



**U.S. AIR FORCE**

## **This Week in USAF and PACAF History** **17 – 23 September 2012**



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. Selfridge was pinned under the engine and died later that afternoon. Wright also received serious injuries.



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 the “Far East Air Force” and still later Fifth Air Force—at Nichols Field on Luzon.

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



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 **The U.S. Air Force was founded as an independent service** – equal in status with the Army and Navy. W. Stuart Symington took his oath as the **first Secretary of the Air Force**. Milestones in the independence of the United States Air Force:



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- 1 Aug 1907 The U.S. Army established the Aeronautical Division of the Army Signal Corps.
- 20 May 1918 The Aeronautical Division was separated from the Signal Corps and renamed the Army Air Service, with divisions for military aeronautics and aircraft production.
- 1917-1918 The Air Service performed crucial missions during World War I, culminating in massed air support to the offensive at St. Mihiel.
- 1921, 1923 General Billy Mitchell led demonstrations of air power by using bombers to sink old warships, including battleships.
- 2 July 1926 The Air Service became the Army Air Corps and got representation on the War Department General Staff. An Assistant Secretary of War for Air was established. Although this action recognized the potential for independent air missions, the Air Corps focused primarily on aircraft procurement and training.
- 1 Mar 1935 General Headquarters (GHQ) Air Force was established to enhance the capability for independent, strategic air operations. Operational control of tactical air units was transferred from Army corps area commanders to GHQ Air Force.
- 22 Sept 1938 Major General Henry “Hap” Arnold was named Chief of the Air Corps.
- 15 Apr 1940 The War Department issued a new field manual, FM 1-5, on the employment of Army aviation. It advocated the centralized use of air power against strategic and interdiction targets but included support to tactical commanders on the battlefield.
- 20 Jun 1941 The Air Corps was renamed as the U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF). The new command under Maj Gen Arnold encompassed both the Air Corps and Air Force Combat Command (formerly GHQ Air Force). Upon U.S. entrance into World War II, the USAAF performed a wide variety of critical missions in all theaters. In March 1942, Circular 59, *War Department Reorganization*, defined the Army Air Forces as an autonomous command.
- 21 July 1943 War Dept Field Manual 100-20, *Command and Employment of Air Power*, declared air and ground forces equal and air superiority the first requirement for ground success.
- 15 Aug 1945 World War II ended when USAAF strategic bombing convinced the Japanese government to surrender rather than continue the war.
- 18 Sept 1947 The *National Security Act of 1947* established the U.S. Air Force as an independent armed service.



World War II convinced many leaders, including President Truman and Generals Marshall and Eisenhower, that national security required an independent Air Force equal with the Army and Navy. Some in government proposed a single, unified “Department of the Armed Forces.” In President Truman’s call to reorganize the U.S. armed forces, he stated: "Air power has been developed to a point where its responsibilities are equal to those of land and sea power.... Parity for air power can be achieved in one department or in three, but not in two." Military leaders preferred three services rather than a single unified department. Although more legislation would be required later in the organization of the Department of Defense, the National Security Act of 1947 finally established the **United States Air Force as an independent service** co-equal with the Army and Navy.





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18 September 1948 Convair pilot Sam Shannon made the first flight in an experimental XF-92A, the **first true delta-wing aircraft** (right). Born out of a USAAF proposal for a supersonic interceptor, the XF-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. after World War II. The XF-92 design led to the F-102 and F-106 fighters and the B-58 bomber.



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**.

23 September 1951 The 27th Fighter-Escort Wing received the **first F-84G Thunderjet** (photo below). The F-84G was the first fighter with built-in aerial refueling capability, the first single-seat aircraft



that could carry a nuclear bomb, and the first aircraft of the USAF Thunderbirds flight demonstration team (right).



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

23 September 1959 **USAF Space Roles and Missions.** The DoD gave the Air Force responsibility for space transportation and ultimately all space booster rockets.

21 September 1964 At Palmdale, California, **North American's B-70A Valkyrie** flew for the first time. 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. However, advances in enemy surface-to-air missile technology led to its production being halted at the prototype stage.



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20 September 1966 At Edwards AFB, California, Lt. Col. Donald M. Sorlie became the first USAF pilot to fly NASA's **M2-F2 Lifting Body** (so-named because the body of the aircraft rather than wings provided lift). 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 and land on a runway rather than parachuting into the sea.

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*.



20-21 September 1982 The 320th Bomb Wing at Mather AFB, California tested U.S. Navy **Harpoon anti-ship** missiles for compatibility with the **B-52G Stratofortress**. At nearly the same time, a B-52G from the 416th Bomb Wing at Griffiss AFB, New York conducted the **first air-launched cruise missile (ALCM) operational test launch**.



20 September 2010 The Air Force officially unveiled the **first Global Hawk unmanned aircraft system (UAS) deployed to the Pacific region**. The remotely piloted aircraft arrived at Andersen Air Force Base on Guam earlier in the month for testing prior to operational missions.

22 September 2010 **Medal of Honor**. The President of the United States presented the nation's highest honor to the family of Chief Master Sergeant Richard Etchberger, who was killed in 1967 while saving fellow airmen as they evacuated a mountaintop radar site in Laos. The award had been delayed for decades because of the secrecy and political sensitivity of the mission at that time. The award citation can be read at this [link](#) and video of the ceremony with President Obama's remarks can be viewed at this [White House webpage](#).

