

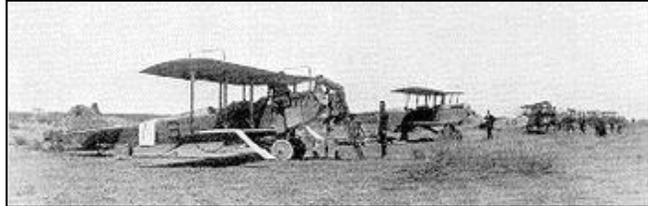


U.S. AIR FORCE

## This Week in USAF and PACAF History 9 – 15 March 2015



15 March 1916 The 1st Aero Squadron (1 AS) became the **first U.S. aviation unit to engage in field operations**. Equipped with eight Curtiss JN-3 aircraft (photo below), the 1 AS arrived in New Mexico to join the punitive expedition against Mexican revolutionary leader Pancho Villa. On 16 March, Capt Townsend Dodd, pilot, and Capt Benjamin D. Foulois, observer and unit commander, flew over Mexico in the first American military reconnaissance flight over foreign territory. The 1 AS flew reconnaissance and communications missions in some of the worst weather and poorest conditions imaginable. By the end of April, all eight airplanes had been destroyed.



11 March 1918 Lt. Paul Baer of the 103rd Aero Squadron downed an enemy airplane and earned the **first Distinguished Service Cross awarded to a member of an Army air unit**. U.S. pilots with earlier aerial victories had served with the French.

9 March 1945 **Area bombing of Tokyo**. More than 300 B-29s dropped incendiary bombs that destroyed 16 square miles of Tokyo – about a fourth of the city. In terms of immediate loss of life (80,000 to 100,000), this air raid was the most destructive in history to date. The attack reflected a shift in U.S. bombardment policy from high-altitude daylight attacks on specific military targets to low-level area bombing at night.

15 March 1950 The Joint Chiefs of Staff gave the USAF formal and exclusive **responsibility for strategic guided missiles** in a basic decision on the role and mission of guided missiles.

10 March 1966 Major Bernard Fisher, a 1st Air Commando Squadron A-1E pilot, became the **first USAF Medal of Honor recipient in Vietnam**. Major Fisher led an attack on enemy forces surrounding an outpost in the A Shau Valley in the northwest part of South Vietnam. Fisher saw another A-1E pilot, Major Wayne Myers; crash-land on a battered landing strip under intense enemy fire. In an amazing display of airmanship, he landed on the runway that was littered with debris and pocked by holes from mortar fire. As Fisher passed the downed aircraft, he saw Myers jump up from cover and run toward him. Myers could not climb onboard because of prop wash, so Fisher throttled back and pulled Myers into the cockpit headfirst. Without taking time to buckle up, he once more turned his aircraft around, fire-walled the throttle, and took off, again avoiding the impediments on the runway. With 19 bullet holes in the aircraft, they cleared the mountains and made it safely to Pleiku. For his outstanding courage and airmanship, Major Fisher received the Medal of Honor.



Fisher and Myers after the mission



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10 March 1967 Captain Merlyn H. Dethlefsen (right) earned the **Medal of Honor** during the first bombing mission against the Thai Nguyen industrial works in North Vietnam. The Thai Nguyen works was the only plant in Southeast Asia making bridge sections, barges, and POL drums. Maj. Dethlefsen was a pilot in a flight of F-105 aircraft engaged in a fire suppression mission designed to destroy the anti-aircraft artillery and surface-to-air missile sites protecting the targets. Maj Dethlefsen repeatedly attacked the SAM defenses even after his aircraft was severely damaged. To make sure the SAM site wouldn't come up the next day, he strafed the site with his 20mm cannon. He then refueled from a tanker and nursed his F-105 back to Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand, 500 miles away.



**Lt. Col. Merlyn H. Dethlefsen**

10 March 1967 Captain Mac C. Brestel, an F-105 pilot flying out of Takhli, became the **first USAF pilot to down two MiGs in one mission in the Vietnam War**. After bombing the Thai Nguyen Steel Mill, “the single most heavily-defended target in North Vietnam,” Captain Brestel engaged and shot down two enemy MiG-17 fighters. The photo below of Brestel’s F-105 is from the [This Day in Aviation](#) website.



15 March 67 The **Sikorsky HH-53B**, the largest and fastest helicopter in the USAF inventory, made its **first flight** at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio.

The HH-53 was the first helicopter specifically designed for combat search and rescue (CSAR), and it succeeded the HH-3 “Jolly Green Giant” as the primary CSAR asset in Vietnam. The HH-53B “Super Jolly” was faster, more heavily armed, and had nearly triple the take-off weight of the HH-3. With almost double the shaft horsepower, it had better overall performance and hover capability, especially at altitude.



For its CSAR role, the HH-53B was equipped with armor plating, self-sealing fuel tanks, three 7.62 miniguns and an external rescue hoist with 250 feet of cable and a 20,000-pound capacity. It could transport 38 combat-equipped troops or 22 litter patients with four medical attendants, or 18,500 pounds of freight. The improved performance of rescue helicopters like the HH-53 made terrain an ally rather than a hindrance. Ridgelines, karst, and jungle canopy in Vietnam were used as cover against enemy fire.



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11 March 1968 **Medal of Honor action in Southeast Asia.** Chief Master Sergeant Richard L. Etchberger and his team of technicians were manning a top secret mountaintop site in Laos known as Lima Site 85. This site guided U.S. bombers on missions in Southeast Asia. The base was overrun by enemy ground forces and Etchberger's unit received heavy artillery attacks. With the rest of his crew dead or severely wounded, Chief Etchberger, despite having little combat training, single-handedly held off the enemy with an M-16 while directing air strikes into the area and calling for air rescue. When the rescue helicopter arrived, Chief Etchberger



repeatedly risked his own life to place three surviving wounded comrades into rescue slings. With his remaining crew safely aboard, Chief Etchberger finally climbed into an evacuation sling himself but was fatally wounded by enemy ground fire as he was being raised into the aircraft.

Due to the secrecy of the mission and the need to avoid publicity, Chief Etchberger was posthumously awarded an Air Force Cross in 1998. The award was upgraded to the Medal of Honor in 2010.

15-28 March 1983 **USAF anti-ship capability.** Three AGM-84 Harpoon missiles were launched from a B-52 at the Pacific Missile Test Range on Kwajalein Atoll. The Harpoon is an all-weather, over-the-horizon, anti-ship missile. Its low-level, sea-skimming cruise trajectory, active radar guidance and warhead design assure high survivability and effectiveness. Fitted with eight AGM-84s externally and U.S. Navy sea mines internally, the B-52H bomber became a long-range, rapid response platform for sea control and area denial. At right, a B-52 armed with Harpoons.



14 March 1988 E-Systems unveiled the **MC-130H Combat Talon II** special operations airlifter, designed to infiltrate, exfiltrate and resupply U.S. special forces behind enemy lines. Navigation and terrain-avoidance systems allowed the aircraft to fly as low as 250 feet in darkness and bad weather and to locate unmarked zones with pinpoint accuracy. The tail was strengthened to allow high speed/low-signature airdrops, and the aircraft was equipped with pods for aerial refueling of special operations forces and CSAR helicopters. See the photo of an MC-130H in the item below on Operation TOMODACHI.



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12 March 2011 In response to a devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan on the previous day, PACAF and other U.S. forces began humanitarian and disaster relief operations later named **Operation TOMODACHI** (“*Friendship*”). The 9.0 quake near Sendai was the fourth largest ever recorded and generated a 30-foot tsunami that devastated coastal areas (photo below, left). The tragic loss of life and extensive destruction included partial meltdowns and explosions at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. (Map at left ©*Maps of World*.)

On 12 March, MC-130s and HH-60s deployed from Kadena Air Base, Okinawa to Yokota Air Base, Japan. USAF personnel and resources at Yokota were already providing food and shelter for 500 passengers from commercial airline flights that had diverted to Yokota after Tokyo’s Narita Airport was shut down. In addition, C-17s from Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska and Hickam AFB, Hawaii flew support missions to provide humanitarian aid. On 13 March, the 374th Airlift Wing at Yokota began supporting aerial reconnaissance and radiation measurement at Fukushima and other locations in Japan. U.S. forces began providing water-pumping trucks, firefighting vehicles and radiation suits for Japanese use at Fukushima. A C-130 also flew into Yamagata with an R-11 fuel truck. On 16 March, an MC-130H was the first fixed-wing aircraft to land at Sendai Airport since the quake. Members of the 320th Special Tactics Squadron (STS) helped to clear the runway and make it ready for other fixed-wing aircraft in the disaster relief operation.

Below right, Tech. Sgt. Ray Decker, 320th Special Tactics Squadron, prepares his rucksack prior to boarding an MC-130P Combat Shadow at Yokota Air Base, Japan.



*Reuters photo/Mainichi Shimbun*



*USAF photo/Staff Sgt. Samuel Morse*