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Korean War: Strategic Bombing – 19

In World War II, the division between strategic bombers and tactical aircraft was clear. Long range, multi-engine strategic aircraft bombed factories, key bridges, ports, and power systems far behind enemy lines. Smaller, short-to-medium range tactical aircraft hit targets closer to the front lines. In Korea, this division blurred as the available strategic bomber, the B-29 Superfortress, was used in both of these roles.

Within the first two months of the Korean War, the strategic bombing campaign was considered over. Most of the industrial targets deep in North Korea had been destroyed or seriously damaged—although some potential strategic targets still remained untouched for political reasons. These included the port city of Rashin, located only 17 miles from the USSR border, and hydroelectric power facilities in North Korea, which also supplied power to Manchuria and Siberia.

The Chinese intervention in November 1950 signaled a new escalation in the Korean War and new responsibilities for the bomber crews. Superfortresses hammered towns and cities all along the North Korean side of the Chinese border, and interrupted the enemy's transportation system by bombing bridges and railroad marshaling yards. They also neutralized enemy airfields, including those situated along the Korean side of the Manchurian border, and attacked enemy troop concentrations.

With the first raids into northwestern Korea came the first MiG-15 attacks against B-29s. Between November 1950 and November 1951, the Air Force lost 16 B-29s to enemy action, in spite of F-86 and F-84 fighter escort. The MiG threat forced Far East Air Forces Bomber Command to switch almost exclusively to night attacks for the rest of the war.

In the spring of 1952, with a stalemate on the ground and the failure of a negotiated truce, the Far East Air Forces began a new policy of "selective destruction" called "air pressure" to force the communists to settle. The goal was to make the war in Korea too costly for the communists by destroying specific high-value economic targets.

The air pressure campaign started on June 24, 1952, when U.S. Air Force, Navy and Marine fighter-bombers attacked North Korean hydroelectric dams, devastating the enemy's power supply. The air pressure raids continued into 1953 with strikes against key North Korean communication, transportation, manufacturing, supply, and power centers. In May 1953, Air Force F-84 Thunderjets attacked irrigation dams for the first time, causing extensive flood damage. The air pressure campaign was a means of striking at the enemy when the situation on the ground was deadlocked, and it was a significant factor in bringing the fighting in Korea to a close.



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Many features of the strategic air war in Korea pointed to USAF tactics of the future: the use of air power against sensitive enemy targets as a bargaining chip in negotiations, the first extensive use of precision bombing at night by strategic aircraft, and the large-scale use of strategic aircraft against tactical targets. Moreover, the use of smaller, tactical aircraft against strategic targets foreshadowed later multi-role aircraft that could function as fighters, fighter-bombers, and even long-range strategic bombers. (Narrated by Carl Day).