

June 2024



This month the LeMay Center highlights Operation POWER FLITE as our Doctrine Paragon for nuclear operations and strategic deterrence.

The latter half of 1956 was a particularly dark time for the US and its allies in the Cold War. The Soviet Union had just brutally suppressed an anti-communist uprising in Hungary, while the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) stood powerless. Nationalization of the Suez Canal by Egypt (spurred on by the Soviets) prompted Britain, France, and Israel to intervene militarily, leading to a diplomatic fiasco that put the US at odds with its allies and increased Soviet prestige and influence in the region. Further, US intelligence was aware that increasingly powerful Soviet atomic weapons were being tested in concert with their most advanced bombers.

General Curtis E. LeMay, commander of Strategic Air Command (SAC), which at the time controlled the only aircraft capable of delivering the US nuclear deterrent, felt it was time to demonstrate American resolve and capability—and his superiors agreed. LeMay and the Air Force's partners in industry had worked hard in the decade since the Air Force won its independence to upgrade SAC's 60 all-prop nuclear-capable B-29s to an all-jet bomber force of hundreds of aircraft. These included the brand-new B-52 Stratofortresses, introduced operationally in 1955. There was another reason for LeMay to demonstrate the new jet's capability: there had been several fatal mishaps among the state-of-the-art B-52Bs and the new aircraft was beginning to attract some negative scrutiny in the press.



LeMay and SAC's leaders planned a "counteroffensive" to demonstrate that the B-52 was a safe and capable weapon system: a power projection demonstration consisting of three B-52s circumnavigating the globe non-stop. Dubbed Operation POWER FLITE, the mission was commanded by 15th Air Force Commander, Maj Gen Archie Old, Jr. The flight consisted of three aircraft that would fly the full circuit and two airborne spares, all from Castle AFB's 93 Bomb Wing. Aircraft Commander of the lead B-52 was Lt Col Jim Morris, who christened his aircraft *Lucky Lady III*.

At 1300 on 16 January 1957, the five B-52s—*Lucky Lady III*, *La Vittoria* (after Magellan's ship), and *Lonesome George*, along with the two spares—Launched from Castle AFB, California. Each aircraft carried an extra pilot, and extra navigator, and a crew chief, in addition to the normal crew of six. The mission required five enroute refuelings, involving nearly 100 KC-97s (it took three KC-97s to offload enough fuel to bring each B-52 up to max gross inflight weight). On the morning of 18 January, all three aircraft flew up initial and landed at March AFB, CA. They were greeted by cheering crowds and by Gen



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LeMay, who gave every crewmember (including the crew chiefs) the Distinguished Flying Cross. The crews had flown 24,325 miles at an average ground speed of 525 knots. The *New York Times* headline the next morning said it best: *"Three Air Force [B-52B] Stratofortresses completed today a 45-hour 19-minute non-stop around-the-world flight. It was made to prove the United States could drop a hydrogen bomb anywhere on earth."*

Why it matters today: Today the United States and its international partners find themselves in an era of renewed great power competition. Deterrence of major war—through nuclear and conventional means—is again a primary focus of military preparedness. Nuclear-capable bombers—the now venerable B-52s most numerous among them—are one leg of the “nuclear triad,” which also includes submarine-launched ballistic missiles and land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles. Together, these forces, along with our conventional forces, enable us to conduct *extended deterrence*, providing the ultimate protection for our allies and partners against attack and regional aggression.

The crews of POWER FLITE demonstrated that the US could respond to aggression at anytime, anywhere in the world. We still conduct power projection missions today: in December 2023, B-1 bombers from the 28th Bomb Wing at Ellsworth AFB took part in a combined exercise with South Korean and Japanese forces as a show of force after North Korea fired an intercontinental ballistic missile over Japan. In February 2024, a B-52 from the 5th Bomb Wing on deployment to Andersen AB, Guam was escorted by three Philippine fighters while conducting freedom of navigation flights in the South China Sea. Like the crews of POWER FLITE, our forces are still providing global deterrence.

For more information on deterrence in general and on nuclear operations in particular, see Air Force Doctrine Publication (AFDP) 3-70, Strategic Attack, and AFDP 3-72, Nuclear Operations and check out the latest episode of the *Air Force Doctrine Podcast: Deciphering Doctrine – Ep 19 – Integrated Deterrence and Great Power Competition*, with General Anthony Cotton, which can be found on iTunes, Spotify, Amazon Music, or at www.doctrine.af.mil.

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