

323 STRATEGIC RECONNAISSANCE SQUADRON (MEDIUM)



MISSION

LINEAGE

323 Bombardment Squadron (Heavy) constituted, 28 Jan 1942
Activated, 15 Apr 1942
Inactivated, 7 Nov 1945
Redesignated 323 Reconnaissance Squadron, 11 Jun 1947
Activated, 1 Jul 1947
Inactivated, 10 Nov 1948
Redesignated 323 Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron, 16 May 1949
Activated, 1 Jun 1949
Redesignated 323 Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron (Medium), 1 Nov 1950
Inactivated, 8 Nov 1957

STATIONS

Harding Field, LA, 15 Apr 1942
MacDill Field, FL, 13 May 1942
Walla Walla, WA, 22 Jun-24 Aug 1942
Kimbolton, England, 13 Sep 1942
Bassingbourn, England, 14 Oct 1942-22 Jun 1945
Drew Field, FL, 3 Jul-7 Nov 1945
Andrews Field, MD, 1 Jul 1947
McGuire AFB, NJ, 19 Jul-10 Nov 1948
McGuire AFB, NJ, 1 Jun 1949
Forbes AFB, KS, 19 Sep 1949

Barksdale AFB, LA, 10 Oct 1949
Lockbourne AFB, OH, 11 Sep 1951-8 Nov 1957
McGuire AFB, NJ, 20 Jul 1948-19 Sep 1949

ASSIGNMENTS

91st Bombardment Group, 15 Apr 1942-7 Nov 1945
91st Reconnaissance Group, 1 Jul 1947-10 Nov 1948
91st Strategic Reconnaissance Group, 1 Jun 199
91st Strategic Reconnaissance Wing, 28 May 1952-8 Nov 1957

ATTACHMENTS

55th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing, 19 Sep 10 Oct 1949

WEAPON SYSTEMS

B-17, 1942-1945
B/RB-17, 1949
B/RB-29, 1949-1950
WRB-45, 1950-1952
RB-47, 1953-1957

COMMANDERS

Maj Raymond T. Eakes, #1950

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Air Offensive, Europe
Normandy
Northern France
Rhineland
Ardennes-Alsace
Central Europe
Air Combat, EAME Theater

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

Distinguished Unit Citations
Hamm, Germany, 4 Mar 1943
Germany, 11 Jan 1944

Air Force Outstanding Unit Award
8 Sep 1953-8 Nov 1957

EMBLEM



323 Bombardment Squadron, Heavy emblem: The insignia shows an angry goat hurtling through space on a huge bomb. The bomb, exemplifying heavy bombardment and the goat exemplifying the squadron mascot which accompanied this organization from the time of activation until departure from the states for an overseas destination. The goat was cared for by the ordnance section and could always be found riding on the hood of the ordnance vehicles. It was from this association that he was named Amatol. The goat, as a mascot along with his strange name prompted the adoption of the insignia as identifying this as a heavy bombardment squadron.

323 Reconnaissance Squadron emblem: On a blue disk an eagle (grey with white head and tail and yellow beak and feet in flight and carrying a red aerial bomb in his right foot and a black camera in his left with wings extending over a crescent shaped cloud formation issuing from a white ram-jet, with red exhaust) in dexter [sinister] chief, and extending downwards around the disc and ending over a yellow spinning globe (with grey-blue land areas, black longitude and latitude lines and white speed lines) in center base. (Approved, 23 Oct 1953)

MOTTO

OPERATIONS

Combat in ETO, 7 Nov 1942-17 Apr 1945.

Pilots and ground personnel from the 323 Reconnaissance Squadron, 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Wing, were already at Langley AFB undergoing training on the B-45 MTU, they were months away from being qualified.⁴ By default, it fell upon the 363rd Tactical Reconnaissance Group, Tactical Air Command, to provide pilots with any B-45 proficiency despite their own unfamiliarity with reconnaissance. It was decided that volunteers culled from the 84th and 85th Bombardment squadrons at Langley would deploy back to Barksdale for a 30-day crash course in photographic techniques. This mixing of TAC crews with SAC or ConAC

machines may have ruffled feathers in certain quarters, but it proved the only practical expedient for getting Tornados in theater as quickly as possible. This new, top-secret unit received the official designation of Detachment 4149A, 84th Bombardment Squadron more simply known as Detachment A.

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Documentation remains spotty as to this highly classified assignment, but certain key figures are known. Detachment commander was 31-year-old Captain Charles E. McDonough, of New London, Connecticut. Previously he had flown B-25s in North Africa and Italy and was now one of the most experienced B-45 pilots at Langley. McDonough's presence here did not surprise those who knew him, for he was a six-foot, three-inch daredevil by nature. "Charlie was a character," Major Joseph Story recalls. "I just want to compare him to a Robert Mitchum type. He smoked cigars, nothing was too hard, he could do it. Charlie just volunteered to go and away he went."

McDonough was seconded by another imposing individual, 30-year-old Captain Louis H. Carrington of Cleburne, Texas. A soft-spoken, burly individual, Carrington was temperamentally the mirror opposite of McDonough, but he was a fine maintenance officer. According to Lieutenant Earl Huggins he was popularly known as "The Bear" and "one of the best." The final member of the team was Captain Albert D. Simmons of Timmonsville, South Carolina, of whom little is known and who functioned as operations officer. Sometime in July Detachment A's ground personnel reached Barksdale to initiate their reconnaissance training. Meanwhile, ConAC flight crews were sent to Long Beach to pick up new, factory-fresh RB-45Cs. The crews returned to Barksdale on July 29, 1950, with aircraft numbers 48-013, 48-014, and 48-015, eliciting some jealousy from the SAC personnel training there to receive them. "The boys of the 323 were both elated and disappointed at the same time," the historian dejectedly noted. "We had hoped to claim these planes." The new craft were promptly transferred over to the Continental Air Command, while the TAC crews underwent reconnaissance instruction.⁸ Continued bureaucratic infighting resulted in some wrangling, but Carrington relied on Captain McDonough to cairn the waters. "He did all the work with higher headquarters and everybody else, keeping people off our backs so that we could do our work," Carrington explained, "We finally got out of there the main reason is that we had direct communication with Continental Air Command, and anytime we'd ask for something they'd say 'Sure!'" A year following its

troubling debut, the Tornado suddenly found itself accorded priority status.

The history of RB-45C activity resumes at Barksdale AFB, Louisiana, where the 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Wing had undergone training since it was organized in the second half of 1949. Select flight and ground crews were continually rotating from Barksdale to Langley AFB for B-45 MTU familiarization prior to receiving their own Tornados. The unit historian pointed out, "Due to the fact that there were no RB-45Cs available, training toward the Skilled ratings were delayed." On July 24, 1950, the first three RB-45Cs assigned to the 323 Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron touched down at Barksdale from California and were as quickly transferred to the Continental Air Command for the benefit of TAC crews! The nine officers and 22 enlisted men of Detachment A spent several weeks in photo reconnaissance training with the 323 before departing for Korea.² The picture brightened considerably on August 26, 1950, when squadron commander Major Raymond T. Eakes, Captain W. L. Slagle, and Major Robert Recce touched down at Barksdale with number 48-016, SAC's first RB-45C. The new aircraft basked in its celebrity status as more than a dozen generals and colonels visited the air base to catch a glimpse and observe test hops. Spirits rose further on September 10, 1950, when a second Tornado arrived and the Strategic Air Command's first all-jet bomber squadron began forming in earnest. SAC had reached a critical transition point in terms of national security, since the long-awaited RB-47s would not be available for nearly three more years, General Curtis E. LeMay pushed Air Staff officials to outfit all three squadrons of the 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Wing with RB-45Cs. He argued that gaining realistic experience with multiengine jet aircraft was essential to the wartime mission of SAC. The idea was well-received, and LeMay's diary noted approvingly how "General Edwards was very enthusiastic over General LeMay's request for B-45s for reconnaissance work, stating that perhaps we could equip with them rather than with B-29s, thereby building up our reserve of jet-trained people."

By October, the 323's inventory had expanded to a total of seven jets following the arrival of five more RB-45Cs. These aircraft were manned by select combat crews, who absorbed the rigors of classroom instruction on in-flight refueling and aerial photography techniques. Unit esprit de corps was further bolstered by the issuance of the new blue uniforms "that have been expected for so long."

By October the number of Tornados at Barksdale had risen to fourteen. Another milestone was also reached that month when the 323 began pioneering the then delicate art of air-to-air refueling. On October 3, an RB-45C rendezvoused with a KB-29 of the 91st Air Refueling Squadron some 50 miles southwest of Barksdale. The two aircraft machines made their refueling contact at 10,000 feet, transferred a load of fuel, and decoupled without incident. On October 26, 1950, a second test with an RB-45C and a KC-97A from Eglin AFB was successfully concluded.¹⁰ These flight tests demonstrated how well adapted Tornados were for aerial refueling, by being very responsive to throttle movements and stable as a rock. Captain Kristen recalled the ease of this procedure: "I would come up behind the tanker where the downwash would stop about fifty feet out. I would put more power on, add twenty degrees of flaps down, break through that and then follow the lights and the instructions from the boom operator. It got so that I knew the position and after that I could fly it in and stay in the green. This airplane

was a snap just pull it in, and take on 6,000 gallons of fuel in about ten minutes." Captain Austin concurred with this assessment: "The air-refueling receptacle was behind the canopy, so the airplane ended right up under the KB-29 and didn't feel the prop wash as much as one did in the newer B-47, with its receptacle in front of the canopy." Lieutenant Spaulding managed to make light of the entire process. "The refueling receptacle was located directly behind the co-pilot's head," he jested. "You tended to hope the boom operator was not a golfer that might mistake your [white] helmet for a golf ball."

Worse still, on May 7, 1951, the wing's busy routine was interrupted by disaster. That day, number 48-030 lifted off on a short training flight from Barksdale to Fort Worth and back. The aircraft had been performing its IP-to-target radar run at 20,000 feet when a suburb of Houston was suddenly showered with Tornado parts. Three crew members, Major Robert C. Reese, Major Jerome M. Rappaport, and Lieutenant Claude L Couk, were all killed in what initially appeared to have been an onboard explosion. Miraculously, pilot Lieutenant Robert L. Hempen was thrown from the plane in midair and survived. According to his accident report testimony, Hempen regained consciousness with the sensation of "being wrapped up inside a tumbling ball of debris and flames when a second explosion took place. This knocked the pilot unconscious for a few seconds and his next conscious thought was that he was away from the main wreckage." Hempen managed to open his chute and survived with only minor injuries. Crash investigators arrived the next day and began reassembling the remains of 48-030 at nearby Ellington AFB.²³ Colonel Lewis B. Lyle, now squadron commander of the 323, accompanied the team members and related what they had deduced: "We found one of the bomb bay doors and it had hit something. They had a big bomb bay tank that held something like 1,000 gallons of fuel so it would give us more range. The tank was held in by two stainless steel pins the tank had dropped down for some reason, and when they reassembled it, instead of putting in stainless-steel bolts they put aluminum. As the airplane was flying along, the tank broke loose, hit the bomb bay doors, and one of the doors got knocked off and hit the tail section. All this happened in only a fraction of a second and as the airplane turned at 600 knots, it exploded, just tore apart."

During February the wing flew 770 hours, even through only eleven RB-045Cs and six B-45As remained on station. This marginal upswing notwithstanding, operations remained impaired by parts shortages, through which an estimated 1,810 hours of flying time were lost. "Although this figure represents a noticeable decline from January's total," the historian noted, "it is still excessively high and tends to illustrate the seriousness of critical parts shortage on Lockbourne Air Force Base." Wing officials, to promote greater use of celestial navigation, also advised Headquarters, Second Air Force, that installation of astrodomes and D-I sextants in RB-45Cs was still highly desirable. March flying produced another slight increase, with 939 hours flown at Lockbourne. The biggest event that month was concluding Detachment I's activities in the United Kingdom and a phased withdrawal of the 322nd Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron beginning on March 18, 1952. The last RB-45C reached Lockbourne on March 26, closing a highly successful episode in the history of the 91st Wing. A new unit, Detachment 3, comprised of American and RAF exchange crews from the 323 Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron,

subsequently rotated back to England on a 90-day TDY with little fanfare.

Activities throughout November remained sharply curtailed because the bulk of the RB-45Cs remained at San Bernardino to obtain tail turrets. General LeMay arrived at Lockbourne unannounced to attend ceremonies honoring the winners of the reconnaissance and navigation competition previously held in October. Ongoing parts shortages continued vexing the thirteen Tornados still on station, with the unit historian noting that, "since the B-45 type aircraft is no longer in production, it is becoming more difficult to obtain parts for said aircraft." Still, in December Major Roy L. Strong was honored for becoming the first Air Force pilot to log over 1,000 hours in a B-45. On December 9, the wing aircraft also launched several aircraft for Operation Turkey Run against the Eastern Air Defense Force, with successful reconnaissance missions over Boston. Three days later, aircraft belonging to Detachment 4 returned to Lockbourne, marking the last time SAC Tornados deployed to Europe. As an indication of future wing activities, plans were underway to begin phasing out the 323's RB-45Cs with brand-new RB-47s as of April 1953. For this reason, SAC headquarters requested permission from Headquarters, Second Air Force, to transfer all of their Tornados to Norton AFB, California, for disposal.

USAF Unit Histories
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Sources

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The Institute of Heraldry. U.S. Army. Fort Belvoir, VA.
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