

SAVING THE B-52: OPERATION POWER FLITE

The following story was adapted from an article written by the SAC History Office in November 1981. This is a continuation of the Global Strike Command History Office's 25 Years of Dynamic Deterrence series.

The dawn of 1957 found the world gripped in the icy tension of the Cold War. The Suez Crisis in late 1956--only the latest in a series of conflicts between the United States and the Soviet Union--had brought the world to the brink of war. To demonstrate American resolve, Strategic Air Command (SAC) bombers and tankers combined, as they had done before, to demonstrate the high state of SAC's readiness.

However, by this time there was a new complication. While the B-47 had proven itself as a reliable weapon system, SAC's newest strategic bomber, the B-52, had come under fire as a result of several crashes earlier in 1956. It was known that a reporter, P. D. Eldred, had interviewed several people at Castle AFB, California about the crashes and most supposed he planned to criticize the B-52. After learning of Mr. Eldred's planned exposé, SAC leaders designed a counteroffensive to show that the B-52 was a safe and effective weapon system.

The result was nicknamed "QUICK KICK," an endurance flight involving eight B-52s, refueled by KC-97 tankers. On 24 and 25 November 1956, the eight Stratofortresses circled the entire North American continent, non-stop. "QUICK KICK" received wide publicity, and, for a time, calmed concerns about the B-52.

But, that calm lasted for just five days, until 30 November, when yet another B-52 crashed at Castle, killing all ten men. With the B-52 program again in trouble, SAC's leaders began planning another power projection flight they dubbed Operation "POWER FLITE."

POWER FLITE AND THE FLIGHT OF THE THIRD LUCKY LADY

Just before Christmas, 1956, operations officers from the 93d Bomb Wing met with Major General Archie Old Jr, Commander of Fifteenth Air Force. Together, they planned a round-the-world mission using B-52s from Castle AFB.

On 7 January 1957, Brigadier General William E. Eubank, Jr., Commander of the 93d Bomb Wing, selected five aircrews to take part in "POWER FLITE". In addition to the normal crew of six, he added an extra pilot and an extra navigator, as well as, the aircraft crew chief. General Old would serve as the mission commander, and Lieutenant Colonel James Morris would be the aircraft commander of the lead B-52, appropriately named the "Lucky Lady III." Colonel Morris was no stranger to endurance flights. He had been the copilot on the non-stop, round-the-world B-50 "Lucky Lady II" in 1949, and had commanded one of the QUICK KICK B-52s just the month before.

Once the aircrews had been selected, maintenance personnel began scouring aircraft records to find the five best aircraft available for the mission. Then, they modified the selected airplanes with the addition of bunks, cooking facilities, 20-man life rafts, and other necessities.

On 16 January, with all aircraft systems carefully checked and the aircrews fully prepared, the five B-52s thundered down Castle's runway. Everyone believed that the airplanes had left in perfect condition, but this was not the case. One of the three primary aircraft--"La Vittoria," named after Magellan's ship, the first to circumnavigate the globe--proved to have more than its share of problems. After takeoff, one of the outrigger gears failed to retract. Extensive efforts to raise the gear failed until a little later in the flight when it retracted on its own. But that was just the start of La Vittoria's problems. Over Newfoundland, ice formed in the refueling receptacle and though the crew attempted to dislodge the frozen mass, the waiting tankers could not refuel the La Vittoria. As a result, La Vittoria had to divert, with the KC-97 tanker force, to Goose Bay where, according to the navigator's diary, "it was cold enough to freeze tears."

Making matters worse, the second spare left the group over North Africa and landed in England. Still, the three remaining bombers headed across Africa, Saudi Arabia, and up into the Persian Gulf. Over a railway crossing in Malaya the aircrews simulated a bomb run and then crossed the Pacific on their way back to California.

By the time the Stratofortresses finished their last refueling over the western Pacific, nearly 100 KC-97s had taken part in POWER FLITE. Twenty tankers from the 98th Air Refueling Squadron performed the refueling over eastern Canada and over North Africa, while the remaining bombers were met by 22 KC-97s of the 305th, 100th, and 98th, operating from Ben Guerir Air Base in Morocco. Over the Persian Gulf, 18 Dhahran-based KC-97s from the 100th refueled the three B-52s still on the mission. A brief refueling by 12 tankers of the 11th over the Philippines took the bombers to Guam, where 26 KC-97s from the 11th and 22d provided the final air refueling.

On the morning of 18 January, all three B-52s landed at March AFB, California. Their flight time, 45 hours, 19 minutes, less than half required by the Lucky Lady II just eight years before. As the 27 crew members stepped out from their B-52s, General Curtis E. LeMay, SAC Commander-in-Chief, greeted the group and then presented each of the airmen with a Distinguished Flying Cross.

The three POWER FLITE bomber crews received tremendous public attention. The crew of Lucky Lady III rode a float in President Eisenhower's inaugural parade just two days after the mission and appeared on several nationwide television programs. The aircraft commander of aircraft -398, which comedian George Gobel had christened "Lonesome George" prior to the mission, was interviewed on Gobel's prime-time television show. To say the least, if P. D. Eldred ever published his article about the inadequacies of the B-52, it went unnoticed in the excitement!

However, even with all the enthusiasm, SAC hardly mentioned its 98 KC-97 tankers and those crews. For security reasons at the time, SAC would not even discuss the bases from which the tankers had operated. In an official account published not long after the mission, the KC-97

crews rated only one mention in the entire 23-page text. “Occasionally--exactly how many times is secret information--KC-97s rose from enroute bases to meet the heavy bombers and replenish their fuel supplies.”

In his remarks during the award ceremony for the bomber crews, General LeMay told them that their flight had demonstrated “SAC’s capabilities to strike any target on the face of the earth.” Later, the National Aeronautic Association recognized POWER FLITE as the outstanding flight of 1957, and named the 93rd Bombardment Wing as recipient of SAC’s sixth Mackay Trophy.

Lucky Ladies I, II, and III Fact Sheet

<http://www.afhso.af.mil/topics/factsheets/factsheet.asp?id=15233>

Luck Lady II Historical Video

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OXf1fSiOYPs>

(NEXT STORY: The Post-War World)