

# MINUTEMEN OF NAVAL AVIATION: THE NAVAL AIR RESERVE IN KOREA

By Hill Goodspeed

The citizen soldier holds a distinguished place in the annals of military history—called to arms when needed by the nation, then returning to civilian life when the job was done. The same can be said for those donning Navy blue. One need only look at the fact that the bulk of Naval Aviators during WW I served as part of the Naval Reserve Flying Corps and that 83 percent of those on active duty in the fleet at the end of WW II were reservists. Yet, it was during the Korean War that the reserves, particularly those wearing wings of gold, had their finest hour and made lasting history.

In April 1950, Rear Admiral Austin K. Doyle, Chief of Naval Air Reserve Training, penned a letter to Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Forrest P. Sherman, writing, “There is no question but that the Fleet is immeasurably strengthened right now by having our trained reservists behind it, but I feel that there are too many senior officers who have not witnessed their operations.” That would soon change when North Korean tanks rumbled across the 38th parallel into the Republic of Korea on 25 June 1950 during an attack that took the world by surprise.

Naval Aviation, having been locked in a bitter interservice debate over its viability in the

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**A formation of F4U-4 Corsairs of VF-884 flies over Boxer (CV 21) as she steams in the waters off Korea. These aircraft formed part of the first all-reserve carrier air group to operate over the embattled peninsula.**







LT JG R E WILSON

OXYGEN REFILL

ATTACH LEVEL BOLT HERE

B165

SLIDING HOSE LOCK

TIRE PRESSURE 175 LBS

RUDDER CABLE DISCONNECT  
USE TOOL GT-447

A.C. EXT. P.W.

EMERGENCY S-

HYD. SYSTEM A2

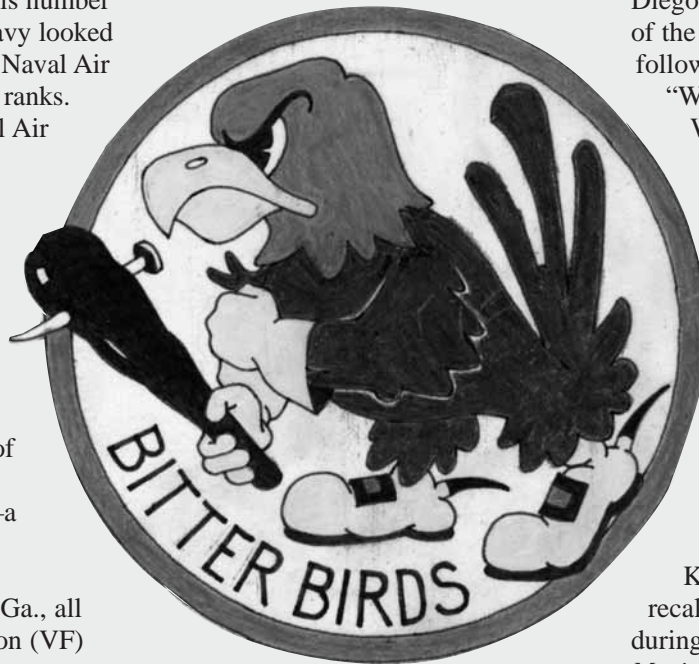
CANOPY L.O.A.F.

nuclear age and subject to reduced defense expenditures under the Truman administration, was only a shell of the force that roamed the Pacific with impunity during WW II. Only 15 carriers of all classes remained in commission, and on the day of the North Korean assault, *Valley Forge* (CV 45) was the sole carrier operating in the western Pacific. From a personnel standpoint, the training command had turned out only 688 pilots the previous year, and though during 1950 this number would nearly triple, the Navy looked almost immediately to the Naval Air Reserve to fill its depleted ranks.

In June 1950, the Naval Air Reserve numbered some 1,700 aircraft, including WW II types, a few first-generation jets and an assortment of utility aircraft. Scattered at air stations from Miami, Fla., to Spokane, Wash., they were manned and maintained by thousands of reservists, most of whom were veterans of WW II—a talent pool that proved a godsend to the Navy. For example, at NAS Atlanta, Ga., all but one of Fighter Squadron (VF) 671's pilots were combat veterans, including Robert Blyth who had been an ace flying F6F *Hellcats* from *Princeton* (CVL 23). Commander Cook Cleland, skipper of VF-653 based at NAS Akron, Ohio, had flown an SBD *Dauntless* in the famed return-after-dark mission during the Battle of the Philippine Sea in June 1944.

Some men went to war enthusiastically. Even before the first activation calls went out, the Navy and Marine Corps had more than 3,400 requests from reservists for return to active duty. However, when the sudden attack by the North Koreans prompted a quick call to arms, men fully ensconced in civilian lives were taken by surprise

when required to return to active military service. *Naval Aviation News* reported a tale of one man receiving the call in the middle of his wife's birthday party, and another being flagged down on the highway during his vacation! Two reservists held jobs about which every American boy dreamed, playing baseball on summer afternoons in Fenway Park, Mass., and Yankee Stadium, N.Y. Red Sox slugger Ted Williams and Yankees



second baseman Jerry Coleman, both Marine pilots during WW II, ended up flying missions over Korea, Williams in an F9F *Panther* and Coleman in the cockpit of an AU-1 *Corsair*. Between them, the American Leaguers logged 99 combat missions. But not all were happy with their new lot in life. For example, the men of VF-884 based at NAS Olathe, Kans., adopted an insignia featuring an irritated-looking jayhawk wielding a bat. The squadron nickname "Bitter Birds" was a humorous reference to their feelings about being recalled.

Throughout the summer and fall of 1950, as United Nations forces pushed northward toward the Yalu

River following the successful landings at Inchon, reserve squadrons honed their skills for war. The units logged traps on board the carriers *Wright* (CVL 49) and *Cabot* (CVL 28), participated in gunnery and rocket training in the desert around NAAS El Centro, Calif., and sent ground support personnel through technical training schools. The transformation of the Naval Air Reserve from peacetime to wartime was readily apparent at NAS San Diego, Calif. A sign across the top of the hangar assigned to VF-871 following their recall read:

"WELCOME WEEKEND WARRIORS," though someone had crossed through the word "WEEKEND."

Patrol squadrons (VP) were among the first from the Naval Air Reserve to deploy overseas. Recalled to active duty on 20 July 1950, VP-892 reported to NAS San Diego the following month, and on 18 December logged its first mission, the first by a reserve squadron during the Korean War. Eventually, seven recalled patrol squadrons served during the conflict, flying PBM-5 *Mariners*, PB4Y/P4Y-2 *Privateers* and P2V-2/3 *Neptunes*. The crews flew a variety of missions, including long-range antisubmarine warfare and reconnaissance flights in the Sea of Japan and along the coasts of China and North Korea. This could get dangerous, as evidenced by the experiences of a VP-731 crew operating over the Yellow Sea off the west coast of Korea. On 31 July 1952, two Chinese MiG-15 jets attacked a squadron PBM-5S2, killing two crewmen and wounding two others. The plane's pilot, Lieutenant E. E. Bartlett, Jr., descended to low altitude, weaving in an effort to avoid further attack, and limped to Paengyong, South Korea, where he made an emergency

**Opposite, the tips of five-inch high-velocity aircraft rockets frame an F9F *Panther* pilot of VF-837 as flight deck crewmen prepare his aircraft for launch from *Antietam* (CV 36). Note his adorned flight helmet.**

landing. Two squadrons, VPs 772 and 871, harkened back to the days of the famous "Black Cat" patrol squadrons by operating at night over Korea, dropping flares to support night interdiction and close air support missions by Marine Corps aircraft.

While patrol aircraft were the first elements of the Naval Air Reserve to see service in Korea, the weekend warriors flying fighter and attack aircraft made a sizable contribution as well. Of the 24 deployments by fleet carriers during the Korean War, nearly one-third of them had at least one reserve squadron operating from the flight deck.

The first carrier-based squadrons deployed to Korean waters in spring 1951, and by November of that year *Naval Aviation News* reported that "in a typical month, every third American plane that flew over Korea on a combat mission was piloted by an activated Navy or Marine air reservist." In March 1951, *Boxer* (CV 21) deployed with an all-reserve air group (except for composite and helicopter detachments). Of the 153

officers in Carrier Air Group 101, 133 were reservists, while 73 percent of the enlisted personnel were reserves. During the deployment, which lasted until 24 October 1951, air group pilots logged 23,627.4 flight hours, 8,567 traps and 8,833 combat sorties. Thirty aircraft were lost, including 18 to enemy fire. On the flight suits of most of the pilots, "USNR" followed their names.

The pattern of missions for the recalled reservists, like all Naval Aviators during the Korean War, involved interdiction missions against supply routes, marshaling yards, manufacturing centers and power complexes in addition to supporting troops on the ground with close air support. However, one reserve squadron engaged in an unexpected departure from this routine on 18 November 1952, when four F9F-5 *Panthers* of VF-781 off *Oriskany* (CVA 34) tangled with seven Soviet MiG-15s while the ship operated about 100 miles from the Vladivostok naval base. In a furious 15-minute dogfight, *Pacemaker* pilots shot down two enemy jets.

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Opposite, Ltjgs. Joe P. Massey, left, and Paul M. Boyer, pilots in VF-791 on board *Boxer* (CV 21), don their flight gear prior to launching on a mission over Korea. Above, aircraft of Carrier Air Group 15 start their engines on the flight deck of *Antietam* (CV 36) as the ship prepares to launch aircraft. All of the fighter and attack squadrons on board the carrier during her September 1951–May 1952 cruise were recalled from the Naval Air Reserve. Left, the air group commander and his squadron skippers plot the next day's strikes on board *Valley Forge* (CV 45) during the ship's combat cruise to Korea. The officer seated at right is VF-653 Commanding Officer LCdr. Cook Cleland, a Navy Cross recipient during WW II and recipient of the Thompson Trophy as an air racing pilot in 1947 and 1949.



Above, the VF-781 *Pacemakers* pose next to one of their squadron F6F *Hellcats* at NAS Los Alamitos, Calif. The squadron had 100 percent of its personnel volunteer for service in Korea. Right, the island of *Antietam* (CVA 36) serves as a backdrop for the launch of an F4U-4 *Corsair* of VF-713. *Antietam* logged one combat cruise to Korea and later became the Navy's first angled-deck carrier.

With the signing of an armistice on 27 July 1953, the Korean War ended. It was to a great extent a reservist's war in both men and material, as civilians returned to uniform to fly from carriers that were themselves pulled from mothballs. Without both of them, Naval Aviation would not have been as effective a fighting force as it was in the skies over the Korean peninsula.

In 1953, when novelist James Michener's classic novel *The Bridges at Toko-ri* appeared on bookshelves, Americans were introduced to the central character, Harry Brubaker. Bitter about fighting in a war thousands of miles from his family, Brubaker dies at the hands of enemy soldiers after being shot down over Korea. Upon hearing the news of the pilot's death, the character of Admiral George Tarrant utters the immortal line, "Where did we get such men?" It is fitting that Brubaker, a 29-year-old lawyer from Denver, Colo., was a reservist like so many of the real-life heroes who answered the call in Korea. ✈

Mr. Goodspeed is a historian in the National Museum of Naval Aviation, Pensacola, Fla.

