



No US ground troop has been killed in an
enemy aircraft attack since the Korean War.

April 15, 1953

By Peter Grier

The US Air Force is proud of the fact that no member of the American military's ground forces has been killed by an enemy air strike in more than half a century. It is an accomplishment officials have long believed speaks to the superiority of the American approach to airpower—and the need to pay the price in money and effort to maintain that superiority.

But history can be a great teacher. Perhaps there is something to be learned about the approach necessary to keep this US record going by looking back at that last ground fatality. The basic fact—no US ground troop has been killed in an attack by an enemy aircraft since 1953—is frequently repeated by airpower advocates. It neatly captures the importance of both air superiority and the Air Force's skill in dominating the skies.

But the details of that last successful enemy air attack are almost never mentioned. Who did it? What were the circumstances? What did the Air Force do in response?

Turns out, those are not easy questions to answer. However, it appears

that two Army soldiers, not one, were killed in that successful enemy air raid. It was near the end of the Korean War, and it occurred on an island off the peninsula's west coast—on what is today part of North Korea. The attack was carried out by a propeller-driven North Korean light aircraft.

In fact, it is highly possible, though not certain, the Army fatalities in question were due to a biplane attack—from a Soviet-designed model that first flew in 1927.

Asked for more details about the last soldier killed by enemy bombs, Air Force historians point to a passage about a particular attack in a classic book, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1950-1953*, by Robert F. Futrell, first published in 1961. Futrell writes about a strike that occurred on the night of April 15, 1953—about three months before the armistice that halted the Korean War.

"Based on the evidence we have, this is the last instance in which US ground forces sustained any deaths from enemy aircraft," says John Q. Smith, director of the Air Force Historical Studies Office.

For nearly two hours before midnight that evening, several communist aircraft attacked US forces based on Cho-do, an island in the Yellow Sea, off the North Korean coast. They killed two Army anti-aircraft artillerymen and destroyed an unspecified weapon. "Four F-94s went to the area, but the Reds kept too low to show up in the ground clutter on the airborne radar scopes," Futrell writes.

From the context of this passage, it is clear the attack in question was a so-called "Bed Check Charlie" raid. It is mentioned in a section Futrell devotes to these strikes, carried out by North Korean airmen flying light aircraft from airfields near the fighting front. One or two North Korean aircraft would appear over a US ground unit after lights-out, flying low and slow, drop a few bombs, and leave.

Often Bed Check Charlie flew a Po-2, a general-purpose biplane that for decades served the Soviet Union as a basic civilian and military trainer aircraft. Powered by a five-cylinder radial engine, the prototype Po-2 took to the skies in 1927. Mass production started shortly afterward and continued





A soldier keeps a look out while another grabs some rest in a foxhole in Korea.

for decades, and to this day the Po-2 remains one of the most produced aircraft in history.

The Soviets turned the biplane into a night attack craft in the 1940s by outfitting it with bombs. A significant number ended up in North Korean hands after the end of World War II.

The Last Air Attack

The Korean War was notable as the first conflict in which jet aircraft played a major role, as US F-86s clashed with MiG-15s flown by Chinese and Soviet pilots in a fight to control the air. But in this context, the Po-2 biplane also served North Korean forces as an effective weapon, and it countered the US edge in high technology.

Futrell's book does not specify what type of aircraft carried out the April 15, 1953, attack on Cho-do. But he notes that four Po-2s struck Cho-do in October 1952, dropping bombs and strafing radar installations. Two Americans were wounded in this incident, and five Korean civilians killed. Bed Check Charlie struck other locations using other piston light aircraft, including the Yak-18, a two-seat Soviet monoplane first used as a military trainer. But it seems likely the last Army casualties due to enemy bombs were from an attack by an airplane with two stacks of wings.

"The little fabric-covered biplanes were too elusive for United Nations night fighters," writes Futrell.

And who were the two US anti-aircraft artillery personnel killed by North Korean bombs on Cho-do that night? The island itself was an isolated outpost at the time. It is off the Korean coast, northwest from Seoul, part of the Taedong river estuary in North Korean territory.

During the Korean War, UN naval forces controlled Cho-do and other offshore islands. These locations served as radar, radio, and electronic intelligence stations. Special operations units used them to stage raids on the mainland.

"The occupation of these offshore islands ... was classified information at the time," writes historian David Rees in *The Korean War: History and Tactics*, published in 1984.

Cho-do was a constant target of North Korean harassment, including air raids. But anti-aircraft artillery was in short supply in the Korean theater, according to Futrell. US commanders could spare only one anti-aircraft battery for the island.

A quick look through lists of US units deployed during the Korean War provides specifics: It was A Battery of the 933rd Anti-Aircraft Artillery (Automatic Weapons) Battalion.

Casualty lists maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission provide the names of two soldiers from the 933rd who were killed on

April 15: Pfc. Herbert Tucker, of Ocean, N.J.; and Cpl. William R. Walsh, from Queens, N.Y.

"It does not say they were killed by an air strike, but that is a logical conclusion. ... Absolute confirmation of a claim like that can be tricky," says Smith.

It is thus likely, but not certain, that Tucker and Walsh were the last Army fatalities caused by enemy air action. Further evidence of this conclusion comes from an online unit memorial page for the 933rd maintained by the Korean War Project, a Dallas organization dedicated to collecting reference material about the conflict. It contains a lengthy missive from a former 933rd enlisted radio repairman named Albert Villanueva, a survivor of the attack in question.

On the night of April 15, 1953, Villanueva sat on a cot on the left-hand side of a tent on Cho-do island that he shared with fellow 933rd A Battery members, listening to the radio. Villanueva was on the island because he had volunteered for the isolated post after learning that doing so would cut six months off his Korean tour of duty.

Three months into his tour at Cho-do, and so far, things were pretty quiet, he remembered. The barracks tent was on the slope of a hill facing away from the North Korean mainland. Occasionally, he and his comrades would hike to the top of the hill and watch the North Koreans shell the village down on the beach. "We were reckless to stand there and watch the shells land. The enemy never shelled us, though they could have easily raised their sights and fired away at us," he wrote in an account on the KWP in 2002.

On that April night, the radio was on because Villanueva had tired of



North Korean "Bed Check Charlie" attackers often flew the Polikarpov Po-2, such as this one in Russian military markings. The light biplane could fly low enough to hide among the ground clutter.

Courtesy of Andrey Zhirnov collection

participating in a loud discussion about baseball. The others were still going at it: Tucker and his buddy Walsh.

The Gist of the Matter

Without warning, Villanueva felt himself surrounded by a tremendous rush of air pressure. The scene in front of his eyes went black. A powerful force picked him up, shook him, and threw him to the floor.

Through the ringing in his ears, he could hear tent mates shouting to find out who was all right. His right arm and leg did not seem to work. With his left arm, he felt up and down his right side and was relieved to discover that his body was still in one piece, according to his account of the incident. Villanueva was seriously wounded. He would spend months recuperating in a hospital in Japan. But he was the lucky one.

"The gist of the matter was that Pfc. Herbert Tucker and William Walsh were both instantly killed by the blast," wrote Villanueva.

Tucker is buried at the Toms River Jewish Cemetery, Toms River, N.J., according to Korean War Project records. Walsh is interred at Long Island National Cemetery, Farmingdale, N.Y.

In the wake of the fatal bombing, US commanders attempted to bolster their defenses against the air attacks. They added anti-aircraft guns and tried to modify available aircraft to make them better able to destroy slow-flying targets. One base commander secured a B-26 bomber with 14 forward-firing machine guns, for instance, and obtained an armed T-6 trainer. But then, an F-94 crashed after it throttled back to 110 mph in pursuit of a Po-2 biplane. After that mishap, US aircraft were restricted from flying below 2,000 feet or slower than 160 mph.

Meanwhile, Bed Check Charlie increased his activities. North Korean light airplanes continued to hit Cho-do, Seoul, and other nearby targets almost every night of June 1953.

On the night of June 15, a flight of nine rattled Seoul, with some of their bombs dropping near the mansion of South Korean President Syngman Rhee. The next night saw an even more intensive raid, as 15 light Po-2s, Yak-18s, and Lavochkin La-11 piston-engine fighters started fires in Seoul and touched off a blaze at Inchon that burned up five million gallons of fuel. These repeated attacks did not, however, kill any American ground troops.

"Before another period of bright moonlight brought a resumption of the 'Bed Check Charlie' attacks, the Fifth Air Force had to find some solutions to the night-heckler raids," writes Futrell.

Commanders instituted a comprehensive defensive approach. Control of anti-aircraft guns was centralized at the Kimpo tactical air direction center. The number of radars on the air defense surveillance network was reduced, so as to keep from swamping operators with false and redundant returns. Intelligence redoubled its efforts to locate the fields Bed Check Charlie was staging from. And Air Force commanders borrowed four old, slower flying Corsair F4U-5N fighters and crews from the US Navy.

"When the Reds renewed their probing raids at the end of June, the Fifth Air Force was ready," writes Futrell. In the early hours of June 30, Lt. Guy P. Bordelon, a Navy Corsair pilot from the carrier USS *Princeton*, found two enemy targets with the help of ground-based radar. He shot down both, which he identified as Yak-18s. The next night Bordelon destroyed two more Bed Check Charlie aircraft. It turned out the old, seemingly obsolete World War II-era Corsair was still a deadly and efficient weapon against biplanes and prop trainers.

Navy Vice Adm. J. J. Clark was so impressed by Bordelon's exploits that he personally flew to meet him and presented him with two Silver Stars. He promised the young aviator a Navy Cross if he bagged a fifth North Korean aircraft. On the night of July 16, Bordelon did just that, near Pyongyang.

Bordelon was the first and only Navy ace of the Korean War, which ended by armistice only one week after his final victory. Bordelon was "the first man to become an ace by getting there last with the least," wrote a *Life* magazine reporter on July 27, 1953.

The Bed Check Charlie raids were not militarily damaging to UN forces, but



F-86s line the ramp at an air base in Korea in 1951. The F-86 was effective against the MiG-15, but slow-flying biplanes proved hard to find and kill.

were a deadly nuisance and a distraction. "The 'Bed Check Charlie' crews ... demonstrated that an air defense system could seldom be perfect, and they showed a need for dispersed air facilities and passive air defense," writes Futrell.

The Air Force clearly learned the lessons from Korea well. Training, discipline, planning, and advanced aircraft and technology, properly applied, have secured the skies and defeated a wide range of threats. Since 1953, USAF has flawlessly provided top cover to the American ground troops at war in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the sites of many smaller skirmishes.

In those intervening decades, Air Force pilots have had ample opportunity to demonstrate their close air support and air interdiction skills, and have repeatedly defended US ground troops and killed enemy forces in the field. For 58 years and counting, however, American ground troops have not had to worry about enemy aircraft overhead about to strafe them or drop bombs on their heads. ■

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