratt & Whitney 2000-horsepower engines give the ship, weighing nearly 40,000 pounds when fully loaded, a top speed of 370 miles-an-hour and a service ceiling of 22,000 feet. It cruises normally at 225 miles-an-hour.

No other plane in the Air Force has so much pilot-operated armament. But the plane is made even more versatile by a quickly interchangeable plastic bombardier's compartment in the nose which replaces eight of the .50-cal. machine guns. This nose, equipped with bomb-sight brackets and bombing controls, also has two .50-cal machine guns which can be fired by the bombardier.

In the rugged Korean air fighting, the B-26s have proved themselves a hundred times over using every variation of this armament.

"I'll never forget my first mission," Lieutenant Prettyman told me recently as we discussed the many important roles the B-26s have played in Korea. "It was on June 29th. The war was just four days old. So far I'd been working on the ground, loading bombs and ammunition for our patrol planes and for our first strike on the 28th. We were the only B-26 outfit in the Far East when the Korean war started and the first Far East Air Force tactical group to go into action.

"They called us together the night before," the lieutenant continued. "It was to be a bomb mission. A maximum effort. The target was Haeju Airfield at Pyongyang, the North Korean capital. 'You can expect fighters and heavy

flak,' the briefing officer told us. I was scared. I don't mind admitting it. "The guys I really felt sorry for, though, were our bombardiers. Here they were being handed the first really important air assignment of the war and most of them hadn't looked through a bomb sight in months. As a peacetime outfit in occupied Japan we spent most of our time on pilot training. Teaching guys like myself just how to fly the B-26 was a full time job. When I joined the group in November, 1949, I was a fresh young second lieutenant only weeks out of flying school. I'd never been inside a B-26 before, much less flown one. I had to learn everything from scratch. There were a lot of other pilots just as green as I was. We used up most of the rationed flying time. It didn't leave much for the bombardiers to do.

"Now, ill-trained as they were, they had a man-sized job to do. Just to add to their troubles they didn't have any bombing tables."

Bomb tables are pre-calculated charts showing rate of fall and disc speeds for various types of bombs dropped from various altitudes. They're vitally necessary for the operation of the electronic bomb-sight.

"Without our bombing tables,' Major Van Burnett (Fort Worth, Texas) told the gang at the briefing, 'our bomb sight are useless. For this one we'll have to rely on our naked eyes.'

"Naturally, this didn't make any of us feel better. Particularly when we got to thinking of the four planes which had failed to return from the Group's first strike the day before.

"There were 18 planes scheduled for this one. I was flying the number three position in the left wing formation. We were off the ground at 6 A.M. The weather, as usual, was stinking. We climbed up through the overcast to 6000 feet and assembled, then headed across the Japan Sea toward Korea. We were at 10,000 feet, in tight formation, when we arrived over Pyongyang. Our arrival must have been a complete surprise to them.

"As we spread out in file for our bombing run, I could see a lot of activity on the runways below us. From around

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the field's perimeter Red ack-ack batteries started giving us hell. They tossed a lot of red-hot stuff our way but they weren't very accurate. Five Yak fighters started a frantic scramble off the runway.

"Captain Harrison Lobdell, Jr., (Los Angeles) who was leading the first formation, let go with his belly-load of frag bombs. They straddled three of the fighters trying to take-off. Out of the corner of my eyes, as I started my own bomb run across the barracks area of the field, I could see them burst into flames. It wasn't until we got back to Japan that I learned what happened to the other two Yaks. Screaming skyward they attacked the right wing formation from the rear. Staff Sergeant Nyle Mickley, (Houston, Texas) a gunner, blasted away at them with his twin .50s. There was a flash of fire. One of the Commie planes went into a spin, trailing smoke as he fell out of control. The other Yak didn't press the attack."

This first aerial raid on North Korea was a huge success. Hangers, barracks and fuel dumps were set afire. All of the 18 B-26s that participated returned safely to Japan. The Third wasn't always so lucky, though.

"We have an expression," Prettyman told me, "that we use when one of the guys is killed or missing in action. It's 'bought the farm!'"

A great many of the Third's crewmen purchased rural real estate by this definition during those early, hectic days of fighting.

As the B-26s continued their slashing attacks at the enemy's supply routes, the Reds, in self defense, were forced to change tactics to meet the serious situation. At the start of the war, transport had been carried out, mostly, during the day without any type of camouflage. They now switched to almost exclusive night operations. The B-26s switched right along with them.

"The men and planes of the Third Bomb Group became the other half of the Fifth Air Force," says Brigadier General William Nuchols, spokesman for the Far East Air Forces. "As the night flying half, they are the most valuable all-around airplane we have out here. They've saved our necks a hundred times."

To give better support to the ground troops, the night flying B-26s took to running most of their missions at low levels, below 500 feet. It was dangerous, tricky work. Just how low they flew was graphically illustrated one night by Lieutenant Colonel Walter King (Cisco, Texas)—later killed in action—and his angry gunner. Returning from a night mission over Korea they reported to the intelligence office when they landed.

"Got ourselves a train and locomotive tonight," King told the I.O. "Blew it higher than hell."

"Anybody see you get it?" asked the cynical interrogator.

"Nope," replied King.

"Then I can't allow it," was the reply. "It has to be confirmed."

At this, the gunner, who'd kept quiet during the questioning, dashed outside, piled into a jeep and raced for the flight line. He was back in a few minutes. Clutched in his hand was a large 25-pound piece of a Korean locomotive. When they'd blasted the train to kingdom-come they'd been flying so low that flying debris buried itself in their plane's fuselage.

"Now, by God," shouted the thoroughly enraged gunner, plunking the jagged piece of metal down on the intelligence officer's desk, "will you believe we clunked that train?"

He did.

On another occasion, Captain James Morrow (Nolan, Texas) flew so low on a mission to bomb a railroad tunnel that he ran head-on into a power line. The broken cable wrapped itself around the engine nacell, one end beating a hundred holes in the fuselage as it flapped in the slipstream. Yet Morrow nursed his plane several miles back to Japan and safety.

Prettyman, who was rotated back to the U.S. as a B-26 instructor-pilot after 13 months of Korean combat, during which time he flew 76 missions against the Reds and won the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with six clusters, is firmly convinced that the B-26

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is the principal factor which has held the Red forces at bay in Korea.

"In the rugged hill country of Korea, no other airplane could have done the job it did," he says. "A jet would have been too fast. We couldn't have approached targets low enough in a jet to drop our loads effectively and then had time to pull out and get over the mountain which was always right there ahead of you. Heavier planes couldn't have been maneuvered at low altitudes in the narrow valleys. If ever an airplane was built for the job, it was the Baker two-six in Korea.

"Take the 'Shook Bomb' for instance. That was a device we used to drop heavy explosives from extremely low altitudes. We'd attach four small parachutes to a 500-pound bomb. We'd then make our bomb run at maybe 200 or 300 feet. At that height we couldn't miss. When we dropped the bomb right in their laps, the parachutes would slow up its drop long enough for us to pull out of the way of its blast. With this technique one B-26 could inflict as much damage as a squadron using regular bomb drops.

"Glide bombing was another instance. It's impossible for a plane like the B-26 which carries bombs in its belly, to dive vertically, like the fighters.

"They carry their bombs beneath their wings or beneath the fuselage. In a vertical dive, the nose of the bomb is always pointed straight down at the target. If we tried that in a B-26 the bomb would just slide forward in the bomb bay and blow us—instead of the enemy—out of the sky.

We found out, though, that if we glided in toward our targets at about a 30-degree angle, we could drop our loads and they would slide in a straight line on down to the target. It was perfect for hitting the mouths of tunnels in close quarters."

The Third paired the "Shook Bomb," named after Colonel Abraham Shook, who perfected it, and the newly developed glide-bombing technique in August for a memorable 16-day battering of the Reds. In that period they glided bombs into 734 targets, scoring 306 direct

hits and 95 near misses on locomotives, boxcars, warehouses, bridges and railroad tracks.

"Another item that we used occasionally were the tetrahedron. These were small, pyramid-shaped metal barbs. Released at night over the highways of North Korea, they punctured the tires of the truck convoys coming down from the Manchurian border and made the supply columns highly vulnerable to attack by our other aircraft.

"One of the most inventive guys we had in the outfit wasn't a flying man at all," Prettyman recalled in talking about the ingeniousness of the Third in Korea. "He was Sergeant Julian Huntley. He was a North Carolina boy, our munitions NCO. We always used a lot of napalm. The napalm was shipped to us in powder form. We'd then have to mix it up with gasoline and acids to make the volatile jelly we'd drop to explode in balls of fire. It was sticky stuff, almost like a jelly. Hard to handle.

"Mixing it by hand, as we had to do for the first six months, was slow work. Huntley finally got tired of this and worked up a Rube Goldberg contraption to do the job by machine. For all I know he may have got the idea from some still back in those North Carolina hills. It certainly looked like one. In fact, we dubbed it 'Huntley's Still.'

"It sure worked, though. Six old gas drums were connected together with bailing wire and pipes from smashed-up planes. A seventh drum was used as a mixing vat. Using compressed air, Huntley forced his napalm, gasoline and acids through this series of connected drums. When it came out at the end it was jellied napalm, ready for use. With this machine, two men, in a day, could turn out 2340 gallons of napalm. Working by hand, it took six men to mix 18 drums of the stuff in a day. His machine saved us an average of 384 man-hours a week.

Another improvisation which Prettyman, and all of the B-26 pilots, used to great advantage in their night bombing missions was the flare plane.

"The Air Force didn't have a flare plane as such," Prettyman recalls, "We'd tried dropping flares from our B-

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26s but it didn't work out too well. Then someone in the Wing came up with the idea of using our C-47 cargo plane"

Colonel Milt Johnson (Tulsa, Oklahoma), was at the controls the night the "Lightning Bug," as they christened the plane, took-off on its experimental run. Several hours later, near Seoul, the Navigator, Major Cecil Riddle, from Ashland, Kentucky, made contact with a U.S. ground controller. They were assigned a target—a town in which the Chinese soldiers were billeted.

As the clumsy, unarmed C-47 circled over the enemy-held village, Technical Sergeants James Walker (Washington, Indiana) and John Harris (Hornbeak, Tennessee) back in the fuselage, took over the back-breaking task of dropping the heavy flares out the open cargo door. In five-and-a-half hours over the target, 129 flares were dropped. It was the B-26s answer for night illumination.

Since January, 1951, when this initial test was made, 27,000 flares have been dropped, paving the way for night attacks—enough roughly to light up the entire area of Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont at one time if they'd been dropped together.

As the effectiveness of the B-26s increased, the Reds devised new and ingenious methods to combat them. Deadliest of these was the flak trap. The Communists would leave a truck or part of a train in the open between two small hills. Anti-aircraft guns, cleverly camouflaged, would be dug-in on the sides of the hills. As the B-26s came in to strike the target, AA guns would open up on them point-blank.

Prettyman, who survived several of these flak-trap ambushes, is single—and glad of it. "This is no job for a married man," he says. "You can't think of the wife and kiddies and fly a plane as hot as this one both at the same time. Someone has to suffer."

Five feet seven, weighing only 140 pounds, Dick regards a night mission in August, 1950, as the most memorable of the more than six dozen strikes he made against the Reds.

"It was a pilot's dream," he recalls.

The day started like any other. Shortly after 9 A.M. he walked over to operations to check that night's flying assignments. He was scheduled. Briefing at 6 P.M. Takeoff at midnight.

Twelve planes were scheduled. Each would fly individually, not as a formation. They would be staggered so one plane would be over the target area at all times from midnight to dawn. When one ship left, another would arrive to take its place.

Dick arrived on the flight line at 11 P.M. His plane was No. 434. It was already loaded. Eight five-inch high velocity rockets beneath the wings. Ten 260-pound fragmentation bombs in the belly. Six thousand rounds of ammunition for the 16 machine guns.

With a staff sergeant crew chief riding in the cockpit beside him and another staff sergeant gunner manning the twin .50s in the rear turrets, Prettyman called the tower for clearance at 11:46 P.M.

"Chadwick Tower. This is Four Three Four. Am I cleared for take-off?"

"Okay for takeoff," came back the reply.

"Roger."

At 12:30 A.M. Prettyman and his crew were over the Korean coast, due east of Taegu. Crossing the peninsula, they headed up the west coast. At the Han River they turned inland, back east again, toward Seoul. They were flying at about 1200 feet.

Around a bend in the Han, just beyond Kimpo airport, the huge Seoul airbase, Prettyman spotted 25 Red trucks lined up bumper-to-bumper, waiting for repairs to be made on a pontoon bridge spanning the river.

"I was at 1000 feet for my first pass," he recalls. "I started down at about a 30 degree angle, pulling out beyond the bridge at about 300 feet. On this first pass I let go with four of my rockets. They hit right on the bridge. On my pull-out I bent the plane over into a steep bank to give the gunner a chance to fire his top turret guns at the lined-up trucks. They were sitting ducks."

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Coming around again, the Reds opened up on Prettyman's plane with everything they had. Anti-aircraft shells, red hot, were bursting so near the fast-flying craft that the gunner, over the intercom, reported. "Those were so close I could have read a newspaper by the light."

This time, Dick dropped four of his 260-pound fragmentation bombs in a line diagonally across the bridge. Then he pulled up screaming for a third pass. On this run, the Reds still shooting at him point-blank, he streaked across the target at better than 400-miles-an-hour. He dropped the rest of his bombs. When the smoke cleared the bridge was gone.

With the bridge destroyed, Dick turned the fury of his machine guns on the trucks. He left them a long continuous line of flames. A few minutes later, south of the village of Suwon, he spotted a convoy. He strafed it with his forward .50s, then went down the road at 300 feet, spotted another convoy and blew one of its trucks sky-high with a direct hit by his two remaining rockets.

His rockets and bombs were all gone. But he still had plenty of machine gun ammunition left. South of Kunsan, hunting for targets of opportunity, his gunner blew up another truck with his .50s. At Kunsan, all 16

machine guns were let loose in a strafing pass down the village's main street.

His ammunition expended and his fuel running low, Dick headed back across the open sea toward home base in Japan. He was one hour and 40 minutes overdue, with dawn spreading like a fan across the Inland Sea, when he finally landed. Mechanics counted 23 separate bullet and flak holes in his plane.

The next night Dick was back over Korea, this time to bomb enemy troop concentrations out of their foxholes into the open. Once he had them upstairs, he finished them off with volatile napalm, burning to death.

"It's a cruel job," he says in describing this low level, close-support troop massacre. "That napalm is rough stuff. It's hard to kill a man that way. It's as cruel as it can be. But it's what the government pays me to do, I do it."

It was missions like these—B26s have flown more than 12,000 of them since the Korean war started—which caused North Korean General Nam II, during the cease fire negotiations, to tell UN observers that it was B-26 attacks which prevented an all-out Red victory.