

Night-Fighters Rule Korean Skies After Dark

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The U.S. Navy's only ace in Korea recounts his night-fighter experience during the conflict.

During the early part of the Korean War, I served on the staff of Commander Cruiser Division 3 based on *Helena* (CA 75). This was good “blackshoe” indoctrination but was very frustrating for a trained and motivated Navy fighter pilot. What I really wanted was to be in the air, carrying the war to the “Reds” and, believe me, the cockpit of a naval fighter is the best place from which to realize that ambition.

It was therefore with great pleasure that in 1951 I received orders to Composite Squadron (VC) 3. The unit of 175 pilots was charged with crewing, training, equipping and supporting night-fighter teams for each *Essex*-class carrier of the Seventh Fleet engaged in Korean combat. Normal complements for such teams were 5 F4U-5N Corsair propeller-driven, night combat-equipped aircraft; 5 specially trained pilots; about 38 maintenance, ordnance and electronics personnel; and the necessary supplies and spare parts.

Princeton (CV 37) was making her second nine-month deployment of the war. She was known as a “happy ship,” meaning that she had a reputation of outstanding concern for the comfort and support of her embarked air group. She didn’t let us down.

As night-fighters, we were a special unit on board and thus had special support problems. Our F4U-5Ns were considerably heavier and more complex than the F4U-4s flown by our support squadron, Fighter Squadron 152. Even the tailhook was different and required unique parts. Early in the deployment three of our five aircraft were “down” until the ship’s ingenious supply officer personally manufactured reliable replacements out of the ship’s boilerplate!

In October 1952 our job was interdiction of enemy road and rail links resupplying their ground troops. Search and destroy was the name of the mission as we



Lt. Guy Bordelon climbs into the cockpit of his F4U-5N night-fighter in Korea on 19 July 1953. Left, the “Team Dog” patch adorned his aircraft. Below, one of the locomotives destroyed during interdiction efforts made by Bordelon and his fellow pilots near Hamhung, North Korea in 1953.



flew at low altitudes in a nightly effort to eliminate anything that moved. It was dangerous because we were forced to fly up steep mountain passes at ground-scraping altitude to reach the targets on twisting and turning mountain roads and rail lines. The enemy did everything possible to stop our attacks by positioning thousands of antiaircraft guns along every route and equipping each truck convoy with machine guns and cannons. Our tactic to prevent detection was to start the attacks at around 7,000 feet and make power-off dives for silent approach. When in range we opened fire with 20mm cannon, targeting the lead trucks to stop convoy movement, then making a second attack against the rear trucks to prevent escape. It was effective.

To prohibit our use of flares for target illumination, the enemy forces set many smoke fires on clear nights,

and the resultant haze combined with the flares created a milk-bowl effect that gave the attacking pilots instant vertigo. The smoke was a common defense tactic used to protect rail tunnel entrances and coastal rail lines. Training in the proper use of the eyes at night was very important to our missions. "Pull away from bright explosions" became our dictum. Night blindness is difficult to get rid of in a hurry and can be deadly.

Among other measures adopted by the enemy to protect their rolling stock was the use of fires inside railroad tunnels to make us think that trains were hiding there. The idea was that we would use up our bombs while attempting to create earth slides, thus closing the tunnels. The answer was not to bomb tunnel entrances unless we had actually sighted trains entering them. It took a while to learn that lesson, however.

To protect their trucks, the Reds converted whole villages into drive-through "garages." When we were in the area the enemy ran the trucks into the villages, then raised walls so the vehicles were out of sight. Daylight photography revealed rutted tracks leading into the concealing "hooches" and we ended their little game.

In June 1953, the Fifth Air Force requested our services to destroy slow and low-flying WW II aircraft that the Reds were using to harass our forces and to bomb supplies. After briefing, we were assigned to a Marine air base south of Seoul. We flew several area familiarization hops, then settled in to begin our mission. Our quarters were screened huts that somehow managed to attract hundreds of biting black flies. The only way we could sleep was to pull heavy wool blankets over our heads and literally "sweat it out." I slept like a baby!

We quickly saw action. As enemy aircraft intruded into our area, I was launched and vectored on the tail of an unknown aircraft. Closing to point-blank range, I identified the bogey as a Yakovlev 18 with a rear seat gunner who sprayed the area to my left and below me with machine gun fire. I fired my four 20mm cannon and literally blew the Yak out of the sky! Reporting the kill to ground control, I was told that another bogey had popped up. I was vectored into contact with a second Yak-18 and after reporting "Enemy" was cleared to fire. Pulling in tight I opened up with my 20mm cannon. I saw the incendiaries begin to burn the aircraft and then an explosion. The aircraft seemed to break into several large pieces, burning furiously. My controller reported the sky "clear" and directed me to return to the field. I did so gladly, feeling very fatigued, yet elated. My reception on

the ground was tumultuous! All I wanted was sleep.

Later, I was scheduled to fly combat air patrol. Arriving on station, I reported in and was vectored toward unknown targets. As I maneuvered to come in behind the two aircraft, I identified them as Lavochkin 11 fighters. They were in loose trail formation so I pulled in behind the rear aircraft and gave a "Tallyho" on enemy bogeys. I was cleared to fire and targeted one LA-11. After two short bursts of cannon fire, it began to burn and dove straight down into the ground. The lead aircraft started to follow the burning craft down, and I closed on him and began firing. My target turned left, then right and started to climb as I gave him another burst. With that, he exploded into fire and began falling apart. I followed the largest burning mass down to 500 feet and saw him crash near my first kill. "Over so fast," I thought.

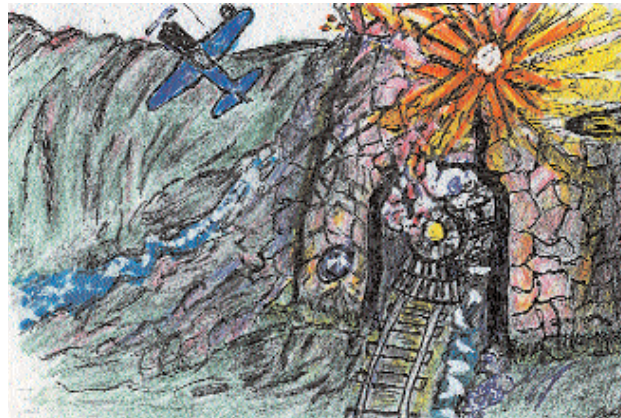
A few weeks later I was launched to take over an intercept for my wingman "Hoppy" Hopson when his aircraft radar suddenly went out as he was closing on an intercepted target. I approached a fast-moving aircraft and acquired a visual on it. The flame pattern of his engine exhausts provided a positive ID of an LA-11. Reporting "Tallyho" on a nonfriendly aircraft, I was cleared to

fire. Our frequency was being monitored because he quickly began evasive turns and reversals, but I had closed to firing range and was able to stay with him. As we left a large battery of antiaircraft fire behind us, he suddenly rolled level and I was able to fire a long burst from my cannons directly into him. He exploded like a bomb and I saw one wing flying just above me. Momentarily blinded, I flicked on my autopilot and my bird, *Annie Mo*, straightened up to level flight like the champion she was. I could have kissed her!

Subsequently, I was presented the Navy Cross by the Commanding General of the Fifth Air Force in Korea for the night ace achievement. My top award, though, was to again return to my family's arms—son Marc and daughters Marcia and Michele. My wife, for whom I named my aircraft *Annie Mo*, remains the love of my life. ✈

In November 1953, Bordelon went to Europe to instruct pilots of the French Aeronavale to fly Corsairs. He returned to the United States in 1954 and served in various command and staff positions. Before he retired he served on the staff of Commander Task Force 140, supporting Apollo recovery missions.

Cdr. Bordelon submitted this article for the Korean War Series in 2000. Sadly, he passed away on 15 December 2002 in Ruston, La. He is survived by his wife of almost 60 years, Anne, three children and four grandchildren.



This original art produced by Cdr. Bordelon shows his successful attack using rock slides against a rail tunnel south of Songjin, North Korea.