

B-29 Operations in the Korean War, 1953

By Chuck Overby, Ph.D.

The Korean War, under the command of our “little-man” President Harry S. Truman, recalled me and multitudes of WW-II veterans to our second war. Uncle Sam also recalled multitudes of mothballed 70 ton B-29 heavy bombers, from Arizona storage, and into service once again for the killing fields of Korea.

When we were there bombing in Korea in 1953, B-29s were stationed in the Far East at two locations – the 98th - Bomb Wing at Yokota AFB near Tokyo, and two Wings, the 307th and the 19th Bomb Wings at Kadena AFB on Okinawa.

At that time, I think that a “Wing” was a USAF [US Air Force] administrative unit of some 45 aircraft with three Squadrons – each with around 15 aircraft.

My B-29 crew [eleven members] and I were assigned to the 19th Bomb Wing, 93rd Bomb Squadron, when we arrived at Kadena AFB on February 27, 1953. I was a 1st Lt. “co-pilot” -- fresh out of USAF pilot training.

B-29s were initially assigned to carry out daylight bombing operations in North Korea, but it was learned somewhere along the way, that this old WW-II flying machine, the “29,” was not the best combat match for the modern USSR designed Chinese MIG-15 jet fighters that also operated in North Korean air-space.

Thus, during my time in the Korean operation, from February 27th to the end of the war on July 27, 1953 -- B-29s flew only night operations. The three Bombing Wings, the 98th, 307th and the 19th alternated with at least one Bomb Squadron of 15 aircrafts over North Korea every night of the war, each with a 10 ton bomb load – flattening anything that was not already flattened in the prior two plus years of the war, before we got there.

I am sure that nighttime B-29 bombing missions helped to reduce the probability of combat losses. However, the North Koreans, still possessed radar controlled anti-aircraft guns and searchlights both of which would lock on to our aircraft and create some unpleasantness for us bombing crews.

I will never forget the brilliance of radar searchlight “lock-ons” to our ship that nicely silhouetted us so that the MIG-15s could have a ball taking pot-shots at us in all our illuminated brilliance.

Fortunately for my crew, one of our enlisted crew members had special training in something called “electronic countermeasures” [ECM]. This equipment enabled him to quite often detect the radar signal for the anti-aircraft guns and the searchlights that had locked on to our aircraft and destroy the “lock-on.” I will never forget the blinding brilliance of those “searchlight” lock-ons, and the relief at having our ECM man take us back to pure darkness when he destroyed the radar connection.

During our time in Korean operations, we bombed with a special kind of system using aerial navigation technology – called, “SHORAN,” [**Short Range Navigation**]. This system was reasonably accurate in placing bombs in the target area.

Our SHORAN navigation bombing system consisted of a pair of radio navigation stations, roughly 250 to 300 nautical miles apart one on each side of Korea, probably located on islands on each side of the peninsula near the 38th parallel. Station A on the west coast would send a radio signal which would reach the other station in a measurable amount of time. When Station B on the East coast of Korea received Station A’s transmission, B would also transmit its time measurable signal. These “time measurable” radio transmissions [translatable into distances] were the key to our finding and dropping on the correct target for the night.

With this SHORAN bombing system, all 15 to 20 B-29s on a night’s mission, with navigation lights off, flew exactly the same flight path, spaced a couple of minutes apart, and with 500 feet of vertical separation. Each crew would send a coded radio signal when they arrived at the “initial point” for the bomb-run, a distance of between 20 to 25 miles before the target. This was done so that one B-29 would not drop its cargo on another B-29 below it.

The first and the last bombs in each B-29s bomb load was a photo-flash bomb – so that each crew automatically made a “pre-strike” and a “post-strike” photograph of the target. This was done so that the “bombing assessors” back at Kadena airbase could determine the effectiveness of each bombing crew for each mission flown.

In some of the “pre-strike” photos of the target, the silhouette of a B-29 could be seen below. However, to the best of my knowledge, no B-29 had its bombs hit another aircraft below it.

War Criming In North Korea

On the evening of June 18, 1953 at 21:00 Okinawa time, my B-29 crew and I lifted off from Kadena Air Force Base [AFB] on our 93rd Bomb Squadron’s Mission # 625 with eight 2,000 pound bombs in our bombays – headed for our target, the North Korean Toksang irrigation dam at Latitude 39-54 N and Longitude 125-23 E.

In mission briefing sessions before each mission, we the cannon fodder aboard our B-29s never learned much about any of the bombing targets that we hit other than its name and its Latitude and Longitude so our navigator could guide us to the target where our Shoran bombing system, described earlier in this “story,” could take over and expeditiously deliver our “gifts.”

Furthermore, since we were doing night bombing, we never saw that which we hit on any of our bombing missions.

Thus, to us the bombing crew, an irrigation dam was no different than a target described as a “supply area” or a piece of North Korea’s capital, Pyongyang, or an air field, or Wonsan’s harbor docks, etc. – it was all North Korean property that we were destroying.

It was not until many decades later that I learned from much reading and research on the Korean War and its air operations [see my little bibliography at the end of this piece] the significance of our bombing on the North Korean dams. In the highly informative book, *Korea: The Unknown War*, it was pointed out to my horror that “the last time an act of this kind had been carried out, which was by the Nazis in Holland in 1944, it had been deemed a war crime at Nuremberg.” (p. 196).

Thus, my B-29 crew and 15 to 20 other B-29 crews in the early morning of June 19th, 1953 were unknowingly committing war crimes by taking out the Toksang irrigation dam and flooding the valley all the way out to the Korean Bay and the Yellow Sea -- thereby, helping to destroy North Korea’s ability to feed itself.

Our Mission No. 625’s bombing operations that early morning of June 19, 1953 was reported in the next day’s *New York Times*, “Official Reports of the Day’s Operations in the Korean War” section: “B-29 Superforts struck in two forces to unleash 150 tons of 2,000 pound bombs on Toksang Dam northwest to the Chungchon River during the night. The fifteen-aircraft strike was opposed by enemy fighter passes and searchlights.”

It is interesting that, the decision to take out North Korea’s irrigation dams was not without some concern by those USAF persons who ultimately made the decision to authorize doing it. One USAF study commented as follows:

“The U.N. air attacks on the North Korean hydro-electric complex and on the irrigation dams have been cited among the important air actions of the Korean War. Each of the two target systems was of significant military value, but each was so intertwined with political considerations that much deliberation preceded the final order to attack.” (“The Attack on the Irrigation Dams in North Korea,” *USAF Air University Quarterly Review*, Vol. VI., No. 4, Winter 1953-54, pp 40-61)

Therefore, I conclude that my B-29 crew and I are “war-criminals” as are the USA Colonels and Generals who ordered these attacks. Fortunately or not, we have not been held responsible as we held the WW-II Germans responsible for their dike destruction war crimes in Netherland. Such is part of the immoral essence of war and “winners and losers” thereof.

My Last Mission

Discussions with the North Koreans about a truce to stop the fighting in Korea had been going on for over two years by the time my B-29 crew and I arrived in Okinawa. As a combat crew, we were anxious for the slaughter to come to a close so that we might be able to pack our bags and head for home. However, almost every third night our 93rd Bomb Squadron was scheduled to fly another mission.

By mid July 1953, the truce negotiations seemed closer than ever to be about to end the killing – yet the missions kept coming.

On the 26th of July, the mission schedule for July 27th, 1953 went up on the 93rd's schedule board – and there our crew's name was on the schedule to take off around 8:00 PM for another trip north to destroy and slaughter once more.

That late afternoon of the 27th, after the mission briefing meeting, we went to our aircraft to do the preflight and load the bombs etc. etc. and then about a half hour before our scheduled take-off time we went to our flying machine and climbed aboard in preparation for a departure.

As we were taxiing out for take off, we get a radio call from the control tower to “hold” for an important message – “mission cancelled.” Because the Korean Peace Truce of July 27, 1953 required that all hostilities cease by 10:00 PM, and we would not be able to deliver our last gift to North Korea and get our B-29 back south and across the DMZ by 10 PM. I can still feel that “reprieve” 62 years after my B-29 crew and I received it. How wonderful to be saved by an armistice! Who wishes to fly the last mission of a war?

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