Formosan laborers in field seem almost oblivious of gleaming F-104 visible in background.

Starfighters on FORMOSA

John G. Norris

TAIPEI, FORMOSA

ONE DAY last September during the heat of the Quemoy crisis, when the question of success of the Red blockade and possible American combat intervention hung in the balance, radar operators on both sides of the Formosa Strait blinked their eyes.

An aircraft blip moved across their radar scopes faster than anything they had ever seen. Quick calculation showed that it was traveling twice the speed of sound. On Formosa, top American and Chinese Nationalist officers smiled and reassured lower-ranking military men who hadn’t gotten the word.

The 1,400-mile-an-hour Lockheed F-104s had arrived on Formosa!

It was probably several days—after their presence on Formosa was announced—before Red Chinese air commanders on the mainland knew definitely what their early-warning network had picked up moving so fast over the Strait. They, of course, knew about the F-104 Starfighter—sometimes called the “missile with a man in it”—and they must have been pretty sure that the blip was an American fighter.

We can’t know for sure exactly what the reaction was in Peiping. But almost certainly the arrival of the USAF’s hottest interceptor influenced the Reds’ decision to stay away from American planes and ships protecting—the three-mile-limit—the Chinese Nationalist supply ships running the Red artillery blockade. The presence of these planes doubtless also contributed to the Reds’ ultimate backdown.

Red Chinese pilots, flying superior-performing MIG-17 fighters, had been taking a bad licking from Chiang’s crack USAF-trained airmen flying obsolescent North American F-86 Sabrejets, and they hardly wanted to tangle with a plane that is more than twice as fast and holds the official world’s speed and altitude records of 1,404 mph and 91,249 feet.

This Peiping reaction, of course, was precisely what Washington wanted. It was the one reason why the first F-104 was rushed into the Formosan skies only twenty-four hours after it had landed on Formosa inside a Douglas C-124 Globemaster. Air Force mechanics worked through the night putting its wings back on and getting the first Starfighter ready to fly.

When 1st Lt. Crosley J. Fitton made (Continued on following page)
that first flight over Formosa and the western part of the Strait, so soon after arrival of the partially dismantled plane, many of the military men in the know must have been surprised. One of the nice things about a fighter deployment overseas in this manner is that the planes arrive ready to fly except for a few things like bolting on the wings.

The F-104 deployment, plus other reinforcements of American muscle in the area, marked another striking instance in which mobile airpower—and seapower—was successfully employed to further American foreign policy. The earlier flight of a Tactical Air Force Composite Air Strike Force (CASF) from California to Far East bases, the movement of a Marine Air Group from Japan to Formosa (and its replacement in Japan by another such group from Hawaii), the bolstering of the Seventh Fleet, the shipment of an Army Nike-Hercules battalion from Texas to Formosa, and movements of Pacific Air Force units in the area all contributed to the desired show of American power and determination.

Gen. Laurence S. Kuter, Pacific Air Forces commander, views the across-the-Pacific USAF deployment in such a relatively short time as a dramatic demonstration of the rapid advance of airpower. He recalled in an interview that when he was a young pilot it took his squadron of Keystone bombers six weeks to move from the US to Panama. General Kuter praised the successful rapid movement of Century series fighters from California to bases on Formosa, Okinawa, and the Philippines by “young men three years out of flying school” without mishap, even when they had to refuel in the air four times.

Actually, the CASF deployment, commanded by Brig. Gen. Avelin P. Tacon, commander of the 831st Air Division at George AFB, Calif., could have been made even faster if the need had been great enough to justify additional risks. The first elements of the force left August 28, arriving in the Far East on August 30—a week after the Reds opened their heavy bombardment of Quemoy. The first F-100s took off August 30 and arrived September 2.

But there was other air strength on the scene. Some Thirteenth Air Force F-100s, based at Clark AFB in the Philippines, were at Naha, Okinawa, taking part in an air gunnery meet, when the shooting started. Within twelve hours, the first of them were in Formosa.

In their attempt to impress the Red Chinese, the Thirteenth Air Force moved in some F-100s and F-86Ds that were almost ready for overhaul and replaced them in a few days. One reason was to make a great show of force with the limited air strength available by such movement of fast planes in and out of Formosan fields, where the traffic could easily be observed by the Red Chinese warning system.

To assure absolute reliability required by the tense situation, F-104s were testflown after their arrival on Formosa.
While the bulk of the Air Force units deployed from the States flew in under their own power, the most dramatic and newsworthy part of the aerial reinforcement was the F-104 movement. TAC has made many CASF overseas training movements, and made its first possible combat deployment in a similar situation when the Middle East crisis developed last summer. Deployment of the 83d Fighter-Interceptor Squadron was the first such emergency movement overseas of an Air Defense Command unit, which are not expected to be as mobile as TAC and SAC units.

Secret orders to prepare for an overseas move were given the 83d Squadron at Hamilton AFB, Calif., the day after Labor Day. The commanding officer, Lt. Col. John W. Bennett, was on leave, fishing in the north California mountains and couldn't be reached immediately. Maj. Carl H. Leo, his executive officer, worked out plans for the deployment with Western Air Defense headquarters and other commands.

Military Air Transport Service provided the C-124s and worked out details of loading for the transpacific move. For WESTAF—MAT's Western Division—this was only part of the big job handed it of supporting the Far East buildup. At the end of the week Colonel Bennett returned, and the squadron learned of its orders and started moving out. The first C-124 arrived at a Chinese Air Force base on Formosa late on September 10, the rest arriving within a week. By late in the month the unit was integrated in the joint air defenses of the island.

At first there was a lack of housing. Sergeants and airmen working on the F-104s took turns sleeping in the noisy, lighted hangars as work went on around the clock to make the aircraft operational.

A separate support squadron formed from Air Force personnel in the Far East was created to handle messing, medical, and other needs. A tent city was built for the enlisted men. Officers and some noncoms fared better, as the Chinese turned over a billet for their use, comparable to temporary USAF housing in many overseas spots.

After things quieted down on Que moy, waiting on five-minute alert in the bamboo shack near the "hot pad" became boring. Torn from the comforts of Hamilton Field, griping in the group became inevitable, and the chant of pilots and airmen, "56, 57, 58, I hate this lousy place," was picked up by Chinese GIs and the ever-present children, most of whom didn't understand what they were singing. Later, the 337th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron (Continued on following page)
Crewmen stand by as one of the pilots of the 83d F-1 Squadron gets ready to taxi his Starfighter out for a test flight. The 337th has replaced the 83d.

was sent to replace the 83d, manning the same F-104s.

At this writing nothing had been reported, but pilots have been a bit concerned over the practice of GCI sending Chinas F-86s off from one end of the strip, necessarily into the wind, while the powerful F-104s are allowed to start downwind. The long strip has a hump in the middle, obscuring the view, and more than one American has wondered what he would do if he met another plane coming at him halfway down.

Support of the USAF units moved into Formosa from the United States and other Far East bases was made much easier because a hard core of supply elements already existed. A Matador squadron has been here for some time, planes of Maj. Gen. Thomas S. Moorman's Thirteenth Air Force, and Lt. Gen. Robert W. Burns' Fifth Air Force have been moving in and out of Chinese bases in preparation for just such an emergency, and of course the USAF section of the Military Assistance Advisory Group, under Maj. Gen. Fred M. Dean, has been supporting the crack Chinese Nationalist Air Force.

A command snafu existed at the start because many of the units moving in were part of the Thirteenth Air Force. Adm. Harry D. Felt, Pacific commander in chief, solved the situation to the apparent satisfaction of all by giving Vice Adm. Roland Smoot, Taiwan Defense Command chief, operational command and making General Dean his deputy. General Dean is also General Moorman's deputy. General Tacon became General Dean's deputy.

Throughout the Formosan buildup, American commanders were careful not to weaken the Fifth Air Force, based opposite Soviet Siberia and northern China. US strength in that area, in fact, was bolstered.

For Communist airpower in the Far East, even after the USAF augmentation, still vastly outnumbers the air strength of the United States and its allies.

Red China's air force now totals about 3,000 planes, of which nearly 2,000 are jets—more than 300 IL-28 light bombers and from 1,600 to 1,800 fighters, more than half of them MIG-15s, and most of the rest MIG-17s.

The Soviet Far East Air Force totals more than 4,000 planes, including about 100 Badger medium jet bombers, about 500 IL-28s, and 1,600 jet fighters. The latter are mainly MIG-17s, but also include MIG-15s and MIG-19s. There are some 240 allweather fighters. Add to this a North Korean air force, which includes 100 IL-28s and 300 MIG-15s.

Against this array, USAF had at peak something over 600 first-line combat planes in the Far East. There are more than two wings of F-100D fighter-bombers, about two wings of F-86D all-weather fighters, a SAC B-47 wing in the Mariannas, the F-104 squadron, an F-101 squadron, and nearly 100 B-57 bombers.

In addition there are two Marine air groups, Navy carrier planes now sharply cut from the 500-plus total at the peak, the Chinese Nationalist Air Force of some 400 F-86s and F-84s, and considerably lesser forces in the Korean and Philippine air forces. As this went to press, USAF confirmed that the CASF would be withdrawn.

Western airpower has a big edge in quality of planes and pilots but also a big weakness in lack of depth in air bases. There are about 200 modern Communist jet air bases in the Far East, extending deep into China and Siberia, many times the number of such fields available to American air forces, most of which are close to the mainland and thus vulnerable.

In a war fought with conventional "ironbombs," Western air forces therefore would be a great disadvantage. But, at least against Red China, the nuclear firepower of the force deployed to the Far East in the Quemoy emergency amounted to tremendous strength.

This time the available forces were strong enough. No one can say about another time.—End

The author, John G. Norris, military analyst for the Washington Post and Times Herald, is just back from seven weeks in the Far East, half of that time on Formosa and Quemoy. A veteran of thirty years of military reporting, Mr. Norris' Washington beat is the Pentagon.