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Bombs Away!

The bomber force isn't what it used to be

by Louis A. Arana-Barradas
opening photo courtesy Charles Hinton

Bombs away!

It's a phrase that dates back to when air men first started dropping bombs from their wood and fabric biplanes. To the infancy of aerial bombing.

Those early attempts — before and during World War I — laid the foundation for what would become aerial bombing. Though as primitive as the concept of airpower, the unprecedented tactic caught on fast.

In the decades after the war, nations raced to develop their own aerial bomber force. Some of those countries clashed in World War II, where aerial bombardment got its first big test.

"The bomber formations were so big, you couldn't see from one end to another," said Jim Braly, who flew a B-17 Flying Fortress for 8th Air Force over Europe. "It was a sight to see."

But flying the mostly carpet-bombing missions over Europe was a nightmare, he said.

Still, Hollywood made a host of movies about bomber crews at war, trying to glamorize their roles. The movies focused on their courage and sacrifice under fire. But bomber losses were horrendous, and tens of thousands of airmen died.

Today's Air Force bomber crews can get up in the morning, jump in their aircraft, fly a mission half a world away and return home the next day. It's a familiar way of life at Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, where the B-1 Lancer reigns supreme. And a job for which crews like (left to right) Lt. Col.

There was a lot of drama in the movies' bomb-run scenes. Flak burst everywhere. Excited crewmembers fought to control their bombers and fight off enemy fighters, which dove through and shot up the huge bomber formations — some of which had thousands of airplanes.

Charlie Catoe and Capts. Marc London, Dave Marten and Mike Ray have plenty of training on the schedule. That wasn't the case 50 years ago, when bombing missions by B-26 crews were hit or miss.

The bombardier always worried, waiting for a break in the clouds. Then he'd look through the Norden bombsight, bouncing in his seat from the flak bursts, release the bombs and utter "bombs away" — which became a catch phrase. Below, the bombs left a polka-dot path of destruction. Then the planes would hightail it for home.

It was different in the Korean War, where Braly flew the smaller Douglas B-26 Invader with the 13th Bombardment Squadron (Light) — "The Devil's Own Grim Reapers" — of the 3rd Bombardment Group (Light). In late 1950, it started to fly "Hoot Owl" night missions from Kunsan Air Base, South Korea. It continued to bomb communist targets until the July 1953 cease-fire.

"As soon as we dropped our bombs, I'd turn the plane around and get the hell out of there," said Braly, who had 50 combat missions. "We bombed the North, and all our bases were in the South. So it was easy to get home."

Charlie Hinton, Braly's navigator for most of his missions, was a fuzz-faced kid when he went from navigator school straight into combat in Korea. It was a tough job. And unlike World War II's massive daylight and nighttime bombing raids, Invaders in Korea were solitary hunters.

"We went out there on our own, in the dark. One plane, one crew, one target," said Hinton, who also flew 50 combat missions. "I never flew a formation bombing mission in Korea."

Things changed

That was 50 years ago, and a much different Air Force. It has grown up since then. Its people, training, weapons and technology are top-notch. And it has spread its wings into space.

The advent of guided munitions during the Vietnam War helped. And the modern super weapons continued to evolve. So did advances in the space program. Today, with its highly trained, combat-tested, state-of-the-art force, the Air Force has made a quantum leap in its ability to conduct aerial warfare and bombing.

Then-Capt. Jim Braly knew how to fly the B-26 before arriving at Kunsan. But many of his fellow pilots weren't as lucky. Today Braly lives in Tulsa, Okla.

Thanks, in part, to some forward-thinking airmen of Braly and Hinton's time.

"We were caught off guard in Korea because we weren't ready. The war proved we needed a strong military, not a token force," Hinton said. "We recognized we were weak. The Air Force decided to change that. That's why it has such good people, training and weapons today."

Braly and Hinton's unit, which dates back to World War I, is still in the bombing business. Redesignated the 13th Bomb Squadron, it's now part of the 7th Bomb Wing at Dyess Air Force Base, Texas. Its B-1 Lancer bombers deploy to forward bases closer to the battlefield. But the sleek gray jets can also hit targets flying round trip, daylong missions from their home base.

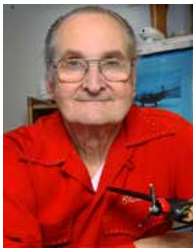
"There's very little guesswork in aerial bombing now, and there are so many players involved," said Hinton, who retired as a major in 1969. "You can drop laser-guided bombs without ever seeing your target. It's amazing."

More amazing is just how accurate aerial bombing has gotten. That fact first came into the limelight during the Gulf War in 1991. Scenes of guided "smart" bombs hitting targets in downtown Baghdad were commonplace on prime time newscasts. At Pentagon briefings, a spokesperson could tell the media, "The bomb will go through this window" — and it would.

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, news teams reported the effect of coalition bombing on Baghdad as bombs hit their targets behind them.

From the Gulf War, through Operation Enduring Freedom and then in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Americans saw just how far pinpoint aerial bombing — day and night — had advanced. How accurate it had become. It meant fewer aircrews and aircraft lost, much less collateral damage and fewer "friendly fire" incidents.

"In Korea we were lucky just to find the target," said Braly, who retired from the Air Force as a colonel in 1966. "Thank God I had good night vision." Still, to find targets, the planes had to fly low, at treetop level. There was no other way — no night vision goggles.



As a young second lieutenant right out of navigator school, Charles Hinton went into combat with no training, but knew he had a job to do. He learned by doing, and today lives in Melbourne, Fla.

"That puts you in a totally different category," he said. "Because when you're on the deck, you only have a few seconds to make a decision," he said. "One mistake and you were screwed."

Needless to say, nighttime bombing in Korea was hit or miss, Hinton said. It depended on the night vision abilities of the aircrews, the accuracy of aircraft that dropped parachute flares over targets "or just plain luck." The Invaders had to do a kind of modified dive-bombing, he said.

"We'd go in low, at a 20-to 30-degree angle, and try to spot our target," he said. "Then we'd calculate the distance, drop our bombs and hope we'd hit the target. It was very inaccurate."

Staying ready

It's different today. There's more time to get ready. Aircrews get most targets in flight, loitering until then. The planning stage can take longer than the mission itself. And crews can even "fly" a mission on a computer before the real thing.

As in the early 1950s, the squadron's mission is the same: stay ready to drop bombs on target. Today, however, it also supports training at the Air Force's weapons school and helps the service's operational test and evaluation group.

"But our main job is still to train new aircrews to be combat mission ready," said Lt. Col. Charlie Catoe, a B-1 aircraft commander. He flew 18 combat missions over Afghanistan.

He said today's pilots have much to learn, absorb and practice because of the sophisticated aircraft they fly. To stay combat ready takes constant upgrade, training and practice. But the aircrews are not necessarily smarter than those of the Korean War.

"We're just working with newer tools," he said. "And ours are a heck of a lot better."

Catoe, who has 2,000 Lancer flying hours — 150 in combat — said today's bomber crews work extensively with tactics, techniques and weapons. They must learn to deal with different and ever-changing dangers. And they know the strengths and weaknesses of the aircraft systems.

"Our guys are smart enough to know what employment method works best with each weapon they use in each situation — just like the guys who fought in Korea," he said.

Catoe and Marten prepare for a training flight, something they do often. Before flying an operational mission, B-1 Lancer crews will train for more than a year. They often spend more time planning than executing a mission.

It's the training that sets apart the Korean War and modern aircrews, Braly and Hinton said.

Braly had the good fortune to receive combat crew training before he went to Korea. It lasted three months at what was then Langley Field, Va. But since he'd flown B-17s, he had several thousand hours of flight and combat time and knew about bombing and gunnery. That gave him a huge edge over other pilots when he got to Korea.

"But a lot of our boys never got any training," he said. "They showed up and weren't even qualified to fly the B-26. They went into combat unprepared — and we paid dearly for it."

Hinton was one of those who didn't receive training. He went straight to Korea, where he was surprised to find his unit didn't even have a training program. All he got were two check — "dollar" — rides in the B-26, where he sat in an extra seat.

His first ride was a milk run to pick up supplies in Japan. The second was to scout a good location for his squadron commander to go duck hunting. Then he went on two combat runs, sitting in a jump seat behind the primary navigator. On his third combat mission, he went solo.

With a bulky electric suit to combat the minus 40 degree weather in the unheated plane, he had to hold a small flashlight in his mouth to read the charts and maps. And he had to calculate distance and time to target in his head.

"I had to shuffle back and forth from charts to maps as I tried to find out where we were dropping the bombs," he said. "And all the time, my feet would be freezing."

But the fact he didn't receive training didn't bother him. He remembered thinking, " 'I'm here, so I'll do my job.' Because that's how you did the job then, the way it was."

Training's the key

Today it's much different.

When he got to Dyess, Capt. Dave Marten knew he had no chance of going into combat without at least one year of B-1 upgrade, familiarization and combat training.

Marten went through the B-1 schoolhouse at Dyess to get his basic qualifications training — to learn how to fly the jet. That took eight

months. Then he joined the 13th at the base and went through another four months of mission qualification training.

“You know how to fly the airplane when you get to the unit,” he said. “But it’s there you learn how to fight with it,” said Marten, who has 350 hours in the Lancer.

Throwing crews into the war with no training didn’t sit right with Braly. He said the light bombers took off “heavy” with bombs and fuel, so there was little margin for error. Pilots who hadn’t checked out on the Invader learned as they flew. But taking off from Kunsan was tough on nights with no moon or stars.

“It was like taking off into the middle of a barrel of tar,” he said. “Some of those poor guys took off on a dark night and flew right into the water. We lost half a dozen crews that way.”

The unit lost 18 aircraft during Braly’s nine months in Korea.

Fifty years after the signing of the armistice that ended the fighting in Korea, the Air Force doesn’t have those problems. It trains like it fights.

“Back then, you learned in combat — something unheard of today,” Braly said. “Today, you fly in the vicinity of the target and an [airborne warning and control system aircraft] tells you where the target is. Then you aim your laser at it, drop your bombs and go home.”

The technology used in Korea was state-of-the-art for its time, Hinton said.

“But you still had to rely on your ‘Mark I Eyeball’ to tell where you were, where the commies were and where your target was,” he said.

When bombers go after a target today, they take a host of friends with them. These strike packages, as they’re called — while not anywhere as large as World War II formations — can still have more than 100 aircraft. They include fighters, reconnaissance and surveillance, command and control, radar suppression, tankers and other aircraft.

“We don’t have to depend on the crew’s eyes for a successful mission,” Marten said. “We have a huge eyeball in the sky that can find, identify and give us our targets.”

Plus, in the modern battlefield, communication plays a more vital role. Everyone in the air and on the ground is listening to what everybody else is doing and what’s going on, Catoe said. It gives everyone involved better situational awareness, which is key in any battle.

“And everyone wears night vision goggles at night,” he said.

The Lancers can take off with targets already programmed into their mission plan. Or they can loiter over the battlefield and wait for an AWACS aircraft to give them targets. On one mission, carrying a variety of weapons, a Lancer can strike 24 targets.

"During a well-planned, well-coordinated attack, we usually employ our weapons at about 25,000 feet — five miles up," said Capt. Mark London, a B-1 navigator and offensive and defensive weapons systems officer. "And we'll see the explosions most of the time."

Braly said, "We were lucky if we could drop the few bombs we had on one target."

Today's crews would have been called "pussycats" in Braly and Hinton's time. These were crews content to drop their bombs from high altitude to avoid tangling with the enemy close to the ground. On the other hand, those who dove to the treetops — who braved small arms and antiaircraft fire to put eyes on target and came back with mud on their windshields — were "tigers." Braly and Hinton were tigers.

The nicknames wouldn't fit today. Radar, global positioning systems, satellite- and laser-guided munitions, thermal imaging, night vision goggles and a host of other technologies have made stand off and fire one of the ways of doing business in the bomber world. And with aerial refueling, the jets can fly as long as their crews can last.

London has more than 1,000 hours in the Lancer — 158 in combat. He has 18 combat missions over Afghanistan. Capt. Mike Ray, also an offensive and defensive weapons systems officer, has more than 800 hours in the Lancer, 170 in combat. He flew 18 missions over Afghanistan.

Every other mission, they switch roles. One takes the "O" seat, the other the "D" seat. The one in the O seat is the navigator and radar operator, in charge of all offensive weapons systems — which also makes him the bombardier. The one in the D seat handles the airplane's defensive systems, responsible for electronic counter-jamming of enemy radars trying to lock onto the bomber and punching chaff or flares if an enemy gets a shot off at them.

In the D seat, Ray said, "You do whatever it takes to protect the jet."

In either seat, neither would ever get to put their eyes on target, as Braly and Hinton did, since the aircraft has no windows for the O and D.

Bomber crew members, old and new, have an opinion on what makes today's Air Force as good and lethal as it is.

"We have excellent people and training," London said. "But it's the technology that has advanced the Air Force to where it is."

Braly and Hinton, both in their late 70s now, agree. But they mostly marvel at how much the Air Force has changed since they suited up, stepped into their twin-engine bombers and flew off in search of targets in North Korea.

They still call each other often and retell war stories at their squadron's yearly reunion. Both are proud of their service in Korea and consider it an important part of their lives. And both marvel at the way the Air Force has changed, especially in the way it does aerial bombing.

Hinton remembers that without training, his life was in Braly's hands. A sobering thought since other navigators said Braly was "just too crazy to fly with." He smiles about that now.

"I survived because I depended on Jim Braly to get us through," he said. "And he did."

Braly said the airmen who fly today's bombers are in a class of their own.

Even though they have all the technological advances to make them the best in the world, they still depend on each other to get the job done. That, he said, hasn't changed since his time.

"In Korea, we flew the best we could with what we had," Braly said. "Bomber crews are still doing that."