



THE ORIGINAL PHOTO BOMBERS

THE BOEING RB-29 & THE BIRTH OF STRATEGIC AIR COMMAND GLOBAL RECONNAISSANCE

Despite the extraordinary advances in aeronautical technology in the immediate post-war period, the USAAF's newly established Strategic Air Command nevertheless had to depend on one of its tried-and-trusted wartime stalwarts to fulfil the vital strategic reconnaissance role. **BILL CAHILL** chronicles the SAC career of the Superfortress's reconnaissance variant



ABOVE By the time he was appointed first commander of the newly formed Strategic Air Command (SAC) in March 1946, General George C. Kenney had established a reputation as a politically and tactically adept leader while in command of the Far East Air Forces (FEAF) in the South West Pacific Area during 1942–45.

USAF / SAC BADGE JUANITA FRANZI

STRATEGIC AIR COMMAND (SAC) was established by the US Army Air Forces (USAAF) on March 21, 1946, acquiring a portion of the personnel and facilities of the Continental Air Forces, the wartime Command tasked with the air defence of the continental USA. The few reconnaissance aircraft that remained available to SAC after the post-war drawdown had to prove their usefulness in an era of austerity, so SAC Commander Gen George Kenney focused his efforts on activities such as the Post Hostilities Mapping Program, that could benefit the growing commercial aviation sector instead of monitoring would-be adversaries.¹ One asset SAC used in this activity was the Boeing F-13.

THE PHOTO SUPERFORTRESS

On April 7, 1944, requirements had been established for a Boeing B-29 Superfortress modified to perform photo-reconnaissance missions, with delivery somewhat optimistically set for September 19 that year. Accordingly, production B-29s were sent to the Denver Modification Center in Colorado, where the bomb bay was sealed and extra fuel tanks added. A camera section was built in the aft pressurised section of the fuselage behind the central fire-control station to accommodate a single vertical camera, a split-vertical two-camera assembly and a trimetrogon camera assembly. The 188 so-modified B-29BWs and B-29As were redesignated as F-13s, using the "F for photo" designation of the era.² In 1948 the designation would change to RB-29.

The first F-13s were scheduled to be delivered

to the 3rd Photographic Reconnaissance Sqn (PRS) to support the Twentieth Air Force's strategic campaign against Japan. The squadron completed training and flew its first operational mission from Saipan on November 1, 1944. In the ten months the 3rd PRS was part of the Twentieth Air Force it flew 450 imagery and 42 signals-intelligence (SIGINT) missions, the latter using specialised Consolidated B-24 *Ferret* aircraft.³ [For more on Ferret operations see the author's *The USAAF's Mediterranean Ferrets in TAH30 — Ed.*] Similar in form and function to the 3rd PRS, the 1st PRS was scheduled to transition to the F-13 in Kansas before deploying to the Pacific to support XX Bomber Command of the Eighth Air Force, but the war concluded before the unit completed its training.⁴

After hostilities ceased, the 3rd Reconnaissance Sqn, Very Long Range (having been redesignated on September 19, 1945) flew Post Hostilities Mapping Program missions throughout the western Pacific until the call came to disband in March 1947.⁵ The 1st RS deployed to Okinawa in September 1945, being assigned to the Far East Air Forces' Thirteenth Air Force in the post-war shuffle in November. The 1st RS flew mapping missions over China, Japan, Okinawa and Formosa (Taiwan) until it too was disbanded in March 1947. The F-13s of the 1st and 3rd RSs were probably assigned to the 31st RS, activated in October 1947 to continue mapping for the Fifth Air Force.⁶

The Post Hostilities Mapping Program in Europe was undertaken as part of Project *Casey Jones*, using two ex-Eighth Air Force Bomb Groups (BGs) equipped with Boeing B-17Gs modified for

A Boeing RB-29 of the 31st Strategic Reconnaissance Sqn (SRS), 5th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing (SRW), has its Wright R-3350 engines run up at the end of the runway before a training mission from Travis AFB in California in May 1951. The photo-reconnaissance variant of the B-29 was initially designated F-13, but was redesignated RB-29 in line with organisational changes for the newly-formed USAF in 1948.

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