



**These were the fighters, bombers, transports, and other airplanes that fought the “Forgotten War” 50 years ago.**

# Air Force Aircraft of the Korean War

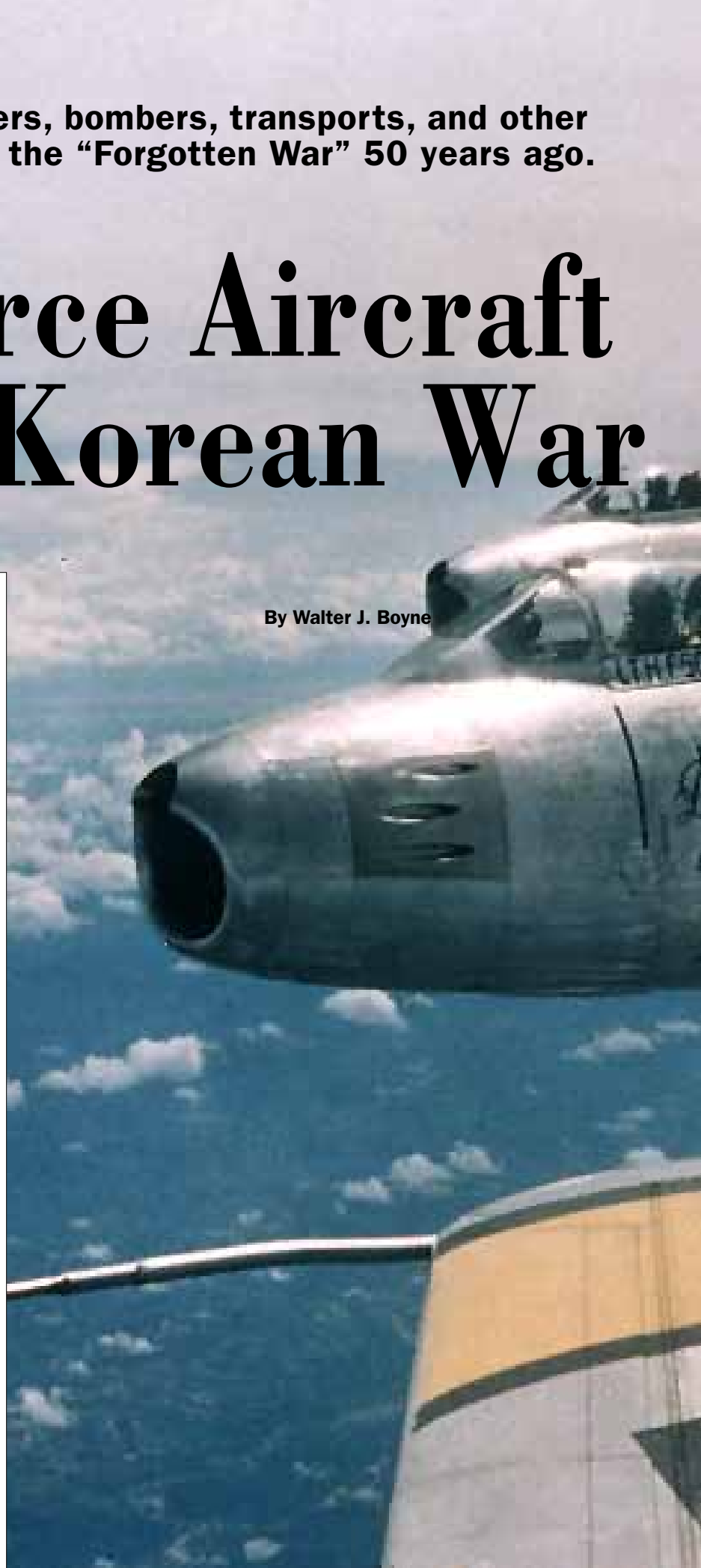
**By Walter J. Boyne**

**T**HE Korean War that was just starting to unfold 50 years ago became the scene for some notable airpower firsts—and lasts.

Korea was the first shooting war for the newly independent US Air Force. The war saw the first large-scale combat use of jet aircraft. Within months of the war's outbreak on June 25, 1950, Korea produced the first-ever jet-to-jet combat. The US military got its first taste of combat against Soviet aircraft, Soviet tactics, and, on some occasions, Soviet pilots.

On the other side of the coin, Korea marked the end of the line for prop-driven combat aircraft—in USAF, at any rate. The Korean War was the last (and only) time large numbers of piston-engine and jet-engine aircraft shared the wartime skies. It was the last US major war without at least some space support.

More generally, Korea marked either the beginning or the end for some famous and significant USAF airplanes. What follows is an accounting of some of the war's most important machines.



F-86 Sabres



## Fighter

**F-51 Mustang.** North American. The single-seat Mustang was first flown in 1940 and considered by many to have been the premier piston-engine fighter of World War II, when it was known as the P-51. It was especially valuable in Korea because it could operate from rough South Korean airfields. The Mustang was used primarily for close support of ground forces, until the aircraft type was withdrawn from combat in 1953. Powered by a 1,695-hp, liquid-cooled, Packard-built Rolls Royce Merlin power plant, the F-51 proved itself to be a capable ground attack and, as the F-6/RF-51D, reconnaissance aircraft.



Photo by Charles Scofield via Warren Thompson

**F-84 Thunderjet**

Photo by Evans Stephens via Warren Thompson



**F-80C Shooting Star**

**F-80 Shooting Star.** Lockheed. The Shooting Star was USAF's first operational jet fighter, making its first flight on Jan. 8, 1944. It operated extensively in Korea in the

ground attack role—primarily for low-level rocket, bomb, and napalm attacks on fixed targets—and as the RF-80 reconnaissance airplane. On Nov. 8, 1950, an F-80C flown by

USAF Lt. Russell J. Brown shot down a Russian-built MiG-15 in the world's first jet-to-jet air battle. Powered by a 4,600-pound static thrust Allison J33 engine, the F-80 did remarkable work at a variety of tasks in Korea.

**F-82 Twin Mustang.** North American. The Japan-based F-82s were among the first USAF aircraft to operate over Korea. The first three North Korean airplanes destroyed by US forces were shot down by F-82s on June 27, 1950. Called the Twin Mustang, the F-82 appeared to be two halves of an F-51 joined together with a wing center section and horizontal stabilizer. The aircraft first flew in 1945. It was intended for use as an ultra-long-range escort fighter and a night fighter. The F-82s were powered by two 1,600-hp Allison V-1710 engines. Used initially for counter-air and ground attack work, their importance as night fighters caused them to be withdrawn for defense

## Fighter Specifications

	Span	Length	Height	Gr. Wt.	Speed	Range	Ceiling
F-51	37 ft 0 in	32 ft 3 in	12 ft 2 in	11,600 lb	437 mph	950 miles	41,900 ft
F-80	39 ft 11 in	34 ft 6 in	11 ft 4 in	16,856 lb	580 mph	1,380 miles	42,750 ft
F-82	51 ft 7 in	42 ft 2 in	13 ft 10 in	25,891 lb	461 mph	2,250 miles	38,900 ft
F-84	36 ft 5 in	38 ft 5 in	12 ft 7 in	23,525 lb	540 mph	1,500 miles	40,500 ft
F-86	37 ft 1 in	37 ft 6 in	14 ft 8 in	16,357 lb	672 mph	785 miles	48,300 ft
F-94	38 ft 11 in	40 ft 1 in	12 ft 8 in	16,844 lb	606 mph	905 miles	48,000 ft



purposes until a shortage of spare parts made it necessary to retire them from combat.

**F-84 Thunderjet.** Republic. The F-84, first flown on Feb. 28, 1946, arrived in Korea in December 1950. Initially assigned to B-29 escort duties, the F-84s soon gained fame in ground attack operations. Powered by 5,000-pound static thrust Allison J35 engines, the F-84's heavily laden takeoffs from Korean airfields were sometimes augmented by the use of strap-on jet bottles, a process known as JATO—Jet-Assisted Takeoff. F-84s were used to attack enemy airfields and even large targets like irrigation dams. The F-84 gained renown for daily attacks with bombs, rockets, and napalm on enemy railroads, bridges, supply depots, and troop concentrations. While unable to cope with the MiG-15 at high altitude, they were more effective at medium or low altitudes and scored several kills. RF-84s were used for reconnaissance.

**F-86 Sabre.** North American. The F-86 incorporated much German research into its design, employing a 35-degree swept wing and automatic leading edge slots. Flown for the first time in October 1947, the Sabre survived many initial teething problems to become the premier USAF fighter of the Korean War. By the end of hostilities, it had shot down 792



**F-94B**

MiGs, with a loss of only 76 Sabres—a victory ratio of 10-to-1. The first models to see combat, the F-86A, were powered by a 5,270-pound static thrust General Electric J47 engine. Later models of the F-86 were more powerful and used both for air-to-air and ground support. The RF-86 was used for reconnaissance.

**F-94A/B.** Lockheed. An offshoot of the T-33, which was in turn a development of the F-80, the F-94 was a two-place all-weather interceptor first flown in 1949. The power plant was

an Allison J33 of 6,000 pounds thrust in afterburner—and it was the first US production jet equipped with afterburner. Because it carried a highly secret airborne radar system, the F-94s were at first not permitted to fly deep into enemy territory. Ironically, the F-94 radar was not very effective on night missions against MiGs. The major task of the F-94 was to protect Korean air bases against enemy intruders. (The F-94C, which was not used in Korea, was called Starfire; subsequently, the name has been applied to all F-94s.)

Photo by John Henderson via Warren Thompson

## Bomber

**B-26 Invader.** Douglas. Originally designated the A-26 Invader, the basic airplane first flew on July 10, 1942. It was redesignated B-26 Invader in 1948. A protracted development period kept it out of combat until 1944. Its performance during the war was exceptional, but after the war it was gradually retired. The B-26 Invaders in Japan proved to be invaluable in the night interdiction role, and it fell to the B-26 to fly the first and the last bombing missions of the Korean War. Powered by Pratt & Whitney R-2800 engines, the Invaders flew some 60,000 sorties and were credited with the destruction of 38,500 vehicles, 3,700 railway cars, and 406



**B-26 Invader**

Photo by John Syphrit via Warren Thompson



**B-29 Superfortress**

locomotives. The bombers were also used for reconnaissance, as RB-26s.

**B-29 Superfortress.** Boeing. The Superfortress first flew on Sept. 21, 1942, and contributed much to the victory over Japan. It was recalled to service for the Korean War, with many aircraft being plucked from

storage and refurbished. Powered by four Wright Cyclone R-3350 engines, the B-29s were effective as day bombers until the MiG-15 appeared. Thereafter, it was confined to night bombing against strategic and tactical targets. B-29s flew on all but 21 days of the 37-month war. In some 21,000 sorties they dropped

167,000 tons of bombs and claimed 16 MiGs and 17 other fighters shot down. At least 16 B-29s were shot down over North Korea, and as many as 48 were lost in crash landings or written off because of heavy damage after returning to base. The bombers were also used as reconnaissance, weather, and rescue aircraft.

**B-45 Tornado.** North American. The Tornado was the first USAF four-jet bomber, making its first flight on March 17, 1947. North American built a total of 142, including 10 long-range B-45Cs with wingtip fuel tanks and 33 RB-45s configured for high-altitude photoreconnaissance. Though the B-45 was available for combat in Korea, it was the RB-45 reconnaissance version that was used. First flown in April 1950, the RB-45 was powered by four General Electric J47 jet engines of about 6,000 pounds static thrust. The Tornados carried out risky night reconnaissance missions over North Korea. Only a small number were available, and while they were not adequately supported, they did yeoman work.

## Bomber Specifications

	Span	Length	Height	Gr. Wt.	Speed	Range	Ceiling
B-26	70 ft 0 in	50 ft 0 in	18 ft 6 in	35,000 lb	355 mph	1,400 miles	22,100 ft
B-29	141 ft 3 in	99 ft 0 in	29 ft 7 in	137,500 lb	364 mph	4,200 miles	32,000 ft
B-45	96 ft 0 in	75 ft 11 in	25 ft 2 in	110,721 lb	570 mph	2,530 miles	40,250 ft

## Transport

**C-46 Commando.** Curtiss. A derivative of a commercial passenger transport, the Commando's prototype first flew on March 26, 1940. The Commando was a radical departure from previous Curtiss transport designs and would perform exceptionally well in "the Hump" supply operation during World War II. The C-46, which had two Pratt & Whitney 2,000-hp engines, was operated both by USAF and by civil operators in the Korean War. It lived on to serve again in the Vietnam War.

**C-47 Skytrain.** Douglas. Officially known as Skytrain but affectionately



**C-46 Commando**



## Transport Specifications

	Span	Length	Height	Gr. Wt.	Speed	Range	Ceiling
C-46	108 ft 1 in	76 ft 4 in	21 ft 9 in	56,000 lb	269 mph	1,200 miles	27,600 ft
C-47	95 ft 6 in	63 ft 9 in	17 ft 0 in	26,000 lb	230 mph	1,600 miles	24,000 ft
C-54	117 ft 6 in	93 ft 10 in	27 ft 6 in	62,000 lb	265 mph	3,900 miles	22,000 ft
C-119	109 ft 3 in	86 ft 6 in	26 ft 6 in	72,700 lb	281 mph	1,630 miles	21,580 ft

referred to as “Gooney Bird,” the C-47 served as well in Korea as it had during World War II and as it would do again in Southeast Asia. During the Korean War, the C-47s hauled supplies, dropped paratroopers, evacuated the wounded, and pumped out flares to light the way for night bombing attacks. First flown as the DST (Douglas Sleeper Transport) on Dec. 17, 1935, and produced by the thousands during World War II, the C-47 was powered by two 1,200-hp Pratt & Whitney R-1830 engines. It was and is a classic aircraft.

**C-54 Skymaster.** Douglas. Originally designed in the 1930s as the DC-4A passenger transport, the C-54 was quickly adopted in World War II for military use. It served brilliantly



C-54 Skymaster

Photo by Ernie Banks via Warren Thompson



C-119 Flying Boxcar

in that war, as it did in the 1948–49 Berlin Airlift. A C-54 was the first USAF aircraft destroyed in the Korean War; one of the transports on the ground at Kimpo Airfield was strafed by North Korean aircraft on June 25, 1950. The C-54 was powered by four 1,290-hp Pratt & Whitney R-2000 engines and was a Military Air Transport Service workhorse throughout the war.

**C-119 Flying Boxcar.** Fairchild. The C-119 Flying Boxcar (officially called C-119 Packet) was used extensively in the Korean War. It was a development of the earlier C-82 Packet and was recognizable by its distinctive twin-boom podded fuselage layout. The C-119 first flew in November 1947 and was powered by the new and trouble-prone Pratt & Whitney R-4360 in some versions and the Wright R-3350 in others. Despite logistics problems that kept monthly flying time averages low, the C-119 worked well in Korea, dropping supplies, paratroopers, and outsize equipment. The latter included artillery, vehicles, and two-ton bridge spans.

Photo by Bob Groszner via Warren Thompson

## Reconnaissance/Observation

USAF-deployed reconnaissance versions of the B-26, B-29, B-45, F-51, F-80, F-84, and F-86 were all previously noted.

**AT-6 Texan.** North American. The famed Texan trainer found a new life in Korea as a forward air control aircraft. To meet an urgent operational need for close air support of ground forces, the Texans flew “mosquito” missions, spotting enemy troops and guns and marking them with smoke rockets for USAF fighter attack. The T-6s performed invaluable work.

**RB-17 Flying Fortress.** Boeing. The venerable Boeing B-17 was adapted for photographic mapping, reconnaissance, and, as the SB-17, rescue work. First flown on July 28, 1935, the B-17 went on to become a



AT-6 Texan

Photo by Harold L. Taylor via Warren Thompson

## Recce/Observation Specifications

	Span	Length	Height	Gr. Wt.	Speed	Range	Ceiling
AT-6	42 ft 0 in	29 ft 0 in	11 ft 9 in	5,155 lb	210 mph	630 miles	24,200 ft
RB-17	103 ft 9 in	74 ft 4 in	19 ft 1 in	65,500 lb	287 mph	2,000 miles	35,600 ft
RB-36	230 ft 0 in	162 ft 1 in	46 ft 8 in	328,000 lb	381 mph	8,000 miles	42,500 ft
RB-50	141 ft 3 in	99 ft 0 in	32 ft 8 in	170,000 lb	385 mph	4,650 miles	37,000 ft



RF-80 Shooting Star

workhorse of World War II. Powered by four Wright Cyclone R-1820 engines of 1,200 hp, the RB-17 operated in the Korean theater for three months in 1950 before being replaced.

**RB-36 Peacemaker.** Convair. The huge six-engine Peacemaker was also used for strategic reconnaissance. Like the RB-50A, the RB-36 operated out of Yokota with the 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron. The XB-36 prototype was first flown on Aug. 8, 1946, and was powered by six Pratt & Whitney R-4360 engines.

**RB-50 Superfortress.** Boeing. An uprated version of the B-29, the RB-50 was used for strategic reconnaissance during the Korean conflict. It operated out of Yokota AB, Japan, and was assigned to USAF's 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron. The B-50B, the version converted to reconnaissance status, was first flown on Jan. 14, 1949. It was powered by four Pratt & Whitney R-4360 engines.

Walter J. Boyne, former director of the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, is a retired Air Force colonel and author. He has written more than 400 articles about aviation topics and 29 books, the most recent of which is *Beyond the Horizons: The Lockheed Story*. His most recent article for *Air Force Magazine*, “The Forgotten War,” appeared in the June 2000 issue.