



U.S. AIR FORCE

This Week in USAF and PACAF History **15-21 September 2008**



17 September 1908 **Lt. Thomas E. Selfridge** of the Army became the first person and the first U.S. military member to die in an airplane accident when he crashed with pilot Orville Wright during a flight test at Fort Myer, Virginia. A propeller split and broke a wire supporting the rudder, sending the aircraft into the ground from about 75 feet of altitude. Wright also received serious injuries, but Selfridge was pinned under the engine and died later that afternoon.



15 September 1938 **Hickam Field was officially activated.** It was the principal army airfield in Hawaii and the only one large enough to accommodate the B-17 bomber.

17 September 1941 During the Louisiana maneuvers, the **Army dropped paratroopers** for the first time in a tactical exercise. Thirteen DC-3s dropped a parachute company.

20 September 1941 The Army Air Forces activated the **Philippine Department Air Force**—later called Far East Air Force and still later Fifth Air Force—at Nichols Field on Luzon.

15 September 1942 Fifth Air Force airlifted the **first U.S. troops to New Guinea**, transporting men of the 126th Infantry Regiment from Australia to Seven-Mile Airdrome near Port Moresby.

21 September 1942 The **Boeing B-29 Superfortress** made its first flight. This aircraft had many innovations including super-charged engines enabling it to carry bomb loads across the vast Pacific Ocean to targets in Japan. Combined with a pressurized cabin, the B-29's innovations allowed the aircraft to reach 40,000 feet and 350 mph, where it was an extremely difficult target for both Japanese fighters and anti-aircraft artillery.

However, many of its actual combat missions were low-level incendiary raids at night. Two of these aircraft delivered the atomic bombs to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.



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15 September 1944 **Operation INTERLUDE.** Southwest Pacific Area forces invaded the island of Morotai in the Moluccas Islands, Netherlands East Indies. FEAF units supported the operation with attacks against Japanese bases on nearby islands. The landings on Morotai were unopposed and construction of two airdromes began at once. The island was within fighter range of the southern Philippines.

17 September 1944 **Operation MARKET GARDEN** began when 1,546 Allied aircraft and 478 gliders carried 35,000 troops for an airborne assault between Eindhoven and Arnhem in the Netherlands. However, Allied armies failed in their attempt to secure bridges and cross the Rhine River into Germany. This operation was the subject of the 1977 movie *A Bridge Too Far*.

18 September 1947 W. Stuart Symington took his oath as the **first Secretary of the Air Force**.

18 September 1948 At Muroc Dry Lake, California, Convair pilot Sam Shannon made the first flight in an experimental XF-92A—the **first true delta-wing aircraft** (at right). Born out of a USAAF proposal for a supersonic interceptor, the AF-92 was made possible by advances in jet engines. The design came from German aeronautical engineer Alexander Lippisch, who had been brought to the U.S. under Operation Paperclip. The XF-92 design led to the F-102 and F-106 fighters and the B-58 bomber.



15 September 1950 U.S. ground forces supported by U.S. Navy and Marine Corps air strikes invaded **Inchon** near Seoul in South Korea, far to the rear of enemy lines. The invasion, coupled with a USAF-supported Eighth Army advance from the Pusan perimeter that began the next day, turned the tide of the Korean War, eventually forcing the North Korean army to withdraw from South Korea. On 18 September, 42 B-29s of the 92d and 98th Bomb Groups dropped 1,600 bombs on enemy troop concentrations near Waegwan, allowing Eighth Army to advance rapidly from the Pusan perimeter toward Seoul, Korea.

20 September 1951 A monkey and 11 mice survived an Aerobee flight to an altitude of 236,000 feet, marking the **first time the Air Force had recovered animals from a rocket flight**.

20 September 1957 General Thomas D. White, the CSAF, announced that radar units could detect ICBMs at a distance of 3,000 miles. On 17 September 1964, President Johnson announced that the US had an **over-the-horizon radar** that could see around the earth's curvature to detect missiles shortly after their launch.

21 September 1960 In a ceremony at Nellis AFB, Nevada, Tactical Air Command accepted the first **Republic F-105D Thunderchief**, an all-weather fighter able to carry a nuclear weapon.



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21 September 1964 At Palmdale, California, **North American's B-70A Valkyrie** flew for the first time, with company pilot Alvin White and Col. Joseph Cotton, USAF, at the controls. The huge delta-wing aircraft was a strategic bomber that could fly up to three times the speed of sound and at altitudes above 70,000 feet, but advances in enemy surface- to-air-missile technology prevented its production beyond the prototype stage.



20 September 1966 At Edwards AFB, Lt. Col. Donald M. Sorlie became the first USAF pilot to fly **NASA's M2-F2 Lifting Body**. Air-launched from a B-52 at 45,000 feet, the M2-F2 tested the concept that a space capsule could fly back from space rather than parachuting into the sea for ship recovery.

The M2-F2 crashed in 1967, seriously injuring the test pilot. Footage of the crash became familiar to millions when it was used in the opening credits of the TV series *The Six Million Dollar Man*.



19 September 1969 An F-4E flying near Edwards AFB successfully air launched the first **Maverick** air-to-ground missile. The Maverick provides the Air Force with stand-off capability for close air support, interdiction, and defense suppression missions.

16 September 1976 The United States officially returned **Eniwetok Atoll**, site of the first U.S. hydrogen bomb explosion, to its former inhabitants.

15-22 September 1979 In **one of the largest aerial fire-fighting operations** on record, eight C-130s from the Air Force Reserve and from Air National Guard units in California and Wyoming flew 254 sorties to drop 732,000 gallons of fire-suppressant liquid over fires in southern California.



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18 September 1980 An **ICBM explosion** destroyed Titan II launch complex 374-7 near Damascus, Arkansas, killing one airman. The nuclear warhead was blown 600 feet, but its safety features worked correctly and there was no radiation leak. This and another, similar accident were factors in the replacement of the 54 liquid-fueled Titan II's with solid-fueled MX "Peacekeeper" missiles in late 1980s. Most of the decommissioned Titan II ICBMs were refurbished and used for Air Force space launch vehicles, with a perfect launch success record.



The 1988 made-for-TV movie ***Disaster at Silo 7*** dramatizes the event. (Photo of Titan II silo at right.)

16 September 1982 Capt. Ron Cavendish, USAF, and his crew successfully landed their B-52 Stratofortress after the aircraft lost both of its rudder-elevator hydraulic systems. Never before had this feat been accomplished without significant damage to or complete destruction of the aircraft. For this achievement, the crew earned the **Mackay Trophy**.

20-21 September 1982 The 320 BMW at Mather AFB tested Navy **Harpoon anti-shipping** missiles for compatibility with the **B-52**. At the same time, a B-52G from the 416 BMW at Griffiss AFB conducted the **first ALCM operational test launch**.

16 September 1985 The Secretary of the Interior designated **Hickam AFB as a National Historic Landmark**, recognizing it as one of the nation's most significant historic resources associated with World War II in the Pacific. A bronze plaque reflecting Hickam's "national significance in commemorating the history of the United States of America" took its place among other memorials surrounding the base flagpole.

15 September 1991 The **C-17A Globemaster III first flew** in a trip from Long Beach to the AFFTC at Edwards AFB.

15 September 1996 **Operation PACIFIC HAVEN** commenced. The Air Force airlifted thousands of refugees driven from their homes in northern Iraq to Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, where they were processed for settlement in the United States.