

The Air Force Reserve Units on Active Service

Overcoming some initial shortfalls and recovering from temporary setbacks along the way, the ten wings mobilized and retained intact in 1950 and 1951 not only provided the Air Force an essential augmentation in a time of crisis but also performed their roles well in the first post-World War II test of the Air Force Reserve.

452d Light Bombardment Wing

Upon mobilization, the 452d Bombardment Wing ferried its B-26s and support aircraft to George AFB, California, and began accelerated aircrew training on August 10. Commanded by Brig. Gen. Luther W. Sweetser, Jr., the former Chief of the Reserve and National Guard Division on the Air Staff, the mobilized wing probably had more talent than any regular unit. As a civilian, its line chief, for example, held the same position at North American Aviation, and the maintenance and supply group commander was supply supervisor for Hughes Aircraft. As Douglas Aircraft Corporation employees, more than a hundred of the unit's mechanics were familiar with the B-26.

On October 15, 1950, the first of five echelons of the 452d left George AFB for Itazuke AB, Kyushu, Japan. As projected, now trained in night operations, the 731st Bombardment Squadron was detached to the 3d Bombardment Wing (Light) at Iwakuni AB, Honshu, Japan. The First B-26 of the 452d arrived at Itazuke on October 25, and two days later the wing flew its initial B-25 interdiction mission to Korea, exactly seventy-seven days after recall. On the last day of the month, the aircrews of the 452d learned they were in a real shooting war, as three Yakovlev fighters jumped one of their B-26s and a Mosquito controller near Yangsi. The B-26 crew shot down one of the Soviet-designed fighters, and P-51s arrived to destroy the other two.³³

Upon arrival in the theater, the 452d Bombardment Wing was the only B-26 unit conducting daylight operations. Until June 1951, it gave close support to ground units in Korea and engaged in interdiction of communist-held airfields, supply lines, and bridges, reaching peak operations in February 1951. The wing moved to Miho AB at Honshu, Japan, on December 10, and within a few days it suffered its first combat losses. Four B-26s and all their crews were lost, only one to hostile fire. One aircraft hit a cable on a power line during a low-level attack, a second flew into a mountain on takeoff in a snow squall, and a third dove out of the overcast into water. The fourth was knocked down by ground fire near Sunchon, Korea.

On April 23, 1951, the enemy began a spring offensive, and Fifth Air Force required an extensive effort of the 452d. For the next eight days the wing dispatched thirty to thirty-six sorties a day, getting maximum use from the approximately eighteen aircraft available each day. This required a refuel and rearm turnaround mission for each aircraft each day. The effort placed a heavy flying burden on all combat personnel as each crew was required to fly nine of ten days. As their effort began to exhaust the combat crews, pilots and observers serving in wing staff and support positions were pressed into service. This surge in operations also produced a sharp increase in maintenance activity as the aircraft sustained extensive battle damage. Three B-26s were lost behind enemy lines, and four others, only one of which was salvaged, sustained major battle damage.³⁵

Following the April surge, the 452d Bombardment Wing underwent a remarkable 45-day period in which its commander was relieved, it moved from Miho AB to Pusan East in Korea, and it completed a transition to night operations.³⁶ In April 1951, aircrew morale in the wing, which had been deteriorating, reached the point where four observers refused to fly. Their actions were the result of multiple reasons, but chief among them were misunderstandings regarding the policies for rotating combat aircrew members and separation of reservists in the Far East, difficulties related to operating the B-26 in the Korean hills, and a perception among aircrew members that the wing commander and other key personnel had no great interest in their day-to-day operational concerns.

The Far East Air Forces had recognized the requirement to establish a rotation policy immediately after hostilities began. However, extreme shortages of personnel had made it impossible to establish firm commitments for crew members. In the late summer of 1950, the command recommended a rotation policy based on a set number of missions, but the Air Staff rejected it, believing that such an Air Force policy would create difficulties for the Army whose rotation policy was based solely upon time served in the combat zone. Moreover, at that time Headquarters USAF simply could not assure the availability of sufficient additional personnel to the theater. Although desiring a more definitive combat crew rotation plan, the Air Force reluctantly included combat aircrews in the normal combat theater personnel rotation policy based on time in the theater.

Headquarters USAF and Far East Air Forces emphasized the need for flexibility in rotation. The number of combat crew returnees would have to be directly proportionate to and contingent upon the replacement flow to the Far East. Personnel officials of the 452d Bombardment Wing committed a grave error when they not only failed to explain the flow requirement but actually advised aircrews that return to the United States was based on a fixed number of missions. When the crews were later informed of the error, a morale problem was born. The situation became more critical when the crews were then required to fly beyond the published planning standard because of lack of replacement personnel.³⁷

Some of the dissatisfaction among the aircrews was also attributable to their misunderstanding of the different circumstances under which some went home earlier than others. Crew members recalled with the wing on August 10, 1950, had been ordered to serve for twenty-one months, whereas crew members who had been involuntarily recalled individually, from other Air Force Reserve wings, for example, to fill vacancies in the 452d incurred only a twelve-month obligation. Category R personnel, meanwhile, were obligated to serve for three years.

The morale problem among the 452d's shorthanded aircrew force also derived from the fact that the crews were being asked to fly difficult combat missions with no promise of relief in an airplane not suited for the task. The flying load could not be spread out because of severe shortages of both aircraft and experienced aircrews. In February 1951, General Partridge reported to a logistics official in the United States that "Our real shortage is B-26s Our shortages are considerable and unfortunately, our losses are heavy.

At the beginning of the Korean War, the Air Force had no aircraft capable of detecting and destroying mobile enemy night ground traffic in the interdiction mission and no aircraft to conduct night intruder missions against the enemy's air forces. The Douglas B-26, designed as an attack bomber and employed in World War II as the A-26 in both light and medium bomber roles, represented the only, if less than satisfactory, potential for both roles. Not until the spring of 1951, after the entry of the Chinese threatened to extend the war, did an Air Staff board select the British-built Canberra B-57 jet bomber to replace the B-26, but even then the Far East Air Forces had to make do until sufficient quantities of the new aircraft could be delivered.³⁹

The Far East Air Forces initially had no choice but to utilize the B-26s of the 3d Bombardment Wing, already in the theater, on both missions even though General Stratemyer recognized the planes lacked a real ability to operate in bad weather or survive determined air opposition. Neither aircraft nor aircrews were available to expand the B-26 force in the Far East Air Forces in 1950 and 1951. The Tactical Air Command was operating a combat crew training school for B-25 crews, but its output could not keep pace with the need in the Far East. On the other hand, once the 452d and its B-26s were

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The B-26s were effective in low-level attacks with machine guns, rockets, and bombs, but their crews found it difficult to maneuver at low altitudes in the small valleys of Korea, walled by hills rising from 500 to 5,000 feet. The moment of level flying needed to launch bombs and fire rockets made the light bombers vulnerable to ground fire, and combat losses soon forced them to bomb from medium altitudes.⁴¹

All of this operational difficulty recalled to the minds of the veteran pilots some of the Army Air Forces' early difficulties with the aircraft in World War II and the macabre ditty, "One a day into Tampa Bay!"⁴² As another consideration, there were no B-26 bases in the United States to function as domestic rotational bases to support the overseas units with aircraft and trained personnel and provide a respite for combat-weary aircrews.

Commenting on the general demands of the B-26 mission and its physiological and psychological effects, the Fifth Air Force surgeon implied that B-26 aircrew morale rested on the razor's edge at best:

The cramped quarters of the Douglas B-26 "Invader" aircraft being used, aggravated by the necessary carrying of parachutes, dinghies, and "Mae Wests" contribute to fatigue in flying personnel. Night missions and low-level strafing and bombing runs through mountains and unfamiliar terrain also contribute to nervous fatigue. It was felt that crews should have certain allotted areas in which to work consistently, so that they would become more familiar with the terrain, more confident, and thus more efficient.⁴³

Finally, observing that their wing commander and other key personnel neither flew combat missions nor participated in mission debriefings, aircrewmembers of the 452d concluded that these officials had no great interest in the airmen's day-to-day operational concerns.⁴⁴

By April 1951, then, seeds of a serious morale problem in the 452d Light Bombardment Wing had been sown. When the unit's leadership failed to explain to the aircrews why they had to fly more combat missions in an unpopular airplane, a handful of crew members refused to do so. Directed by General Stratmeyer to get to the bottom of the problem, Lt. Gen. Earle E. Partridge, Fifth Air Force Commander, conducted a special investigation and an operational evaluation of the 452d. On May 10, on the basis of several indications that the morale of General Sweetser's unit had completely dissolved, General Partridge relieved him.⁴⁵

Replacing General Sweetser on May 12, 1951, Col. Brooks A. Lawhon, formerly commander of the 35th Fighter-Interceptor Wing, swiftly stabilized the staggering unit. He entered in combat training many rated officers who had not been flying, getting them ready to take their places as combat crews. He also insisted on lead crew integrity and lead crew training, which soon proved its value. He reinstated military courtesy which, as it normally does, had accompanied morale out the door. He replaced key personnel as quickly as he could. As for the crew rotation problem which had started it all, Maj. Gen. Edward J. Timberlake authorized him to ground the flyers when they got up to seventy-five missions, even at the risk of decreasing the number of combat sorties.⁴⁶

On June 18, 1951, the 452d completed converting to night operations. From the beginning of operations in Korea, the U.S. Air Force 3d Bombardment Wing and the Marine squadron VMF-513 had provided the only night intruder capability. Needing still more night effort, General Stratmeyer readily accepted General Vandenberg's advice to convert the 452d to night operations as well. Following its changeover, the wing flew more than 9,000 night combat missions.⁴⁷

On May 10, 1952, having served its prescribed twenty-one months, the 452d Bombardment Wing was relieved from active military service, inactivated at Pusan East, and returned to the control of the Continental Air Command as an Air Force Reserve organization.⁴⁸

731st Bombardment Squadron

The 452d's separated 731st Squadron completed its move from George AFB to Iwakuni AB, Honshu, on November 20, 1950. Four crews which had left George AFB as an advance echelon on September 15 participated in combat during October, and the unit put up its first complete squadron mission on November 24, 1950.⁴⁹

The 731st filled a real need for General Stratemeyer. From the beginning of operations in Korea, the Air Force had been unable to attack moving targets at night. On September 6, General Vandenberg suggested that General Stratemeyer convert the 3d Group completely to night attack and assign the 731st Squadron, especially trained for low-level operations, to the under-strength 3d Group. General Stratemeyer quickly implemented this solution to his night-attack problem. During its seven-month Korean tour, the 731st flew more than 9,000 hours of combat on 2,000 combat sorties. Its missions included high-, medium-, and low-level visual and radar bombing, front-line close support, flare drops, and armed reconnaissance—all under conditions of darkness. When the 3d Bombardment Wing was brought up to full strength by the acquisition of the 90th Bombardment Squadron as a third active force unit, the 731st was inactivated at Iwakuni June 25, 1951.⁵⁰