

# KOREA'S EARLY DAYS: CARRIER AIR POWER'S PROVING GROUND

By Marc D. Bernstein



When North Korea's Kim Il Sung launched a surprise attack against South Korea on 25 June 1950, the U.S. military establishment in the Far East languished in a state of neglect. The Seventh Fleet, only a shadow of its former size and power, was scattered throughout the western Pacific and in no position to provide an immediate response to an act of ruthless, unprovoked aggression. But little more than a week after the war began, aircraft carriers operating in the Yellow Sea were able to launch strikes against strategic targets in the vicinity of North Korea's capital, Pyongyang. Between 3 July and 15 September 1950, the few U.S. carriers available, assisted by a British carrier, constituted a vital element in the United Nations' struggle to retain a foothold on the Korean peninsula.

At the outbreak of hostilities, the Seventh Fleet comprised a single aircraft carrier, *Valley Forge* (CV 45); one heavy cruiser, *Rochester* (CA 124); eight destroyers; and a handful of submarines and support ships. The presence of *Valley Forge* was fortuitous, since in the period prior to January 1950 no carriers had operated west of Pearl Harbor. Her embarked Carrier Air Group (CVG) 5 had engaged in extensive ground-support training with Marine units prior to its overseas rotation. The air group's complement of 86 planes included 2 F9F-2 *Panther* jet fighter squadrons of 15 aircraft each; 2 14-plane squadrons of Vought F4U-4B *Corsairs*; a 14-plane attack squadron with Douglas AD-4 *Skyraiders*; and 14 additional aircraft configured for photographic, radar and night missions.



An F4U-4 *Corsair* prepares to launch from *Phillipine Sea* on an August 1950 strike mission in Korea.

Following President Harry S. Truman's decision to support South Korea, operational control of the Seventh Fleet, under the command of Vice Admiral Arthur D. Struble, was moved from Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet to Commander Naval Forces, Far East (COMNAVFE), Vice Admiral C. Turner Joy. NAVFE was under the operational control of General Douglas MacArthur as the naval component of his Far East command.

The Seventh Fleet's striking force, Task Force (TF) 77, under orders to report to NAVFE at Sasebo, Japan, sortied from Subic Bay, R.P., and Hong Kong, China, on the morning of 27 June. Carrying out a presidential directive, *Valley Forge* engaged in a show of force in the Formosa Strait, putting 29 planes into the air over Taipei. As the task force moved toward Japan, its immediate destination was changed from Sasebo to Buckner Bay, Okinawa, a better location from which to parry any Communist Chinese attempt to seize Formosa.

VAdm. Joy's resources were further augmented by a significant British force. On 28 June, the Royal Navy's Commander in Chief, Far East Station, Admiral Sir Patrick Brind, notified Joy of his ships' availability for operations off Korea. The Royal Navy's Task Group 96.8 was present in Japanese waters, with the light carrier *Triumph*, the cruisers *Belfast* and *Jamaica*, two destroyers and three frigates. Other ships were made available by the navies of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and these, as well as several additional Royal Navy ships, were assigned to blockade duty off the Korean coast.

Orders allowing Gen. MacArthur to employ TF 77 north of the 38th parallel were received from Washington. In a consultation in Tokyo on 29 June among MacArthur, Joy, Struble and the Commanding General of the Far East Air Forces, Lieutenant General George Stratemeyer, it was determined that the carriers would be used against targets in the vicinity of Pyongyang. On the evening of 1 July, the combined U.S./British task force—2 carriers, 2 cruisers and 10

destroyers—left Buckner Bay for the west coast of Korea.

Though only a single day of strikes initially had been planned, Joy authorized Struble, en route to the Yellow Sea, to conduct a multi-day operation. At 0545 on 3 July, *Triumph* commenced the carrier offensive by dispatching 12 *Fireflies* and 9 *Seafires* to attack installations at Haeju airfield, 60 miles south of Pyongyang. Fifteen minutes later, *Valley Forge* launched an attack group of 16 *Corsairs* from Fighting Squadron (VF) 54 and 12 *Skyraiders* from Attack Squadron (VA) 55, targeting the airfield complex at Pyongyang 150 miles from the carriers. The *Corsairs*, like the British *Seafires*, were rocket-loaded, while the *Skyraiders* each carried two 500-pound and six 100-pound bombs.

Following the attack group, eight *Panthers* launched from *Valley Forge*, led by COMCVG-5 Commander Harvey P. Lanham. In the first jet combat mission ever flown by the U.S. Navy, the *Panthers* overtook the slower piston-driven aircraft and strafed the field at Pyongyang; on the first pass, Cdr. Lanham destroyed a transport aircraft on the ground while Lieutenant (jg) Leonard Plog and Ensign Eldon W. Brown each downed an airborne Yak-9P fighter. On the second jet pass, two more aircraft were destroyed on the ground. Meanwhile, the attack group of *Corsairs* and *Skyraiders* appeared and successfully attacked hangars, fuel storage areas and runways. North Korean anti-aircraft fire was light; the U.S. planes did not suffer any hits and the British group absorbed only minor flak damage.

On the afternoon of the 3rd, the Pyongyang marshaling yards and bridges across the Taedong River were attacked, with heavy damage to tracks, locomotives and rolling stock. The next day, the bridges were attacked again and pilots from VA-55 succeeded in dropping a bridge span. The planes also attacked gunboats in the river, which returned fire. Four ADs were hit, and one of them, with hydraulics out and flaps inoperable, made a





British forces such as HMS *Triumph*, below, augmented the initial U.S. carrier force off Korea. Left, senior U.S. and British naval officers confer aboard *Rochester*, flagship of the U.S. Seventh Fleet, during the early days of the war. Opposite, *Valley Forge*, shown transporting aircraft from Hawaii to California in May 1949, was the first carrier on the scene following the outbreak of hostilities in Korea.



landing approach to *Valley Forge*, bounced over the barriers and careened into aircraft parked forward on the deck. The ensuing fire destroyed the *Skyraider* and two *Corsairs* while damaging three additional ADs, one F4U and two F9Fs. This unfortunate consequence of straight-deck carrier operations detracted from an otherwise highly successful first operation against North Korean targets. A total of 11 enemy aircraft were destroyed in the two-day raid.

TF 77 retired to Buckner Bay after the Pyongyang operation and did not see action again until 18 July, when it covered the landing of the U.S. Army's 1st Cavalry Division at Pohang on Korea's southeast coast, and proceeded to attack new targets in North Korea. On the morning of the 18th, seven *Panthers* from VF-51 undertook an armed reconnaissance of Korea's east coast and observed that the Wonsan oil refinery remained in full operation. Beginning at 1700, *Valley Forge* launched 10 *Corsairs* from VF-53 and 11 *Skyraiders* from VA-55, all of which headed north. The F4Us were loaded with eight high-velocity aerial rockets, while the ADs each carried two rockets, one 1,000-pound and one 500-pound bomb. The attack destroyed 12,000 tons of refined products and heavily damaged the complex. A day later, smoke from the burning refinery still reached 5,000 feet into the air.

After weathering Typhoon Grace and moving through Tsushima Strait to the peninsula's west side, *Valley Forge* launched aircraft at dawn on the 22nd, with CVG-5 performing the dual tasks of long-range interdiction and close support of ground troops. The support mission was the first attempted by the Navy in Korea and proved an unfortunate forecast of what was to come in the following months. The *Corsairs* and *Skyraiders* allocated to close support were unable to contact Fifth Air Force controllers on the assigned radio frequencies and opted to expend their ordnance in attacks on secondary targets in the vicinity of Seoul. A subsequent attempt at close support met the same fate.

By the last week of July, war on the Korean peninsula had been raging for a full month and the North Korean Peoples' Army (NKPA) continued its advance. Attempts were being made to reconstitute the South Korean forces while U.S. ground units were fed piecemeal into the battle. Effective air support was badly needed, but between July and September, Fifth Air Force tactical air direction functioned poorly. Several factors were responsible for this situation, not the least of which were the differences between the Navy/Marine Corps close support system and the Air Force/Army system. The naval system was designed to fulfill the needs of Marine units involved in opposed amphibious landings. Because the Marines were light in artillery, close air support had to fill that role, and naval pilots were trained to execute air strikes well within 1,000 yards of ground units' positions. The system was predicated on forward, ground-based tactical air control parties (TACPs), one of which was provided for every Marine battalion. This approach proved its merit when later given a chance to be employed in Korea.

The Air Force/Army approach was more bureaucratically rigid and less well-tailored to the kind of very close support required in Korea. Support was to be coordinated through an Air Force/Army Joint Operations Center (JOC), designed to operate alongside an Air Force Tactical Air Control Center (TACC). Provision was made for Air Force TACPs to function with the front-line troops, but only four sets of these forward controllers were allotted per Army division; in the early days of the war, Republic of Korea (ROK) divisions were fortunate

to have even a single team of ground-based forward controllers. Due to the fluid nature of the fighting, it was quickly determined that airborne forward controllers were required, and unarmed USAF T-6 *Texans* were utilized for that purpose.

But tactical communications remained an unsolved problem. Air Force VHF radios usually had only four, or sometimes eight, channels, which were quickly overloaded during emergencies. In addition, the Air Force/Army procedure for requesting an air strike was complex. A forward controller would have to radio the headquarters of the Army division where he was attached, which would pass the strike request to corps headquarters, which in turn would relay it to the JOC. The TACC would then order an airfield to supply the appropriate aircraft. At best, this time-consuming process could put ordnance on target roughly three-quarters of an hour after an initial request for air support. Unlike the Marines, the Air Force did not constantly orbit aircraft over the battlefield, as that was considered unduly expensive.

The early days of the conflict highlighted the weakness of the Air Force/Army doctrine. The Far East Air Forces initially possessed far more jet fighter aircraft built for aerial combat than the desperately needed piston-driven fighter-bombers that could operate from rough airfields in Korea itself. Consequently, the Air Force had to resort to employing F-80 *Shooting Stars*, based in Japan, as a significant component of its ground support operation. These jets could carry only a small bomb load and, due to the distance to Korea, invariably arrived over their targets with only a few minutes of fuel remaining. On numerous occasions during the early fighting, Air Force controllers kept heavily armed Navy aircraft in a holding pattern over targets while they administered to the priorities of late-arriving F-80s.

The inefficient handling of aircraft was most evident to the infantryman on the ground. As one hard-pressed soldier put it, "We want no more of these jet jockeys. They don't have enough fuel to stay in our areas long enough to find out where we are having trouble. And they don't have enough firepower to do any real good. Give us those Marines."

"Those Marines" were two squadrons of *Corsairs* from Marine Air Group (MAG) 33 that began operations

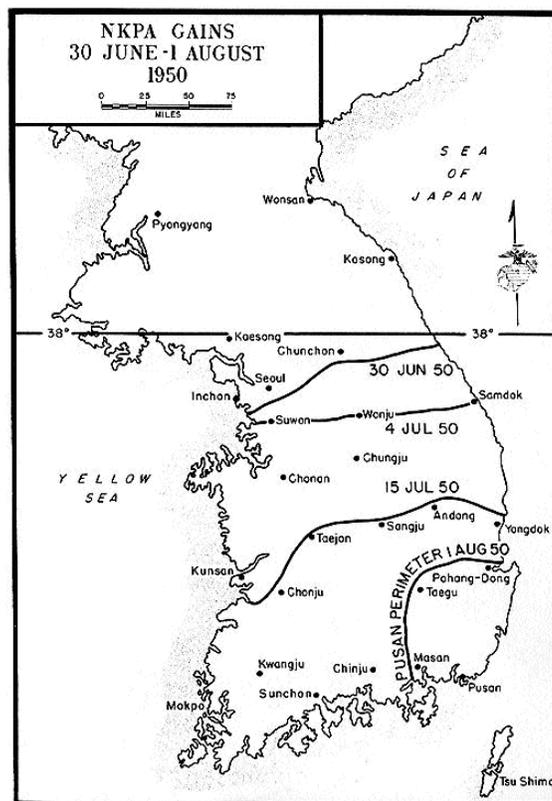
against targets in Korea the first week of August. The Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 214 *Blacksheep* and the VMF-323 *Death Rattlers* received orders to Korea in early July and embarked aboard the escort carrier *Badoeng Strait* (CVE 116), which left San Diego, Calif., on 14 July bound for Kobe, Japan. Another escort carrier, *Sicily* (CVE 118), commanded by Captain John S. Thach of WW II fame, was ordered to report to Yokosuka, Japan, after delivering antisubmarine aircraft to Guam. These two ships constituted Carrier Division 15, under the command of Rear Admiral Richard W. Ruble.

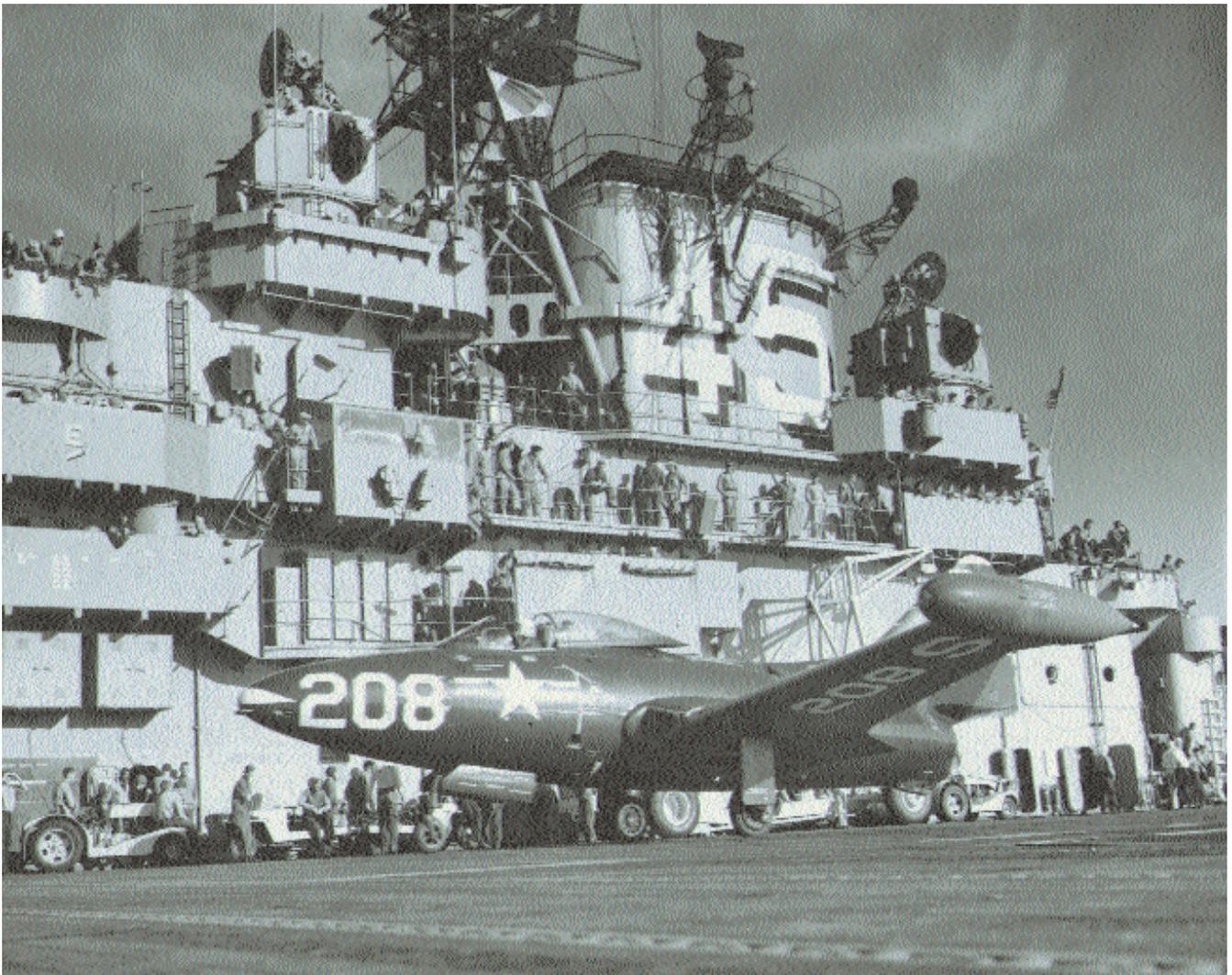
*Sicily* and *Badoeng Strait* reached their destinations in Japan on 27 and 31 July, respectively. After the Marine aircraft aboard *Badoeng Strait* were removed to Itami Air Force Base near Osaka, it was decided to employ the *Corsairs* from the escort carriers in Korean operations. On the afternoon of 3 August, VMF-214's *Corsairs* landed aboard *Sicily*. They were armed and refueled, then catapulted off to provide support for ground units on the Pusan perimeter. The first Marine air strike of the war was a rocket and bomb attack against Chinju. As VMF-323's pilots received several days' refresher training at Itami, *Sicily* sailed westward into the Yellow Sea, positioning for air strikes against targets in southwestern Korea. On 5 August, the *Death Rattlers* finally flew back aboard *Badoeng Strait*, which launched close support and combat air patrol sorties while operating in the Strait

of Korea on 6 August.

*Sicily* and *Badoeng Strait*, as well as their escorts, were not under Seventh Fleet command. Thus, two separate U.S. carrier forces, plus the British carrier, were operating off the Korean coast by early August. *Valley Forge*, which had remained the sole fast carrier in operation through July, was augmented by the arrival of *Philippine Sea* (CV 47) at Okinawa on 1 August. Another *Essex*-class carrier, *Boxer* (CV 21), had arrived at Yokosuka on 23 July, bearing 145 badly needed P-51 *Mustang* fighters for the Air Force. *Boxer* made the trip from San Diego in the record time of 8 days and 16 hours; she was not, however, immediately committed to combat, as she was earmarked to provide support for the coming Inchon invasion.

TF 77 resumed operations on 25 July, having received emergency orders from COMNAVFLE to assist the Eighth





An air wing F9F-3 Panther prepares to launch from Valley Forge (CV 45) on 19 July 1950.

Army in blunting the North Korean drive in the southwestern part of the peninsula. The results again proved disappointing due to faulty intelligence and inadequate communications and control. In an effort to forge a solution to some of these chronic coordination problems, CVG-5 pilots flew to Taegu to confer with Air Force and Army officers at the JOC. This face-to-face meeting marked a departure in the Korean command arrangements, as previous interservice coordination had been undertaken at a much higher level.

The new Navy/JOC coordination bore fruit on the 26th, as *Skyraiders* and *Corsairs* raked the area between Taejon and Yongdong, with a division of ADs achieving destruction of two-thirds of the latter town. TF 77 broke off combat operations for refueling after the raids of the 26th but resumed attacks on the 28th, operating off the southwestern tip of the peninsula. A direct communications link was finally established between TF 77 and the JOC, and on the 29th the JOC allocated a sector of the front and airborne controllers specifically for the task force's use. After launching support and armed reconnais-

sance missions on the 29th, TF 77 withdrew to Okinawa, detaching *Triumph* for duty with the blockade force.

The first week of August saw an important push by the NKPA all along the front, with enemy units reaching the Nakdong River line. Taegu was under pressure, and the JOC was moved back to Pusan while the Fifth Air Force flew its planes out to Japan.

In July, MacArthur had specified that the Far Eastern Air Forces (FEAF) would have "coordination control" of all aircraft in theater, except those officially allocated to naval missions by COMNAVFE. On 3 August, FEAF attempted to clarify aviation responsibilities still further at a conference held in Tokyo, which featured four Air Force generals but no admirals. A conference memorandum specified that carrier air power would be employed primarily in close support and secondarily for interdiction missions below the 38th parallel; bottom priority was given to strikes north of the parallel. The actual coordination authority for attacks south of the parallel lay with the Fifth Air Force. On the surface, those priorities appeared sensible, but they did not reflect the command and control realities of August 1950,



A Marine pilot mans his F4U-5P *Corsair* aboard *Valley Forge* (CV 45), circa July 1950. Note the camera hatch low on the fuselage behind the cockpit.

for the application of increased naval air resources would swamp Air Force capabilities during the month.

As the frustrations of naval commanders mounted, Commander Seventh Fleet Struble and COMNAVFE Joy increasingly became advocates of carrier-based long-range interdiction missions. The chaotic state of close air support coordination in early to mid August led these commanders away from favoring the use of Navy aircraft on close support sorties.

TF 77 reentered the fray on 5 August, as *Philippine Sea* pilots hit the rail and highway bridges at Iri, east of Kunsan, and *Valley Forge* aircraft flew in close support of troops along the perimeter. In light of the continuing problems evidenced in these operations, a number of Navy airborne controllers were subsequently employed along the front, achieving improved control of attacking planes. Similar strikes were conducted on the ensuing two days. On the 8th, Gen. MacArthur directed that until further notice, the entire carrier air effort was to be utilized on close support and close interdiction missions, thereby scuttling VAdm. Joy's efforts to employ TF 77's aircraft against rail lines in northeastern Korea. Much of

the interdiction effort in the following several days was directed against targets in the Seoul-Inchon area, including the ever-important bridges across the Han River. Close support sorties flown on behalf of Army and ROK units on the perimeter continued to be wasted, however, as the radio channels were clogged. By the 13th, MacArthur had relaxed his requirements for the close support mission and TF 77 attacked targets north of the parallel, with particular attention paid to rail lines and other transportation targets.

Meanwhile, the Marine squadrons were engaged in supporting a 1st Provisional Marine Brigade drive on the western end of the perimeter, in which the *Corsairs* were used with devastating effect against enemy troop concentrations. The brigade was subsequently redeployed northward to counter a mounting enemy effort on the Naktong front west of Yongsan, and it succeeded in driving the NKPA back across the Naktong River in heavy fighting during the third week of August. The quality of the aerial effort provided by MAG-33 was summed up by Brigadier General Edward A. Craig, the brigade's commander: "Close air support furnished by Marine airmen was a marvel to everybody concerned, including the Marines. We had never seen anything like it even in our practice."

On the 16th, TF 77 returned to action, with the bulk of its effort expended in the Pohang area, which was also under heavy enemy pressure. The following day, *Valley Forge* and *Philippine Sea* launched strikes against rail lines and inshore shipping along the east coast of North Korea.

On the 19th, aircraft from *Philippine Sea* struck troop concentrations and supply dumps west of the Naktong River, disrupting the retreat of enemy forces. *Philippine Sea* also launched a major strike against the railroad bridge at Seoul, sending nine *Skyraiders* and nine *Corsairs* against the target and dropping a span. On the 20th, attack sorties were flown against targets in northwestern Korea before the fast carriers withdrew to Sasebo.

The final weeks of August marked a period of relative quiet in Korea, as the NKPA licked its wounds in preparation for a renewed effort to wipe out the United Nations' foothold, and the buildup for the amphibious invasion of Inchon proceeded. On the 20th, MacArthur informed the Eighth Army that TF 77's fast carriers would not be employed individually as a backstop for close support operations along the perimeter. He had been gradually won over by the contentions of VAdms. Joy and Struble that the fast carriers were best employed on long-range interdiction missions against North Korean

targets. By the last week of August, TF 77 had effectively freed itself from Fifth Air Force and Eighth Army demands so that its aerial firepower could be principally utilized along the perimeter. On the 25th, VAdm. Struble officially took over command of the Inchon operation, leaving TF 77 in the hands of Rear Admiral Edward C. Ewen, Commander Carrier Division 1, whose flag was in *Philippine Sea*.

The temporary lull in the fighting ended abruptly on the night of 31 August, when the NKPA launched an all-out attack along the entire perimeter, concentrating on the Naktong River front. The next morning the JOC made an emergency request that TF 77 employ its aircraft in support of the Eighth Army. *Valley Forge* and *Philippine Sea* aircraft had already struck transportation targets in and north of Seoul earlier that morning, but after receiving the JOC's message RAdm. Ewen turned his force southward and launched his first strike against troop concentrations in the early afternoon of 1 September. The Marine squadrons were temporarily ashore in Japan at this time and emergency orders were issued to employ them from Ashiya on missions over Korea until they could redeploy aboard *Sicily* and *Badoeng Strait*.

On 2 September, all available effort was utilized in trying to blunt the enemy advance on the Naktong front. A special attempt at coordination with the JOC made by *Philippine Sea*'s air group commander, Cdr. Ralph Weymouth, paid off that day when Navy controllers were again provided a specified sector of the front; the result was that North Korean troop concentrations took a severe beating. In scrambling to meet yet another emergency request from the Eighth Army on the 3rd, *Valley Forge* and *Philippine Sea* launched heavy attacks against NKPA concentrations near Masan, Kwangju and Samchonpo, helping turn the tide in bitter fighting.

After launching strikes in

**Aircraft from *Valley Forge* (CV 45) attacked the Wonsan oil refinery in North Korea on 18 July 1950, destroying tons of refined petroleum and much of the plant. Smoke from the attack could be seen 60 miles out to sea.**

the vicinity of Pyongyang on the 4th, TF 77 withdrew to Sasebo the next day, while *Triumph* and *Badoeng Strait* continued to operate off the west coast of Korea, pounding targets between Kunsan and the 38th parallel. On the 10th, the Marine squadrons dumped 95,000 pounds of napalm on Wolmi Do near Inchon before departing for replenishment. Subsequently, the main carrier air effort would be made directly in support of the upcoming Inchon invasion.

In the first few months of the Korean conflict, Navy and Marine Corps aviators proved the effectiveness of carrier air power in combat. Compelling testimony of their efficacy was given by a North Korean prisoner of war interrogated in August 1950. When asked which U.S. weapon he feared the most, he replied, "the blue airplanes." ✈

Mr. Bernstein is a freelance writer and independent scholar specializing in 20th century U.S. naval and military history. His book, *Hurricane at Biak: MacArthur Against the Japanese, May–August 1944*, is due for release in the summer of 2000.

