Flying the Mukden Gauntlet: Covert RB-45 Flights Against China

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"It is highly desirable to place all effort available on targets which will have an immediate and direct effect on the enemy's air capability to attain the objective of air superiority at the earliest possible time. . . . Bomber Command must be prepared to use their maximum strike capability on the first strike."

Letter from General Curtis LeMay to Brigadier "Buster" Briggs, February 21, 1951.

"In the event of an all out war we must have readily available intelligence info on China and Manchuria mainland, and on northern Russian held islands. . . . we have an urgent need for additional RB-45 capability for above reasons. . . ."

Message from General "Opie" Weyland to General Curtis LeMay, 15 August 1951

On December 4, 1950, a pair of North Korean MiG-15 fighters flown by Soviet pilots intercepted a U.S. Air Force RB-45C Tornado reconnaissance aircraft operating on the border of China and North Korea near Dandong. Pouring 37mm and 23mm cannon fire into the four-engined jet until it was on fire, the MiGs broke off and headed to their base as two of the four surviving American crew bailed out. Captured and turned over to Soviet and North Korean interrogators, Capt Charles McDonough and Col Jack Lovell were tortured and eventually executed. Such was the potential fate for Air Force crews involved in the riskiest of Cold War operations: penetrating the Bamboo Curtain.

The political and strategic dynamics that reconnaissance aircrews found themselves in during the Korean War were complex. North and South Korea were at war, but Communist China and the Soviet Union were not official combatants. "Volunteers" from both countries played a significant role as ground troops and MiG pilots against the U.S.-led UN Command defending South Korea. After the Chinese intervention in November 1950, President Truman declared a state of national emergency and implied through the media that nuclear weapons would be used in Korea. Emboldened by this announcement, Gen Douglas MacArthur determined that he would need 26 nuclear weapons, of which "four would be used on invasion forces and 4 bombs to be used against critical concentrations of enemy air power, both targets of opportunity."

By March 26, 1951 a combination of factors nearly forced Truman's hand. These included, according to Atomic Energy Commission Commissioner Gordon Dean, the fact that "the Chinese were massing large forces; that they apparently intended to use their air forces for the first time; that this was coming about with definite support from the Russians; . . . that it might result in a decision by the Russians and Chinese to launch an offensive against Japan. . . ." Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen Omar Bradley noted that he "received alarming intelligence information (from a classified source) that the Soviet Union was preparing for a major military move, where we did not know," either intervention in Korea or against NATO. MacArthur was authorized to plan for attacks against airbases in China.

On April 6, 1951 Truman authorized the deployment of

Jet-powered RB-45Cs supplemented slower RB-29s for reconnaissance over "MiG Alley."

nine nuclear cores to be stored at the American base complex on Guam. The Joint Chiefs of Staff requested the deployment of nuclear cores to match the already-deployed nine atomic bomb "shapes" on Okinawa that were co-located with 10 special Strategic Air Command (SAC) B-29s allocated to deliver them. The cores were to be flown to Okinawa by transport and provided to the B-29 crews if President Truman ordered this course of action.

The problem was: what targets were they to be used on and how would SAC's bombers navigate their way there? The biggest concern was a mass air assault by China and the Soviet Union directed against South Korea and Japan if hostilities expanded. As a result, airfields were the primary targets.

Typical reconnaissance operation during the Korean War.

U-2s, SR-71s, satellites, GoogleEarth—these capabilities were all in the distant future. Manchuria was practically *terra incognita*. The only way to find out where the bases were was to fly into Communist China and get the data firsthand. The Far East Air Force's 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron based in Japan operated RB-29s; these were unsuited to the task. The only aircraft capable of carrying out the new mission were the RB-45C Tornados of SAC's 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Wing (SRW) based at Barksdale AFB, Louisiana. With their APQ-24 radar systems, similar to that used by the B-36 bomber, the RB-45Cs were capable of recording the radar returns from terrain features, cities, and airfields and photographing them so that targeteers for the nuclear strike force could plan their missions. The film could also be turned into an overlay for the B-36, B-29, and B-50 bombardiers' bomb-navigation system scopes to assist in the strike itself as required

SAC at this point had 22 RB-45Cs on inventory, but the bulk were allocated to support the bomber offensive against the USSR in the event war broke out in Europe. After some discussion SAC commander Gen Curtis LeMay authorized the deployment of a pair of RB-45Cs from their base in Louisiana to Yokota Air Base near Tokyo in Japan. Indeed, LeMay had personal experience with the RB-45C. During an exercise in which SAC attacked Chicago, he flew one of the aircraft himself.

These planes and their crews were hidden administratively in the 91st SRW but reported to SAC's second in command, Lt Gen Thomas Power, through a special liaison entity in Tokyo, SAC X-RAY. The RB-45C crews kept to themselves and minimized contact with the 91st staff and crews. These measures were intended to ensure that the operation remained as discreet as possible.

It was dusk on June 5, 1951 when the pilot conducted the preflight inspection of his RB-45C. Sitting in the hangar away from prying eyes at Yokota Air Base, the silver aluminum skin gleamed in the lighting. The exception was the black-painted protrusion under the nose for the radar system. In some ways the RB-45C anticipated the new B-47 that was coming on line: the tandem pilot-copilot arrangement, the closed nose where the observer sat, the twin engines under each wing. Unlike the B-47, this bird did not have swept wings, a serious limiting factor on operations in a MiG-heavy environment. The three-man crew entered the plane through a hatch on the port side of the nose. There was no gunner; that position was closed off and incorporated camera gear.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff had authorized Commander Far East Command to conduct reconnaissance missions in China at his discretion. Signals and human intelligence pointed to the open country behind the Chang Bai mountains. This region, known as Mukden and site of the infamous "Mukden Incident" in 1931, was one vast support area for the communist war in Korea: airbases, air training facilities, depots, and even a MiG factory. The analysts divided the region into sectors designated with female code names. Tonight's objective was to gather radar scope imagery on targets Jane, Catherine, Lucille, and Martha. The RB-45C would fly the same profile that the B-29 bombers would use if they were ordered to unleash their Mk IV nuclear bombs. The imagery would provide a navigation aid to each target for radar bombing runs. Opposition? Unknown. Threat capabilities? Undefined.

After takeoff the weather remained clear as the plane

transited over the Sea of Japan for the first waypoint, Xitun. It was with some surprise that the RB-45C was illuminated by ground-based searchlights near the North Korean city of Sinmak on the way to the turn point. Taking evasive action, the pilot was shocked when an intercepting enemy aircraft, probably a MiG-15, suddenly clicked on its landing lights in an attempt to locate the American plane as it jinked away from the searchlights. Applying power the pilot maneuvered away from the light source and left it behind.

With the East China Sea below them and Dalian (Port Arthur) to port, the RB-45C made the waypoint and climbed to 40,000 feet, heading north-north east. U.S. Air Force RB-29 Ferrets had been collecting Chinese air defense radar signals information off Dalian for some time, and the route skirted those sites which were "a hodgepodge of American, Japanese, and Soviet built sets."

The observer, who had already warmed up his equipment, looked at the scope and could see the mountains to starboard and the city of Yinkou to port. The first target set was Anshan/Liaoyang, but as the plane approached Anshan the flak started, with bursts at 39,000 and 42,000 feet buffeting the plane. The whole crew understood the need for the vulnerability; to gather the necessary information, the RB-45C had to fly straight and level for about 30 minutes. Evasive action would throw off the imagery. In minutes the flak was left behind and the radar returns from the Hunhe River as it flowed through the city of Shenyang were clear on the scope.

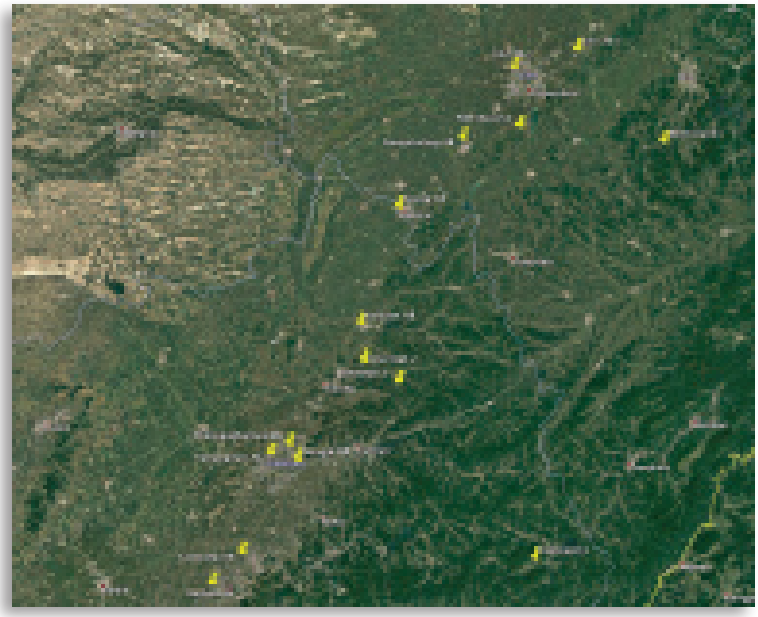
The respite did not last long. Approaching Mukden the guns started up again on both sides of the town of Dengta, throwing off the airplane on the run towards the large city and its under-construction MiG factory. Passing over the city, the crew decided to press on. Approaching the city of Kaiuyan, another aircraft, again likely a MiG-15, attempted an intercept. Employing similar tactics, the enemy employed landing lights to illuminate the RB-45C. As the American aircraft jinked once again to avoid detection, flak opened up, this time in front of the Tornado.

They were now 400 kilometers inside China and were clearly detected. The crew determined that it was time to depart the area. Banking right and dropping down below 1,000 feet, the RB-45C headed southeast only to encounter four more intercepting aircraft between Tieling and the North Korean border. One MiG dropped down and made a firing pass from 1,000 feet high against the fleeing reconnaissance bomber.

The closest means of escape was to head to the nearest coast bordering the Sea of Japan, which in this case was the Hamhung-Hongwon region, get over the sea and away from the flak and the pursuers. Heading south-south east and pushing the J47 engines to their maximum, the MiGs were left behind, likely caught up in a three-way jurisdictional command and control snarl. That didn't stop North Korean flak engagements at Tongsin and Yongwang. Buffeted by fire from the radar-directed guns, the RB-45C finally made the coast and escaped back to Yokota Air Base.

There was some dispute about the quality of the "take." Colonel Milton Close at SAC X RAY liaison staff noted that "the scope photos obtained on these two targets fulfill our requirements," but he thought that the crew "became unduly excited" and was skeptical about the amount of opposition encountered. That said, all the collected information was fed into the SAC operations plan for the use of nuclear weapons against these targets by the 43rd Bomb Wing's advanced echelon on Guam.

The second run was conducted sometime in June covering the Lucille and Martha targets; there was no opposition. A third RB-45C run was made on the night of July 8 on targets Irene and Anne. Once again no opposition was reported. An assessment made at the time noted that SAC now had "good radar scope photos on [the] proper axis of attack," so the bombers could accurately bomb five of the identified targets. Two other targets, Martha and Catherine, had good radar scope pictures but not on the requested axis of attack. That left the five remaining targets to be scoped.



Map of RB-45 reconnaissance target areas and engagements.

The only opposition encountered by the reconnaissance planes was on the first mission.

The RB-45Cs were able to gather radar scope information on the location of 10 Chinese air bases. The crews, however, did not necessarily know what was on them; this intelligence came from SIGINT and agents on the ground to some extent, but the full picture was not available until after the end of the Cold War. Each of those bases had both Chinese and Soviet regiments on them, partnered by similar equipment for ease of training. For example, Mukden had the People's Liberation Army Air Force's 3rd Division, equipped with MiG-15s. The Soviet 151st GIAD was co-located with the 3rd Division and also equipped with MiG-15s, around 120 aircraft total. Kaiyuan was equipped with Il-10 Sturmoviks, and Gongzhiling with MiG-9s. The Siping base had Soviet and Chinese TU-2 bomber squadrons. All in all, there were more than 1,500 enemy aircraft on 11 bases that the single-ship RB-45C missions were up against as they passed over conducting radarscope photography, not to mention anti-aircraft defenses. Three of these air bases were clustered around Mukden, where the MiG factory was under construction.

The destruction of these targets with nine Mk IV nuclear weapons would have destroyed 10 out of the 19 available Chinese air bases, wiped out over 52 percent of the People's Liberation Army Air Force, and destroyed the only MiG factory available in China. It would have also eliminated nine of the 13 bases Soviet air force units operated from in China, thus destroying 70 percent of the Soviet capability in China. Most of these aircraft were the deadly MiG-15s. Their experienced pilots and trainers would also have been destroyed. These bases were also the closest Chinese bases to Korea, and thus their destruction would have assisted significantly with the ground campaign by stripping away irreplaceable communist air cover and permitting the UN Command greater latitude in the persecution of the war.

The possibility of a more stable situation on the Korean front in July 1951 put the spurs to the RB-45C detachment. SAC was in a hurry to complete the missions and get the targeting data because a "cease fire order at this time will probably render inadvisable any reconnaissance into China and Manchurian areas. We are proceeding on the premise that a truce is not forthcoming. . . ."

General Weyland's request to General LeMay paid off, and another pair of RB-45Cs joined the detachment at the 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Wing later in 1951. In addition a KB-29 tanker was deployed to Guam to support the RB-45Cs. As one planner gleefully noted, "there are a few Manchurian targets that cannot be reached without air-to-air refueling . . . there are several Russian targets which are in the same category."

Reconnaissance missions using the Tornado aircraft continued into 1952, though the details remain sketchy. It appears as though the deep penetration missions into China were completed by at least November 1951, when General LeMay requested reduction of the SAC presence in Guam based on intelligence assessments suggesting there would be no mass communist ground offensive.

Regular escorted missions in daylight were, however, flown off the North Korean and Chinese coasts by RB-45Cs, but crews were instructed to maintain the three-mile limit. On September 29, 1952, an RB-45C escorted by 16 F-86s was conducting a photo reconnaissance mission off the coast of North Korea when it was attacked by approximately 29 MiG-15s. One MiG-15 was shot down and two F-86s had to make emergency landings on the way home. The RB-45C was shot at but not damaged, completed its mission, and returned to base K-14 in South Korea.

The RB-45 missions flown against Chinese targets indicate just how serious the Joint Chiefs of Staff viewed the deteriorating situation in the Far East in 1951, a fact generally not known when the Korean War is discussed. The courage displayed by aircrews flying nearly 500 miles deep into enemy territory at night, in what was essentially the heart of the People's Liberation Army Air Force, under conditions where they would have been treated harshly or even executed if shot down and captured, surely is deserving of recognition. Today, similar activity is mounted using unmanned aerial vehicles piloted from the comfort of air-conditioned trailers remote from the target region.

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