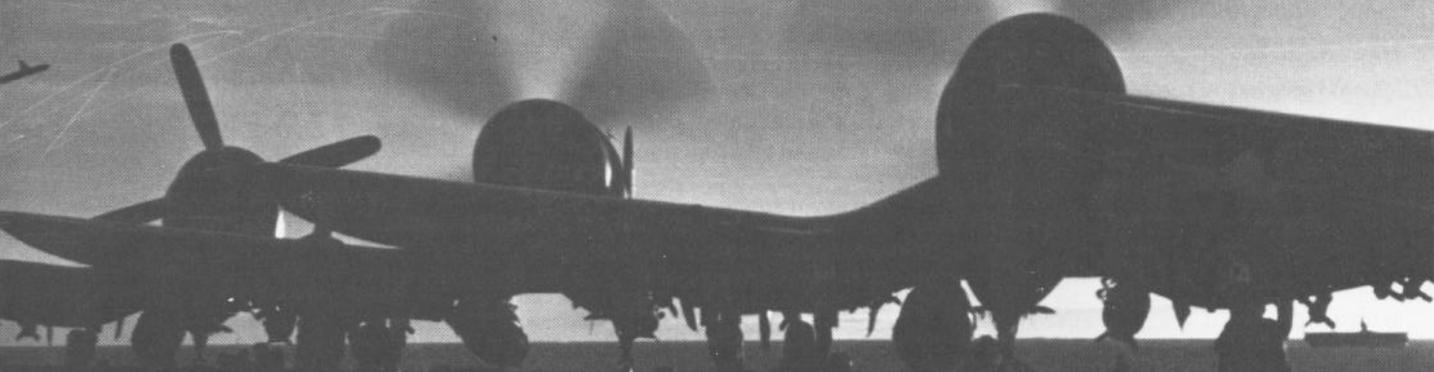


*A History of
Sea-Air Aviation*

*Wings Over
The
Ocean
part fifteen*

By John M. Lindley



☞ Naval Aviation Since 1945 ☞

The dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan in 1945 had an unsettling effect on sea-air aviation in the immediate postwar years. Atomic bombs seemed to be the ultimate in cost-effectiveness for military weapons. A single airplane carrying nuclear bombs could cause as much damage and destruction to an enemy's city and war-making machinery as the mass

conventional bombing raids of WW II. As the Chief of the Army Air Forces, General H. H. Arnold, put it in 1945, the atomic bomb had made destruction "too cheap, too easy."

The direct effect of the explosion of atomic bombs on Japan and in tests after the war was to challenge the need for Naval Aviation in the future. Proponents of strategic bombing argued that the armies and navies of WW II were obsolete and that the only de-

fense forces that the U.S. needed were atomic bombs and a fleet of long-range bombers to deliver them. Just at the time when the Navy's multiple carrier task force had proven its power to dominate the seas, it seemed the strategic bomber would relegate the carrier to ancient history. Proponents of atomic bombing talked as though the ancient Greek myth-makers had decided that they no longer needed Bellerophon and, that when they



wanted to kill a monster like the Chimaera, they would just send Pegasus into the sky to drop a bomb on it from a great height.

Concurrent with this challenge to Naval Aviation was the rapid disappearance of the significant differences between land and sea-based aircraft used for commercial air transport. Land planes made intercontinental passenger flights over the oceans with ease and rapidity. The flying boat was

no longer a prominent passenger carrier in transoceanic operations.

Yet, despite these challenges and changes on both the military and civil fronts, Naval Aviation has continued to maintain its distinctiveness as a part of sea-air aviation.

The effectiveness of the atomic bombs which brought destruction to Hiroshima and Nagasaki left political and military leaders with an extraordinarily perplexing problem: how to

prevent mankind from blowing itself up in a nuclear holocaust. This problem grew even more complex and pressing when the Soviet Union detonated an atomic bomb in 1949 and a hydrogen device in 1954, thereby ending the nuclear monopoly of the United States.

Although the Soviets possessed atomic weapons by 1950, the U.S. took the position that its stockpile of nuclear arms would prevent Soviet

aggression. According to naval historian Stephen W. Roskill, the consequence of this deterrent strategy for the Western nations was a reduction in conventional military forces after 1945 because policymakers expected that nuclear arms would deter minor, as well as major, aggression. However, as Roskill pointed out, "The stalemate in the nuclear field acts as an incentive to minor aggression, which the deterrent strategy is powerless to prevent." Thus the Soviet attempt to cut off the city of Berlin in 1948-49 and the North Korean attack on South Korea in 1950 produced conflicts which were settled with conventional rather than nuclear weapons. The Korean War was typical of the kind of aggression which resulted from the nuclear stalemate between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

In the Cairo Declaration of 1943,

the leaders of the United Nations declared that Korea would be a unified, free, independent and democratic state after the Japanese were defeated. Following the Japanese surrender, the U.S. and the Soviets agreed that they would jointly disarm the Japanese troops in Korea. The Soviets would take care of this north of the 38th parallel; the United States, south of that convenient dividing line. When the Soviets balked at the idea of unification of the two Koreas in 1947, the U.S. placed the problem before the United Nations. The U.N. tried but was unable to bring the two Koreas together. In 1948 the Republic of Korea sprang to life in the south and the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea began to govern the north. With the establishment of two Korean nations, the U.S. removed all its troops (except 500 advisors) in July 1949.

Nearly a year later, in the early morning of June 25, 1950, seven infantry divisions and one armored division of the North Korean People's Army crossed the 38th parallel and attacked South Korea. On the evening of the next day, President Harry Truman instructed General Douglas MacArthur, in Japan, to use his air and naval forces to assist the South Koreans. The following day, the U.N. Security Council voted to assist the Republic of Korea in repelling the attack. By the end of June, MacArthur had been given the authority to bomb North Korean targets. Thus, nine days after the war began, carrier aviators from USS *Valley Forge* and HMS *Triumph* struck military targets in the North Korean capital of Pyongyang, which were outside the range of land-based U.N. aircraft. The 57 planes completely surprised the North



Koreans and destroyed an airfield, parked aircraft, ground installations and a fuel tank farm. Later carrier strikes hit railroad facilities and other supply installations. The U.N. carrier air forces on these initial strikes used British *Seafires* and *Fireflies* and American F4U *Corsairs*, AD-1 *Sky-raid*ers, and F9F *Panther* jets. This was the first wartime mission for jet planes.

By the end of July 1950, the U.S. Navy had committed all five of its Pacific Fleet carriers and their escorts to the war in Korea as part of Task Force 77 (TF 77). Carrier planes flew close air support missions for U.N. troops who were slowly retreating to the port of Pusan on the southeast coast of Korea. On September 4, 1950, U.S. Navy *Corsairs* shot down a Soviet airplane, marking the first combat between carrier planes and Soviet

aircraft. Once U.N. forces established themselves at Pusan, they broke out of their defensive perimeter with MacArthur's brilliantly conceived amphibious landing at Inchon, a South Korean west coast port about 15 miles from Seoul, the South Korean capital. The U.S. Marines were the first ashore at Inchon on September 16, and quickly took Seoul and a key airfield at Kimpo. During the assault at Inchon, TF 77 encountered no North Korean air or naval opposition; thus its three carriers provided close air support for the Marines and flew interdiction missions.

The landing at Inchon caught the North Koreans by surprise. Soon U.N. ground forces took the offensive, driving north toward the 38th parallel. By early October 1950, U.N. troops had crossed into North Korea and headed for the Yalu River which separated

North Korea from Manchuria in Red China. In October the first Red Chinese "volunteers" joined the North Koreans. The next month Soviet-built MiG-15 fighters fired on U.S. aircraft. The MiG-15 (named for its designers Artem I. Mikoyan and Mikhail I. Gurevich) had a maximum speed of 680 miles per hour and was considered, at the time, to be the most advanced operational fighter in the world. The first all-jet air battle took place on November 8 when four F-80s and four MiGs tangled. One MiG was shot down; there were no American losses.

While the Red Chinese transported volunteers across the Yalu in late 1950, TF 77 carrier planes tried to knock out 6 of the 17 bridges across the Yalu in order to slow the stream of supplies from Manchuria. Although these air strikes were largely successful in spite of heavy fighter and antiair-





Over Korea, from top, Corsair, Panther, Skyraider.



Snow covers flight deck of Philippine Sea, Korea 1951

craft fire, North Korean and Red Chinese forces drove U.N. troops back to the 38th parallel. By January 1951 the battle lines had stabilized just above the 38th parallel, along the Han River. Three months later, U.N. forces were back to the parallel. Frustrated by the men and supplies that the communists received from the Manchurian sanctuaries, Gen. MacArthur advocated bombing north of the Yalu River – to stop the flow of reinforcements. In April President Truman announced that he not only refused to widen the war by adopting this strategy, but also had replaced MacArthur with General Matthew B. Ridgway.

From the spring of 1951 until the signing of the armistice on July 27, 1953, carriers of TF 77 continued to support the ground operations of U.N. forces. Although carriers did not provide air support for U.S. Navy forces or for attacks on North Korean naval vessels, they kept very busy. U.N. carrier aircraft flew air patrol, antisubmarine and reconnaissance missions, but most carrier aircraft were involved in raids on inland targets or in close support missions along the battle line. As historian Gerald Wheeler has pointed out, “The average combat mission was against a bridge, factory, railroad line, or troop concentration, and all provided hazards of flak and ground fire.”

Naval Aviation carried out other missions. Land-based patrol planes such as the P4Y *Privateer* and P2V *Neptune* and the PBM *Mariner* seaplane flew antisubmarine patrols, mine spotting, photographic reconnaissance and air-sea rescue missions.

The helicopter received its first combat test in Korea. According to historian James A. Field, the helicopter “. . . proved of transcendent value as plane guard for carrier operations, as platform for observation and for gunfire spotting, in the location of underwater mines, in providing courier and transport service between ships at sea and across difficult terrain ashore, in the rescue of pilots down behind enemy lines, and in the rapid evacua-

tion of the wounded.”

As part of its minesweeping operations in Wonsan Harbor in March 1951, the U.S. Navy made LST-799 into a helicopter carrier. Its helos did their share in clearing the mines, and also rescued 24 pilots who were forced down in the Wonsan area between March 1951 and November 1952.

The other major air combat innovation in Korea was the jet plane. Jets such as the Grumman F9F *Panther* (maximum speed 579 miles per hour) and the McDonnell F2H *Banshee* (maximum speed 532 miles per hour) joined piston attack planes like the F4U *Corsair* (maximum speed 470 miles per hour) and the AD-1 *Skyraider* (maximum speed 375 miles per hour) in the air over Korea. The *Corsairs* and the *Skyraiders* were valuable planes since they could remain on station longer than the jets. Nevertheless, the jets represented the fighter and attack aircraft of the future because they were much faster. Their speed, combined with their silent approach and bombing steadiness, made them very effective in tactical roles. The increasing effectiveness of the jet in TF 77 operations was reflected in the changing ratio between jet and propeller planes. Between July 1950 and January 1951 the ratio was 1:2, but between February and July 1953, it was 4:3. Thus jets were definitely established as part of the Navy's air arm by the end of the Korean War.

Although the United Nations and North Koreans had begun truce talks in June 1951, the air and sea war in Korea continued until the armistice was signed in July 1953. Three years of war in Korea had a substantial impact on the U.S. Navy. The tactics and most of the weapons had been those of WW II, but the air war had seen the introduction of jets and helicopters. The U.S. had neither used its nuclear weapons nor had it won a clear-cut victory. The war also demonstrated the continuing need for a strong navy, especially a carrier navy, to fight hot and cold wars. Perhaps the biggest tactical surprise of the war had

been the failure of U.N. land and sea-based air power to cut the communist supply lines. Despite the presence, at various times, of one Australian, 17 American, and 4 British aircraft carriers, whose aircraft flew a total of about 280,000 operational sorties, the communist supplies continued to get through. Even night carrier aircraft raids on nocturnal communist activity failed to cut the enemy supply lines permanently.

Malcolm Cagle and Frank Manson, two naval officers who have written a history of the naval war in Korea, summed up the overall air interdiction campaign in Korea as only partially successful because U.N. air forces were unable to hit the sources of supply in Manchuria. They could only attack the railroads, bridges, highways, storage depots and supply traffic in Korea. Historian James Field agrees with Cagle and Manson on the limited effectiveness of the air war. He concluded that strength in the air was not in and of itself “the precondition of victory” and that the war showed once again “the essential interdependence of air and surface activity.”

Although some political and military leaders in the U.S. had called upon President Truman to use nuclear weapons against the communists, he would not. Apparently total war of the sort which Gen. Arnold envisaged in 1945 when he declared that strategic bombing had made destruction “too cheap and easy” was now obsolete because no aggressor could use nuclear weapons without risking the possibility that he would bring retaliatory nuclear destruction upon himself.

This policy of avoiding total war and trying to limit conventional warfare permeated the war in Vietnam between 1962 and 1973. The gradual involvement and escalation of the U.S. combat presence in Vietnam in the early years indicate that political and military leaders in the U.S. wanted to limit the level of fighting just as President Truman had done in Korea.

(Continued)