

The “Grim Reapers” at Yokota

by Joseph Stroud

After discovering there is very little information about the 13th Bomb Squadron during “the gap”, between WWII and the Korean War, and after finding the official Air Force historical data to be incomplete regarding this period, I decided to share my knowledge and experiences of the three and one-half years I spent with the unit from December 1946 to May 1950. Of course, it has been fifty years since I left the squadron and the old memory isn’t as sharp as it once was. I realize for those of you who followed me, this era was not a part of your world with the 13th, but it is history and I felt you should be given the opportunity to include it if you so desire.

I arrived at Yokota Air Base on 27 December, 1946, just eight days short of my 18th birthday. Then on 30 December, I was assigned to the 13th Bomb Squadron, aka “*The Devil’s Own Grim Reapers*”. I was specifically designated for training as an aircraft mechanic. Yokota is located 28 miles northwest of Tokyo and was formerly a Japanese aviation experimental base known as Tama or Fussa Airfield during WWII. [U.S. military officials named the base Yokota after a small town located nearby; while the town of Fussa was closer to the base, it was decided that to name the base Fussa would result in undesirable “GI pronunciation” of the name.] This was “*where it happened*” as far as Japanese aircraft development and testing was concerned during WWII. At the end of the war, the Japanese had around 200 of their latest aircraft located here in various stages of completion; around 100 of these were shipped to the U.S. for evaluation after the surrender of Japan.

The Army engineers moved into Yokota and immediately began to upgrade the base to handle heavy aircraft. Major General Kenneth B. Wolfe, Fifth Air Force commander, landed his B-17 at the new airfield on August 15, 1946. Later that same day, fifteen A-26s landed as the advance echelon of the 3rd Bomb Group. Shortly thereafter, the remainder of the group’s aircraft arrived from Atsugi Air Base, 27 miles south of Tokyo, where it had been located since moving there from Okinawa in September of 1945. Even though the runway had been rebuilt, we were living in Japanese barracks and performing maintenance in hangers designed for much smaller aircraft. Yokota was to be the *hub of activity* as it became the gathering point for aviation units from all over 5th Air Force for joint training exercises, including an Australian P-51 Group from Iwakuni Air Base on the southern tip of the island of Honshu as well as P-47 and B-29 units from Okinawa. With inexperienced mechanics and pilots, many of whom were just as “green” regarding the A-26, we had our share of both fatal and non-fatal accidents.

We were required to deploy on maneuvers and operate from remote sites. We were operating from an abandoned Japanese airfield (Hamamatsu) with a very short runway where we lost an aircraft when it went off the end of the runway after an attempted abort on take-off. We lost three airplanes and four crew members in another incident when they were caught in bad weather; two planes collided in mid-air and the other one was forced to ditch in the sea after running out of fuel. Then we lost two planes and six crew members while enroute to Itazuke for a week when they encountered bad weather and both crashed into the mountains in south central Honshu. We flew search missions for three days before locating them. We also lost an airplane at Yokota while on base leg during approach for landing.

In addition to our normal flying activities, we were assigned the duty of flying surveillance missions to monitor and photograph Russian surface vessels. As a result of these missions, crew chiefs were placed on flying status. Usually three airplanes would go on temporary assignment to Itazuke Air Base, on the southernmost island of Kyushu, or to Chitose Air Base on the northernmost island of Hokkaido to fly these missions. From Itazuke we would fly over the sea between Japan and Korea. From Misawa we would fly between Japan and Russia; north toward Sakhalin island, and west toward the Russian mainland in the direction of Vladivostok. We would fly out and locate a Russian ship, the pilot would initiate a steep banking right turn and the flight engineer would use a large camera to snap pictures. Upon returning from each mission, we would be transported to a highly secure building for debriefing by intelligence personnel.

We were operating from a long (I think 10,000ft) runway at Yokota. Most of the other bases in Japan had shorter runways. The 35th Fighter Group, stationed at Johnson Air Base, located about 10 or 12 miles from us was equipped with P-51s and P-82s. The P-82 was essentially two P-51s married together. The 49th Fighter at Misawa Air Base had converted from P-51s to P-80s in 1949. The 35th was scheduled to make this conversion in late 1949 or early 1950. The runway at Johnson was considered marginal for the operation of P-80s; the 3rd Bomb Group moved to Johnson AB, and the 35th Fighter Group moved to Yokota. I don't recall the official date of the move, but my form 5A, Individual Flight Record, reflects my last flight at Yokota on 13 December 1949, and my first flight at Johnson on 11 January 1950.

The 13th had various commanders while I was with the unit. The one I remember vividly and above all others was the CO in 1947, before the Air Force became a separate Branch of the military. He was LTC John P. "Ironjaw" Crocker and he was "old army" all the way, from his flat-top haircut to his high top shoes. He kept his hair trimmed flat with whitesides; his capped toe, brown shoes shined to a high gloss, and his uniform with razor sharp creases. We called him Ironjaw because his

face was hard set, with a very prominent lower jaw and a square chin. Everyone learned quickly that you didn't mess with John P. because he didn't cut no slack, no time, for no body. I recall other commanders vaguely but I shall always remember LTC Crocker very clearly; he could make a lasting impression on a young recruit.

My tour of duty with the 13th BS ended when I boarded the Gen. David C. Shanks, troop transport, on 5 May 1950, for return to the U.S.. I arrived in Seattle, WA on 15 May 1950. The North Korean communists invaded the Republic of South Korea on 25 June, 1950 and the 3rd Bomb Group flew the first air strikes against the invaders on 28 June. When I left the unit to return to the U.S., the 13th was awaiting orders to deploy on maneuvers again. When the war started the squadron was on maneuvers at Matsushima. On the 27th of June, they were ordered to Ashiya Air Base on the southern island of Kyushu and flew the first three days from there. They then moved to Iwakuni for a year and eventually on to Kunsan in South Korea for the duration of the war. Another interesting note; two years later at the end of the action a 3rd Bomb Group B-26 dropped the last bomb of the war. My research on the internet shows (by serial number) that the 13th BS lost thirty-three planes in the Korean War action. I had been back in the U.S. forty days when the action started and I tried unsuccessfully to return to the squadron.