

581st AIR RESUPPLY GROUP

MISSION

LINEAGE

581st Air Resupply and Communications Group

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STATIONS

Mountain Home AFB, ID, 23 Jul 1951-26 Jun 1952

Clark AFB, Philippines, 18 Jul 1952

Kadena AB, Okinawa, 20 Oct 1954-18 Sep 1956

ASSIGNMENTS

COMMANDERS

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

581 Air Resupply and Communications Wing was the only USAF special operations unit organized,

trained, and equipped from the start to conduct psywar in the Far East during the early 1950s. The bland-sounding ARCW designation was a cover for a mission more fittingly described with the 561st's motto "Freedom through Truth."

The visionaries in the Air Force understood the potential of psychological warfare, or "psywar" as it came to be called. With Soviet intransigence continuing to manifest itself in Europe (and Korea), Headquarters USAF organized a Psychological Warfare (PW) Division at the Air Staff level in February 1948.¹ Within 24 months, the PW Division was ready to propose specific plans for an Air Force psywar weapon tailored to meet this new kind of war. The plans turned to reality in 1950 when the Air Staff authorized the activation of two "special operations wings" in fiscal year 1952, with three more to be added in FY1953.

Initial planning called for each SOW to operate under a psywar unit within each overseas theater command.³ These theater psywar staff units would, in turn, report directly to the PW Division at Headquarters USAF, an odd "stovepipe" arrangement but one that fully reflected the priority attached to the psywar mission at the start of the cold war. On 5 January 1951, the Military Air Transport Service (MATS) was given the mission of organizing, training, and equipping these SOWs, which for security reasons were designated "air resupply and communications wings." An air resupply and communications service would provide a functional headquarters for the air resupply and communications wings (ARCW, pronounced "Arc"). Never before had the Air Force attempted such an organization on this scale—nor would it ever do so again.

Obviously an ARCW was meant to be extremely flexible, breaking down into whatever size and composition of elements best suited to accomplish a particular mission. To brief FEAF on the capabilities of the ARCW and sort out how the wing would fit into the overall air campaign in Korea (and elsewhere), the 581st commander, Col John K. Arnold Jr., flew to Tokyo to meet with the FEAF staff. From these meetings emerged the following concept of operations (Operations Plan 3-52) for the 581st: Four of the 12 B-29s with crews were sent on 60-day rotations to the B-29-equipped 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron, Yokota Air Base, Japan. Each crew was to fly once every four days, completing a total of 15 tactical leaflet-drop missions prior to rotating back to Clark AB. The four C-119s and crews were placed on 90-day rotations with the commander of the 315th Air Division designating the particular unit to be supported. Conventional troop carrier missions would be performed during this initial period. Later, the C-119s would find their biggest contribution taking place a long way from Korea—in a place called Indochina.

Two of the four SA-16s, with crews, were sent on extended temporary duty to Seoul City airport (K-16) in Korea to support B Flight, the 6167th ABG's unconventional warfare unit. These black-painted amphibians would find their role in coastal infiltration and exfiltration of spies behind enemy lines at night. All four of the H-19 helicopters were to be stationed with the 2157th Air Rescue Squadron, also located at K-16. Their mission was identical to that of the SA-16s, with a secondary mission of air rescue of downed pilots. All C-118s and C-54s (two each) were reserved for "special" missions, some of which supported an agency beyond the operational purview of the US Air Force—the CIA.

All these deployments represented the activities of just the flying squadrons of the 581st. In addition, large numbers of specialists and mission-tailored teams from elsewhere throughout the wing were sent on continual rotations to other unconventional warfare units in Korea. One set of 581st orders dated 8 January 1953 gives an unusual insight into this overall movement:

- 4 personnel from 581st Comm Sqdn to Detachment 2, 6004th AISS.
- 1 person from 581st Resup and Comm Wg attached to "B" Flight.
- 3 personnel from 581st Resup & Comm Sqdn attached to "B" Flight.
- 1 person from 581st Hold and Brief Sqdn attached to "B" Flight.
- 5 personnel from 581st Hold & Brief Sqdn attached to CCRAK.

It was the aircrews of the flying squadrons more than the other personnel that found themselves in harm's way, and their stories tell in graphic detail just how much harm was out there for these psy-war specialists.

On 15 January 1953, the 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron notified the 581st ARCW Operations Center at Clark AB that Colonel Arnold, the 581st commander, and the other officers and airmen aboard a 581st B-29 were missing in action on a night leaflet drop in the northernmost sector of North Korea near the Chinese border. Nine days later, Peking radio announced the shutdown and capture of the surviving crew members. Colonel Arnold was specifically named as one of the prisoners. Peking radio then went dead silent on the fate of the crew.

Already inside China, the ARCW prisoners had only begun their ordeal. Kept handcuffed and chained in solitary confinement for months, the ARCW crewmen underwent grueling mental and physical torture. Eighteen months after their internment and a year after the war was over, the Chinese broke their silence to announce the forthcoming trial of the crew on charges of germ warfare. In October 1954, the crewmen were put through a highly publicized propaganda trial before a Chinese military tribunal and—surprise—found guilty.

The effects of prolonged deprivation and torture showed on the crewmen during the trial, a fact that generated outrage throughout much of the Western world. Efforts by the United States and the United Nations to secure the release of the crew intensified but without apparent impact on China's leaders. Then, following secret negotiations between the US and China in Geneva, Switzerland, in July 1955, the Chinese released the crew on 4 August 1955—the last American POWs released after the Korean War.

Was it coincidence that the massive Chinese effort expended just happened to fall on airmen from an ARCW unit? Unprovable circumstances suggest otherwise.

The shutdown of Colonel Arnold's flight, call sign "Stardust 40," was neither the first nor the last of B-29 losses during the Korean War. In fact, only four months prior to the loss of Stardust 40, FEAF had lost five of the giant bombers and suffered damage to another seven on bombing

missions in the last 10 days of October alone.¹¹ That these air-to-air losses to Soviet-built MiG-15 fighters occurred despite USAF fighter escort gives some measure of the threat posed at the time. Reasonably enough, FEAF concluded that until the MiG threat could be neutralized, it had to be avoided.

Limiting the B-29s to night missions was the obvious answer, at least for the time being. The MiG-15 was an effective but fairly crude "day

only" fighter with none of the electronics necessary to conduct night-interceptor missions, a fact borne out by their combat record during the war. The temporary measure worked, and losses to night-flying B-29s by MiGs stopped . . . until Stardust 40. Lt Col George Pittman, the 581st Air Resupply Squadron commander at the time, still recalls the secret postshootdown briefing he received at Fifth Air Force headquarters:

Fifth Air Force radar plots had showed the "day only" fighters rising up to intercept Stardust 40. At approximately the same time, radar-controlled searchlights lit up the B-29, making it an easy target for the cannon-firing MiGs.

Airborne Material Assembly Sq On 8 September 1953, two of the Squadrons of the 581st Air Resupply & Communications Wing and several members of Wing Headquarters were formed into the 581st Air Resupply Group. They continued their operations at Clark AFB until 1955 when they were relocated to Kadena AB. In October 1956 they were deactivated.

Air Force Order of Battle
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Sources
Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.