

The 17th Bombardment Wing in the Korean War

By John V. Garrett, Ph.D.

“We took off at 2400 hours,” Walt McGinnis remembered. A B-26 pilot with the 34th Bombardment Squadron, Lieutenant McGinnis had become one of the top train killers among the *Invader* units in Korea. Recalling the nighttime mission along the east coast of North Korea on 26 February 1953, McGinnis continued:

*“We sighted about 20 cars being pulled by one engine. I made the first dive-bomb attack, dropping two 500-lb bombs. The first one hit the locomotive straight on, blowing it up. We then made consecutive attacks to destroy the boxcars it was pulling. We ran into a lot of trouble in the form of a 40-mm anti-aircraft battery positioned up in the hills. He would only shoot when we turned away from him, so I couldn’t spot where he was. In an effort to get the upper hand, I called in another B-26 to hit the train while I pretended to leave the area, loitering just out of earshot from the gunner. Sure enough, as soon as the other *Invader* made a pass, the gunner opened up. I pinpointed his position and went after him with my 0.50-in. guns, which chewed both the gun and gunner up. Between the two B-26s, all of the boxcars and engine were destroyed.”*

This was what the 17th Bombardment Wing did in Korea. Operating from Pusan-East Air Base, designated K-9, the wing flew Douglas B-26 *Invaders* on nighttime interdiction missions, hunting and killing trucks and trains in an attempt to limit the flow of supplies to North Korean and Chinese communist forces positioned north of the 38th parallel.

Officially, the 17th was there only since May 1952, when it activated at K-9 on the tenth of the month to replace the 452nd Bombardment Wing. To the pilots and personnel of the newly formed 17th, however, the event was transparent, a paper change. The day before, they had been part and parcel of the 452nd, the first Air Force Reserve wing to fly combat in Korea. Recalled to active duty at the outset of the war, the 452nd had now fulfilled its 21-month active duty commitment and, as mandated by law, was relieved from active duty, inactivated, and allotted back to the reserve.

The 17th stood up in its place and used the same planes and men to continue the same night intruder mission the 452nd had conducted since early in the war, focusing on the eastern half of the country while a separate *Invader* unit, the 3rd Bombardment Wing, focused on the country’s western half. During the early months of the war the interdiction campaign had met with fair success, interdiction working best when the battlefield is fluid. Later, as the front stabilized, interdiction was proving more difficult.

Intuitively, the communist supply system should have been vulnerable to interdiction, lying exposed along the 150-mile journey from the Yalu River to the 38th parallel. Deprived of supply, the enemy would be unable to attack and perhaps be forced

to retreat. In practice, however, interdiction proved a greater challenge than expected. First, the enemy supply requirements American forces hoped to interdict were modest, totaling 60-70 tons per day for a Chinese or North Korean division compared to 500 tons per day for an American division. Second, the rough Korean terrain made interdiction difficult. Running north-to-south, the roads followed the rails and both ran through narrow valleys flanked by rugged mountains with numerous tunnels, providing ample opportunity to hide, especially at night.

Third, the Chinese and North Koreans cleverly rerouted supply lines and repaired choke points, keeping materials and tools on hand near bridges and vital roadways to effect rapid repair. Thus, *Operation Strangle*, a United States interdiction campaign begun in 1951 after the front lines congealed, quickly became what Army historian B.C. Mossman called “a failure” due essentially to the “flexibility of the Communist logistic system.” *Operation Saturate* in 1952 brought no better reward, degenerating into a race between American Airmen attempting to obliterate rails and roads and North Koreans trying to mend them.

Eventually, in the last months of the war, *Operation Thaw* produced better results due in part to new tactics that the 17th devised. Upon finding a convoy, the wing’s aircraft would no longer attack it on the first pass but instead would lay anti-disturbance bombs in front of the convoy. Only then would trailing aircraft move in to strafe and bomb the trucks. At the same time, the wing solved the enemy’s system of warning by which the approach of an Invader previously had sent enemy trains or trucks scurrying for cover inside the region’s many tunnels, there to lurk until satisfied that the intruding aircraft had left the area. Now, the 17th began dispatching Invaders in pairs, sending a glassnose B-26C out first followed by a hardnose B-model ten minutes later. The job of the glassnose with its superior vision was to locate the trucks and trains and then fly off after first alerting the trailing hardnose pilot, who would arrive on target ten minutes later just as the enemy vehicles emerged from cover. The wing scored its highest destruction rate of the war with these two methods.

Even so, it was not enough to satisfy the full promise of interdiction. Gen Mark Clark, commander-in-chief of the United Nations command during the last year of the war, had the experience of a similar failed attempt at aerial interdiction over mountainous terrain in Italy during World War II. “Air power could not isolate the front,” Clark explained of the Korean experience. The commander of the 7th Fleet, Vice Admiral J. J. Clark, agreed, concluding that the “interdiction program was a failure. It did not interdict.”

In the end, the small size and easy flexibility of the enemy’s logistics system plus the difficulty of the terrain blunted the effectiveness of interdiction. Nonetheless, the men of 17th carried out their mission courageously, logging nearly 11,000 combat sorties while releasing more than 22,000 tons of ordnance. Happily, casualties during the wing’s 15 months of Korean combat were light.

After the war, the wing transferred to Miho Air Base in Japan, still a part of Fifth Air Force. Following an assignment as a heavy bombardment wing in the 1960s and 1970s and as a reconnaissance wing in England during the 1980s, the 17th was assigned to Goodfellow AFB, Texas in 1993 as a training wing.



In Korea, the 17 BW operated both B-model hardnose and C-model glassnose B-26 Invaders. The hardnose (shown above) boasted six or eight .50-calibre machine guns in its nose plus another three on each wing and a pair in each turret. With a bombardier and short-range radar in place of the nose guns, the glassnose version carried fewer guns but offered enhanced visibility, especially at night. Pilots of the B-26B hardnose often complained that they would lose their night vision after firing the nose guns, making it difficult to reacquire a target following the first pass.