

# Experiment at Yangdok

The Communist supply train in that narrow North Korean valley was top priority for an unorthodox attack.

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**I**N THE early summer of 1951, a cease-fire was declared in Korea while Soviet-inspired peace negotiations were conducted between Chinese and North Korean Communists and United Nations forces. It soon became apparent that the Communists were using the cease-fire as a screen for large-scale re-supply of their armies, preparatory to moving once more against US and other allied forces.

On August 18, Far East Air Forces (FEAF) responded with Operation Strangle, a determined interdiction campaign against railroads in North Korea. Daylight attacks by F-84 fighter-bombers, B-29s, and Douglas B-26s (the A-26 of World War II) forced the Communists to shift to nighttime movement of supplies by both rail and truck convoys. Strangle then became a round-the-clock operation, with two wings of USAF B-26s and a Navy F4U squadron flying continuous four-hour interdiction missions against targets of opportunity.

USAF's 3d Bomb Wing, based at Kunsan, was responsible for the transportation net in western North Korea, and the 452d Wing at Pusan was assigned the eastern half of enemy territory. In both areas, roads and rail lines ran for much of their length through narrow valleys flanked by rugged mountains. To make the game even sportier, the Communists lined those routes with multiple-mount .50-caliber machine guns and both 20-mm and 40-mm anti-aircraft guns. The enemy had devised a variety of tricks to lure low-flying B-26s into mountainsides. It was a sweaty mission for

the B-26 crews, who were out an average of fifteen nights a month, weather permitting. And if a crew had to bail out, the chance of rescue was slight. Each B-26 operated independently in an assigned area that might extend as far north as the Yalu River. Pinpointing a downed bomber was virtually impossible.

To help in locating and attacking trains and trucks, a few B-26s of each wing were equipped experimentally with old 80,000,000-candlepower searchlights that the Navy had used on its submarine-hunting blimps during World War II. Capt. John S. Walmsley of the 3d Wing's 8th Bomb Squadron was one of the pilots selected to develop tactics for searchlight attacks. On the night of September 12, 1951, he scored the first success with a searchlight, stopping a truck convoy with 500-pound fire bombs and then making several bombing runs on it using the light, which could be used for no more than fifty seconds at a time.

Two nights later, Captain Walmsley, call sign "Skillful 13," halted a train near Yangdok, about ninety miles north of the Thirty-eighth Parallel, and made searchlight passes on it until he ran out of ordnance. Circling over the train, which was in a valley surrounded by craggy peaks, he called for another B-26 to come and continue the attack.



*Capt. John Walmsley won the Medal of Honor for valor during the Korean War.*

Blowing up a locomotive had top priority, since one freight car could carry as large a load of supplies as eight trucks.

Finally, a 3d Wing B-26, "Skillful 16," responded. Walmsley gave its pilot his location as accurately as the uncertain maps of North Korea would allow and used his searchlight as a beacon, making himself a clear target for enemy AA guns. When the other bomber arrived, Walmsley twice flew his B-26 through heavy flak along the correct axis of attack, illuminating the area with his searchlight. As "Skillful 16" prepared for its bomb run, Walmsley peeled off in a low-level pass, his searchlight blazing.

Communist gunners on the hills surrounding the train threw up a concentrated barrage across the path of Captain Walmsley's brightly lit B-26. Ignoring the web of tracers ahead of him, Walmsley refused to take evasive action and continued his run in order to pinpoint the train for "Skillful 16" as long as possible. He was well aware of the risk. This was John Walmsley's twenty-fifth intruder mission. As he approached the target, his plane was hit. It continued to fly straight and level for about two miles, but then crashed into a mountain and exploded.

For his determination to complete a top-priority mission in the face of almost certain injury or death, Captain Walmsley was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously. He was one of only four Air Force pilots to be so honored during the Korean War. All four awards were posthumous.

A month after Walmsley's heroic act, the searchlights were abandoned. They proved too fragile and unreliable for bomber operations and increased the risk of crew losses to a degree that was out of proportion to their limited usefulness. The light may have failed, but not John Walmsley or the other B-26 crews who participated in that bizarre experiment. ■