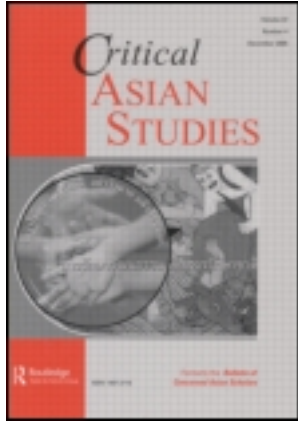


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LIMITED WAR, UNLIMITED TARGETS

U.S. Air Force Bombing of North Korea during the Korean War, 1950–1953

Taewoo Kim

ABSTRACT: In the early days of the Korean War, the U.S. Air Force (USAF) had a policy of precision bombing military targets only. Policy-makers in Washington, D.C., formulated this policy to ensure the protection of Korean civilians and to increase the effectiveness of their air operations. Senior USAF officers in Korea, however, were unhappy about the limitations placed on them by Washington. In their strategic air operations against targets in North Korea USAF officers followed Washington's precision bombing policy, but they insisted that USAF bombers be permitted to use incendiary bombs against population centers in North Korea. China's entry into the war in November 1950 led to a drastic change in the precision bombing policy. On 5 November 1950, when the UN forces began suffering defeat after defeat in battles with the new enemy, General Douglas MacArthur designated cities and villages in North Korea as "main bombing targets" and permitted the use of incendiary bombs, which had been used in attacks against Japanese cities during World War II. From that point until the end of the war, the USAF regarded North Korean cities and villages as their crucial targets as political and military occasion demanded.

1. Introduction

One of the oldest and most traditional interpretations of the Korean War is that it was a limited war. This interpretation is well presented in David Rees's *Korea: The Limited War*, which reflected and reinforced Washington's own interpretations of the war's origins and course. In general, a limited war means a conflict in which the belligerents do not expend all of the resources at their disposal. According to Rees, the Truman administration "limited not only military action to the area of Korea, but limited its objectives after the Chinese intervention to a

restoration of the status quo ante bellum.”¹ He stressed that “Truman and Acheson were also attempting to limit popular participation in the Korean War. Resources that could be spared for Korea were also limited, as well as the weapon systems and target systems which were used inside the peninsula.” Actually, Washington refrained from using their most effective weapons (atomic bombs) in Korea, but they also refused to take any action that could prompt the Soviet Union to intervene directly in the war. In particular, Rees insisted that the characteristics of a limited war were clearly evident in certain aspects of bombing operations of the U.S. Air Force (USAF). For example, he stressed that the air operation against Nachin, a city located near the Soviet Union, was restricted from a political standpoint for fear that the Korean War would mushroom into World War III.

Washington gave two important military directions to the commanding general of the U.S. Far East Air Forces (FEAF). As will be shown below, U.S. President Harry S. Truman and the U.S. State Department were directly involved in the creation of these directions. The first order prohibited USAF bombers from attacking border areas between North Korea and its two neighbors, China and the Soviet Union. The second order insisted on the “precision bombing” of *military* targets only in order to protect Korean civilians. The policy banning bomb attacks on North Korea’s borders was observed relatively very well throughout the war. But this article will demonstrate that the precision bombing restriction quickly disappeared as the war situation changed.

On 6 September 1950, early in the Korean War, U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson issued the following public statement in reference to precision bombing: “The air activity of the United Nations forces in Korea has been, and is, directed solely at military targets of the invader. These targets are enemy troop concentrations, supply dumps, war plants, and communications lines.”² On the next day, Ernest Gross, the U.S. representative to the United Nations, assured members of the UN Security Council about the “care and solicitude of UN air forces for Korean civilians.”³

In fact, Washington’s official position on USAF operations during the Korean War never changed, as Robert F. Futrell makes clear in his authoritative study, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1950–1953*. Futrell strongly denies that the USAF bombed civilian areas in North Korea, insisting that the USAF was bound by the following rule until the end of the Korean War: “Every effort will be made to attack military targets only, and to avoid needless civilian casualties.”⁴ However, USAF documents created during the Korean War reveal contradictory historical facts. According to these materials, USAF bombers attacked many Korean civilians from the early days of the war on, even in South Korea, the civilian

Note: For part 1 of this article, see *Critical Asian Studies* 44 (2): 205–26 (Kim 2012).

1. Rees 1964, xiii–xvi; all quotations in this paragraph are from Rees. See the following article to assess the academic status of Rees’s book on Korean War historiography: Foot 1995, 271.
2. Acheson 1950.
3. *Minju Shinbo* [Minju newspaper], 7 September 7 1950; *Nevada State Journal*, 8 September 1950.
4. Futrell 1961, 41.

territory of the Allies.⁵ In addition, this article will show that USAF bombers, following China's entry into the war in November 1950, began to strike North Korean cities and villages even more harshly, designating them as *main targets* for destruction.

This article will examine the policies and procedures of USAF aerial bombing during the Korean War and will explain why the precision bombing policy, which was intended to protect civilians, was neutralized in November 1950 and why USAF bombings constituted the most important cause of civilian casualties in the Korean peninsula during the three years of the Korean War.

In addition, this article will dispute the assertions of Sahr Conway-Lanz and Conrad Crane regarding the "protective characteristics" of precision bombing in North Korea during the first phase of the Korean War. Despite the critical position both of these researchers have taken on aerial bombing during the Korean War, they have accepted Washington's formal stance on North Korean civilian casualties in the early months of the Korean War. Crane, for instance, discusses "the best efforts of the Air Force to emphasize its desire to avoid civilian casualties" and states that "collateral damage was generally limited" in war's early months.⁶ For his part, Conway-Lanz argues, "For the first few months of the war, the United States did refrain from attacks on urban areas, and these restrictions did provide greater protection for Korean civilians."⁷

Our comparison of USAF documents and North Korean investigation reports will show, however, that the level of North Korean civilian casualties was high, even in the early months of the war. The structure and cause of these civilian damages are analyzed below. In particular, USAF operations analysis reports and photographs will illustrate clearly the remarkably low accuracy rate of U.S. bombers. And investigative reports produced by the USAF, the North Korean government, and foreign investigators and journalists will show conclusively that attacks on civilian areas after November 1950 were indiscriminate. These *unrestricted* attacks on cities and villages of North Korea put the term "limited war" to shame.

2. Realities of Precision Bombing, June–October 1950

2.1. Origin of the Precision-Bombing Policy in Korea

The first two months after the outbreak of the Korean War in late June 1950 are recalled as a period of sweeping victories by the North Korean Army. In fact, North Korea's military forces occupied Seoul, South Korea's capital, just three days after the start of the war. Moreover, in their first battle against U.S. ground forces, on 5 July 1950, the North Korean Army (NKA) killed more than one third of all U.S. troops in Task Force Smith. Later, on 20 July 1950, about one thousand troops of the U.S. Twenty-fourth Division were either killed in action or taken prisoner in the Taechŏn area. Within a month's time, North Korean mili-

5. Kim 2012.

6. Crane 2000, 42–43.

7. Conway-Lanz 2006, 86.



Fig. 1. U.S. Air Force Boeing B-29 Superfortress bombers from the Ninety-eighth Bomb Group (Medium) attacking a target in Korea in January 1951. The accuracy rate of the B-29s was notoriously low, as this article shows. (Credit: USAF, photo 342-AF-80327AC)

tary forces had occupied most of the Korean peninsula. Thus, historians who regard the first phase of the war as a period of victory for the North Korean Army have a strong case to make.

Yet, during this same period, a different situation was developing in North Korean areas: FEAF's B-29 medium bombers were beginning to carry out massive aerial attacks on transport centers and industrial hubs in North Korea. The North Korean Air Force (NKAF) had only 226 aircraft at the beginning of the war.⁸ Soon after the war broke out, the USAF concentrated its efforts on destroying concealed NKAF airplanes; within a month the USAF had established its superiority in the air. One USAF study concluded: "Destruction of their [North Korean] aircraft in the air and on the ground, with some inevitable operational attrition, reduced the North Korean air units nearly to impotence during the first month of hostilities."⁹ USAF bombers encountered no enemy resistance during their attacks in North Korea in the early months of the war. The sky over North Korea was their safe front yard.

Surprisingly enough, it was not President Truman but General Douglas MacArthur, commander-in-chief, Far East Command, who directly ordered the first aerial bombing of North Korea. At 6 a.m. on 29 June 1950, MacArthur chanced to witness an air combat engagement between USAF F-52s and NKAF Yak-9s near the Suwŏn airfield in South Korea. Seeing this aerial combat with his own eyes made MacArthur realize the importance of gaining air superiority. Taking

8. The Office of the General Staff of the Supreme Command of the Soviet Army 1951.

9. USAF Historical Division 1952, 34.

advantage of this opportunity, FEAF's commanding general, George E. Stratemeyer, suggested an immediate attack on North Korea in order to gain command of the air. In his diary Stratemeyer writes: "[I] told CINCFE [MacArthur] that in order for me to support him full-out [I] must have authority to attack the enemy (his aircraft and airdromes) in North Korea. Permission granted at once and we now cross the 38th Parallel!"¹⁰ MacArthur approved Stratemeyer's request on the spot, and B-26 light bombers of the Third Bomb Group promptly executed the order and bombed an airfield located near Pyöngyang, the capital of North Korea, on the afternoon of 29 June.¹¹ This attack—just four days after the start of the Korean War—was the first ever USAF aerial operation in North Korean territory.

MacArthur's order to bomb targets in North Korea was issued *before* President Truman approved the expansion of air operations into North Korea.¹² Although North Korea was clearly the enemy from a military point of view, it was highly unusual for a commander in the field to decide to attack an airfield near the enemy capital city without the president's approval. For example, not only the areas near Beijing, the capital of China, but also the North Korean provinces bordering China were designated as areas prohibited from bombing even after China's entry into the war. These military actions resulted from political sensitivities about aerial bombing in rear areas across the border. With his charismatic personality, however, MacArthur would make or request permission to initiate many military policies, even against Washington's grand strategy of the war.¹³ The USAF's aerial bombing of North Korea started in just this manner.

The expansion of USAF operations in North Korea foreshadowed the massive destruction of North Korea's military and industrial facilities as well as large portions of its cities that would soon follow. During World War II, Allied bombers regarded civilian areas under enemy occupation as legitimate and critical targets from the standpoint of "strategic air operations."¹⁴ On Valentine's Day 1942, for instance, the UK's Royal Air Force (RAF) decided to intensify the bombing of German cities, especially residential areas. According to Directive 22, issued to the RAF's Bomber Command, the intent of these attacks would be to undermine the "morale of enemy civil population" and "[the] aiming points [were] to be built-up areas, not, for instance, the dockyards or aircraft factories. This must be made quite clear if it is not already understood."¹⁵ Furthermore, in the Pacific War against Japan, as is well known, FEAF bombers attacked concen-

10. Y'Blood 1999, 47.

11. Combat Operations Division of the FEAF 1950, 25–26.

12. Truman's order to attack North Korean areas had been approved at the suggestion of Louis A. Johnson, U.S. secretary of defense, on 29 June. But this order reached Tokyo on the evening of 30 June, local time. See Truman 1956, 341–42.

13. David Halberstam cites the source of the conflict between MacArthur and Washington as MacArthur's "self-willed and arrogant behavior." Halberstam 2007, chaps. 48–50.

14. An air operation that contributes to strategic air warfare. Strategic air operations are aimed at the enemy's military, industrial, political, and economic system, or at massive undermining of morale. The operations include strategic reconnaissance, strategic air transport, strategic fighter operations, and the employment of strategic missiles, as well as strategic bombing. Heflin 1956, 493.

15. Lindqvist 2001, 90.

trated population areas with both incendiary and atomic bombs. An estimated 190,000 people in Tokyo were killed or missing as a result of incendiary bomb attacks. The number of casualties was even higher than estimates of those who suffered in the atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, attacks that resulted in about 140,000 dead or missing.¹⁶ Thus, those in charge of over 90 percent of the UN's air power during the Korean War—the U.S. Far East Air Forces¹⁷—were very experienced in bombing civilian areas in East Asia. Cities and production facilities in North Korea were soon to face a similar fate as targets of FEAF's bombers.

Whatever their World War II experience or the inclinations of their commanders in Korea, FEAF pilots had to adhere to the two policies mentioned above: no aerial attacks in border areas between North Korea and China and the Soviet Union and the "precision bombing" of military targets exclusively. Political considerations—policy-makers' concerns about an expansion of the war—dictated the first policy. The second policy was formed by combining the USAF's military doctrine of precision bombing during World War II and concerns expressed by the public after the war about the need to protect civilians. More detailed explanations on the historical formation of these two policies are as follows.

First, it is important to indicate that the U.S. Department of State was a prime mover in creating the prohibition against the bombing of the border areas. On 29 June 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson permitted the expansion of USAF operations into North Korea, but he insisted that air operations must not reach beyond the border of the Korean peninsula.¹⁸ Acheson's decision was immediately communicated to Stratemeyer through the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and General MacArthur. On 3 July Stratemeyer officially ordered those under his command to observe the policy prohibiting aerial attacks in border areas; this policy remained unchanged until a cease-fire brought armed conflict to an end on 27 July 1953.¹⁹

In the wake of World War II, vigorous public debates concerning the indiscriminate character of strategic bombing led to the formulation of the doctrine of precision bombing, which became an important military policy of the USAF during the Korean War. Originally, the United States limited its air attacks in Europe during World War II to precision bombing. The UK's policy was different. RAF bombers engaged in indiscriminate "area bombing" at night, simultaneously destroying military targets along with enemy-occupied civilian areas. U.S. so-called precision bombing raids were conducted only in the daytime and only against the most important and vulnerable parts of the enemy's industry.²⁰ In fact, the precision bombing policy of the USAAF (United States Army Air Forces) was made to increase the effectiveness of military operations rather

16. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 1975, 37.

17. The United States had charge of 93.38 percent of the United Nation's air power in Korea in 1951. Goodrich 1956, 146–47.

18. Truman 1956, 341.

19. Combat Operations Division of the FEAF 1950, 34.

20. Crane 1993, 4–11.

than to protect civilians. American airmen serving in Europe had concluded that mass destruction was unintelligent.²¹ In Asia, by contrast, U.S. forces designated densely populated cities as their main targets and had even used atomic bombs and incendiary bombs against Japan. The indiscriminate destructive character of these bombs was plain to see. John Dower, Craig Cameron, and Ronald Takaki, among others, have argued that the reason why the USAAF opted for this indiscriminate air attacks policy instead of precision bombing was closely related with their “racism” in Asia.²² In any case, as World War II came to an end in Asia in 1945, the U.S. military had a destructive strategic air policy in place against civilian areas. In the postwar period this air policy was criticized on the basis of “noncombatant immunity.”

In 1949, arguments over the indiscriminate nature of strategic bombing reached their peak. At that time, the U.S. government was participating in the formulation of the Geneva Conventions governing the protection of civilians in wartime as a member of the International Committee of the Red Cross. A U.S. minister in Switzerland declared officially: “The Government of the United States fully supports the objectives of this Convention.”²³ In addition, in October 1949, a controversy that surfaced in a Congressional hearing between the U.S. Air Force and Navy played an important role in popularizing the debate concerning strategic bombing. In the hearing, Navy admirals argued persuasively that strategic bombing—the policy the USAF favored—was not only inefficient from a military point of view but also incompatible with American moral sentiment.²⁴ U.S. Navy admirals voiced arguments about the imprudence and immorality of indiscriminate destruction in their criticisms of U.S. Air Force strategy with the hope of evoking public sympathy. As a result of these Congressional hearings and public criticism of the USAF, Air Force commanders and their supporters backed away from supporting attacks on noncombatants.²⁵

Robert F. Futrell, a historian of the USAF, writes, “On 29 June 1950, when the National Security Council discussed air operations in North Korea, President Truman stated that he wanted to be sure that the bombardment of North Korea was not indiscriminate.”²⁶ The minutes of the NSC meeting on that day have not yet been made public, and it is thus not certain that Truman did in fact issue

21. Lindqvist 2001, 91.

22. Dower 1986; Cameron 1994; Takaki 1995.

23. Federal Political Department 1949, 346.

24. For example, on 11 October Rear Admiral Ralph A. Ofsite gave the strongest statement criticizing the USAF’s strategic bombing: “Strategic air warfare, as practiced in the past and as proposed for the future, is militarily unsound and of limited effect, is morally wrong, and is decidedly harmful to the stability of a postwar world. If we consciously adopt a ruthless and barbaric policy toward other people, how can we prevent the breakdown of those standards of morality which have been a guiding force in this democracy since its inception?” House Committee on Armed Services 1949, 183–89.

25. Sahr Conway-Lanz, who analyzed this controversy between the Navy and the Air Force, concludes that “the hearings represented the beginnings of a broader American reinterpretation of noncombatant immunity.” Conway-Lanz 2006, 58.

26. Futrell based his claim on an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* on 10 November 1951. Beverly 1950, 88; Futrell 1961, 41.

such an order.²⁷ Yet, instructions the JCS issued on 29 June indicate that the president might have favored limiting aerial attacks to military targets only: “You are authorized to extend your operations into Northern Korea against air bases, depots, tank farms, troop columns and other such purely military targets.”²⁸ As noted above, the precision bombing policy, which had been ignored in Asia during World War II and then publicly criticized after the war, became actualized in the early days of the Korean War at the direction of high-ranking officials in Washington. In this way, the restrictions on aerial bombing were created and issued in the USAF in the first phase of the Korean War.

2.2. Realities of the Precision Bombing of Military Targets in North Korea

On 3 July 1950, USAF Chief of Staff General Hoyt S. Vandenberg ordered the re-deployment of two medium bombardment groups from the Strategic Air Command (SAC)’s Fifteenth Air Force in the continental USA to temporary duty with FEAF in Korea. This shift was at a considerable cost to the SAC’s strategic capabilities in the continental United States, but the reason that General Vandenberg gave for the reassignment was “the vital necessity of destruction of North Korean objectives north of the 38th parallel.”²⁹

On 8 July, General Stratemeyer organized the Far East Air Forces Bomber Command (FEAF Bomcom), which would exercise operational control over two medium bomber groups from the SAC (the Twenty-second and Ninety-second Bombardment Groups), the Thirty-first Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron, and FEAF’s own Nineteenth Bombardment Group. General Vandenberg then appointed Maj. Gen. Emmett O’Donnell Jr. as FEAF’s bomber commander. General O’Donnell, an experienced veteran from the World War II air campaign against Japan, had commanded the Seventy-third Bombardment Wing of the Twenty-first Bomber Command in the last years of the war. O’Donnell assumed command of SAC’s Fifteenth Air Force after 1948 and was ordered to serve in the Far East—a region that was very familiar to him—with the air units under his command (the Twenty-second and Ninety-second Bombardment Groups of the Fifteenth Air Force).³⁰

In the early months of the Korean War, the main missions of the FEAF Bomcom were to “destroy North Korean communication systems to include highway, railroad, and port facilities from a general line of the Han River–Samchok north to the Manchurian border.” Destroying “North Korean industrial targets contributing to the combat effort of North Korean forces” was also one of the most important missions of the Bomcom.³¹ On 11 July 1950, Stratemeyer ordered the FEAF Bomcom to take full charge of the attack on North Korea. And on 12 July 1950, he also commanded the Fifth Air Force to as-

27. The U.S. State Department has said only that Philip Jessup wrote the minutes of the NSC meeting on 29 June 1950, but the minutes have yet be released. See U.S. State Department 1976, 240.

28. Joint Chiefs of Staff 1950.

29. Vandenberg 1950.

30. USAF Historical Division 1952, 17; Crane 2000, 21.

31. Stratemeyer 1950 (11 July).



Fig. 2. Shopkeeper Nam Bok-gu lost her entire family in a nighttime attack on her village by U.S. Air Force bombers. (Source: *North Korea: Caught in Time. Images of War and Reconstruction*. Chris Springer [Garnet Publishing, 2010], p. 23. Used with permission.)

sume full responsibility for air operations in South Korea. Stratemeyer stressed that Bomcom should “operate south of the 38th parallel [South Korea] only by direction of Commanding General, Far East Air Forces or after coordination with Commanding General, Fifth Air Force,” and that the Fifth Air Force should operate “after coordination with CG FEAF Bomcom.”³² In this way, Stratemeyer established a line of command that made effective use of FEAF air power in the Korean peninsula.

After creating a stable command system, FEAF began launching massive operations against industrial facilities and military installations in North Korea. These attacks started with the bombing of the Wŏnsan dock areas by fifty-six B-29s on 13 July 1950. Next followed attacks on the P’yŏngyang marshaling yards by six B-29s on 22 July 1950 and eighteen B-29s on 23 July 1950; the P’yŏngyang arsenal and marshaling yards by forty-nine B-29s on 7 August 1950; the Wŏnsan Chosŏn Oil Refinery and marshaling yards by twenty four B-29s on 9 August 1950; and forty six B-29s on 10 August 1950.³³

Among these air attacks against North Korea, the USAF historians and bomb damage assessment team singled out the Hŭngnam bombing operations, which started on 30 July 1950, and continued for three days, as a typical example of the USAF’s precision bombing during the Korean War. A report by the bomb damage assessment team even directly quoted and stressed a statement of one engineer in Hŭngnam: “No wastage in the way they placed the stuff. Not one

32. Stratemeyer 1950 (12 July).

33. FEAF Bomber Command 1950 (13 July); Combat Operations Division of the FEAF 1950, 64, 93, 96, 98; FEAF Bomber Command 1950, 14, 16.

bomb seemed to go astray.”³⁴ In fact, the bombing operations of Chosŏn Nitrogen Explosives Factory in Hŭngnam reveal some important characteristics of the USAF’s strategic bombing in the early months of the Korean War. First, the FEAF Bomcom had detailed information about the position and uses of the buildings in the factory even before the bombing mission, and the B-29s of the Bomcom carried out their mission based on this advance information. An operation order for the Hŭngnam attack included not only a detailed diagram of the structure of the factory complex but descriptions of the various uses of the individual buildings such as a nitrogen storage facility, an administration building, dynamite lines, and workers’ barracks.³⁵ According to USAF historians’ claims during the war, a Bomcom intelligence officer had picked up a set of target-illustration folders that had been in storage in Guam, and these old folders contained information about 159 targets in South Korea and 53 in North Korea.³⁶

Second, the FEAF B-29s bombed only their assigned military targets in order to minimize the damage caused to the workers’ barracks in Hŭngnam. In fact, a photo taken right after the bombing showed dense smoke rising from the buildings that had been previously designated as military targets.³⁷ In addition, the US FEAF Bomb Damage Assessment Field Teams touted the bombing of the Chosŏn Nitrogen Explosives Factory as a good example of FEAF’s precision bombing policy. The assessment report quoted Hong Seung-whang, a worker at the Hŭngnam factory since the Japanese colonial period, who expressed his great surprise that “the B-29 bombers were so obviously careful in avoiding districts in which workers were housed.”³⁸

Despite USAF claims about its precision bombing, the government of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) protested over and over again about indiscriminate bombings of North Korean civilian areas by USAF bombers right from the start of the war. Pak Hŏn-yŏng, the DPRK’s foreign secretary, notified the United Nations of the extent of civilian damages caused by the USAF’s bombings on more than six occasions in 1950, including 1 July, 5 and 29 August, 7 and 16 September, and 7 December.³⁹ The letters Pak sent to the president of the UN General Assembly and the president of the UN Security Council dealt solely with the damage caused to North Korean civilians as a result of the aerial bombing.

The DPRK’s claims contradicted the USAF’s claims about precision bombing. Were North Korea’s assessments and claims about civilian damage simply propaganda? A comparison between the DPRK’s claims and the actual results of USAF bombardments demonstrates that the North Korean government did not exaggerate their findings regarding the intensity of aerial bombing. FEAF Bomcom’s own records show fifty-six sorties by B-29s in the Wŏnsan area on 13 July, dropping 500 tons of explosives; one B-29 attack on 22 July; ten B-29 at-

34. Futrell 1961, 179–81; FEAF 1950 (Evaluation), 4.

35. FEAF Bomber Command 1950 (30 July).

36. USAF Historical Division 1952, 84.

37. FEAF 1950 (Activities).

38. FEAF 1950 (Evaluation), 2.

39. Korean Central Press Agency 1952, 91–104.

tacks on 7 August; twenty-four B-29 sorties on 9 August; and forty-six more on 10 August against what they called “military targets” in the Wŏnsan area.⁴⁰ The North Korean government’s own assessment showed a remarkable similarity: USAF bombers had dropped 500 tons of explosives on 13 July; nine bombers had dropped seventy-seven explosives on 9 August; and thirty-one B-29s had released 120 bombs on 10 August.⁴¹ North Korea’s count of the number of bombers and tonnage was in line with or even lower than USAF accounting. This was equally the case in other areas including Pyŏngyang, Hŭngnam, Hamhŭng, Ch’ŏngjin, and Sungjin.⁴²

USAF documents said nothing about civilian damage caused by their bombers because the USAF insisted that they conducted air operations in North Korea against military targets only. The USAF airmen thought that civilian damage in enemy territory was completely collateral, so they felt no need to assess such damage. It is impossible, therefore, to accurately measure the extent of the damage by comparing North Korean charges with USAF documents. In the early months of the Korean War, however, even the South Korean government, America’s strong ally, publicly revealed that aerial bombing by the USAF was the most important cause of civilian damage in Seoul, the capital of South Korea. According to the government’s own investigation, the USAF bombing of Seoul resulted in 4,250 people killed and 2,413 people wounded during June–September 1950.⁴³ The USAF, of course, insisted that they conducted precision bombing only against military targets in Seoul.

Supposing North Korea had accurately evaluated not only the time, place, and nature of the USAF attacks but also the extent of the damage, how can the discrepancy with U.S. records be explained regarding civilian casualties? Two factors account for the enormous damage caused to North Korean civilian areas in the early months of the Korean War: (1) most military targets were located in or near the center of densely populated areas, and (2) the accuracy rate of B-29 bombers was notoriously low, making the precision bombing of military targets in population centers virtually impossible.

In the first phase of the Korean War (June–September 1950) strategic bombing aimed to destroy communication centers in North Korea such as railroad stations, marshaling yards, main roads, and railways in order to interdict enemy forces and supplies and to demolish industrial centers deemed vital to the enemy’s war-making capacity. Communication centers and industrial facilities in big cities like Wŏnsan, Pyŏngyang, Hamhŭng, Hŭngnam, Chinnamp’o, and Chŏngjin were thus designated as the USAF’s prime targets.

The B-29s responsible for the strategic bombing of these cities in North Korea carried very powerful explosives but had a low accuracy rate of hitting its targets. The Fifth Air Force Operations Analysis Office assessed the power of the

40. FEAF Bomber Command 1950 (13 July); Combat Operations Division of the FEAF 1950, 64, 93, 96, 98; FEAF Bomber Command 1950, 14, 16.

41. *Chosŏn Inminbo* (Korean People’s Newspaper), 16 July 1950; DPRK National Unification and Democracy Front 1950.

42. For more information, see Kim 2008, 82–122.

43. ROK Bureau of Public Information 1950, 3–4.



Fig. 3. Bomb craters around Hŭngnam Industrial Complex, North Korea, 6 November 1950. Note the many bomb craters on the broad field surrounding the buildings that were targeted in this attack. (Credit: National Archives and Records Administration)

“general purpose bomb”—the primary weapon of B-29s—by analyzing bomb damage done in a demonstration bombing at the Kimp’o Air Base. The analysis team measured the bomb craters on the asphalt-paved runway, which was four to six inches thick. The average diameter of these craters, they calculated, was thirty-six feet; the biggest one reached fifty-nine feet. The destructive force of one general purpose bomb was clear to see.⁴⁴

As for the accuracy rate of these general purpose bombs, an operations analysis report, which the Operations Analysis Office in Korea produced on 24 July 1950, calculated that the probability of a single general purpose bomb hitting a target 20 feet by 500 feet (6.096 meters by 152.4 meters) in size was only 0.7 percent, and that of hitting a target measuring 30 feet by 1,000 feet (9.144 meters by 304.8 meters) was only 1.95 percent. Thus, a B-29 had to drop ninety bombs to record a hitting rate of 50 percent over a target measuring 20 feet x 500 feet; it needed 209 bombs to reach an 80 percent rate over the same target.⁴⁵ In other words, a B-29 had to unload hundreds of bombs in order to completely wipe out its target.

Fig. 3 (above) shows the remains of buildings in a part of the Hŭngnam Industrial Complex in North Korea on 6 November 1950. FEAF took photos such as this to show USAF commanders back in the United States the extent of the damage. What is noteworthy for our purposes, however, are not the destroyed buildings but the many bomb craters on the broad field surrounding the ruins.

44. FEAF Operations Analysis Office 1951, 4, 14, 20.

45. FEAF Operations Analysis Office 1950, 2–4.

The B-29s clearly dropped a lot of bombs to destroy a few buildings in their mission area, but most of those fell in the open space around the targets. This photograph is clear and compelling evidence not of precision bombing but of the low accuracy rate of the B-29s.

Since most military targets were located in or near densely populated areas, dropping powerful explosives with a low accuracy rate resulted in the simultaneous destruction of nearby civilian areas. The reason that the Yongsan-gu area in Seoul, one of the most important communication centers in the North Korean-occupied area during the first phase of the Korean War, recorded an extraordinarily high figure in the total number of deaths (2,706) and the number of deaths killed by the aerial bombing (1,587) also could be analyzed on the same grounds.⁴⁶

3. Revived Indiscriminate Bombing Policy in Asia after November 1950

3.1. *Background of a Fateful Decision*

On 15 September 1950, General MacArthur's "Operation Chromite," the so-called Inch'ŏn Landing Operations, reversed the situation of the war overnight. The North Korean Army retreated in disorder as UN forces pressured them from both sides, from Inch'ŏn and the Naktong River. The close air support and interdiction campaign carried out by the USAF disrupted the NKA's strategy and the morale of the North Korean troops fell as a result.

Given the drastic change in the military situation in the early fall of 1950, most FEAF B-29 medium bombers were put on standby. With UN forces moving northward, the enemy's rear area shrank, and the medium bombers could no longer find proper strategic targets. Indeed, General MacArthur was so confident of triumphing in the war at this time that he sent Bomcom's two medium bomber groups back to the Zone of Interior on 25 October 1950.⁴⁷

The war situation changed again, however, when Mao Zedong, China's leader, officially ordered his army to enter the Korean Peninsula on 8 October; China's troops began crossing the border on 19 October 1950.⁴⁸ The UN troops, stretched thin due the extension of their supply lines and burdened by the cold weather in North Korea were understandably apprehensive about the appearance of this new enemy. In fact, as the UN troops feared, the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (CPV) scored overwhelming victories over the UN forces in their initial battles in early November. On 3 November 1950, the Republic of Korea's (ROK) First Division and the U.S. Eighth Cavalry Regiment were decimated in their first encounter with Chinese forces in Unsan. The ROK's First Division suffered more than 530 fatalities and the U.S. Eighth Cavalry Regiment lost more than 800, either killed or missing in action. Finally, on 3 November 1950, General Walker, the Eighth Army commander, ordered his subordinate units to

46. See Kim 2009 for the information on the USAF's bombing of Seoul during the Korean War.

47. USAF Historical Division 1952, 94.

48. Goncharov et al. 1993, 184–87.

withdraw hastily and establish a bridgehead over the Ch'ŏngch'ŏn River, twenty-five kilometers south of Unsan.⁴⁹ To General MacArthur, who had confidently sent back two medium bombardment groups to the Zone of Interior after a victory a week earlier, this withdrawal must have been a big psychological shock. The UN Command had to deal with this new critical situation.

At a meeting of key figures of the UN forces on 5 November 1950 General MacArthur announced a very important decision concerning the USAF's bombing operations. In what he hoped would be a breakthrough in the fight against the new enemy, MacArthur declared: "Every installation, facility, and village in North Korea now becomes a military and tactical target. The only exceptions are the hydroelectric power plant on the Manchurian border at Changsi and the hydroelectric power plant in Korea."⁵⁰

Ordering FEAF commanders to regard every installation and village in North Korea as a major military target, MacArthur added that "under present circumstances all such [every means of communications and every installation, factory, city, and village] have marked military potential and can only be regarded as military installations."⁵¹ Whether enemy troops or supplies were present in a city or village was no longer an important criterion in the bombing operations. Cities and villages were all designated as major targets for destruction.

FEAF commanders went even further, ordering pilots to execute prior destruction of all buildings that could be used as shelters for the enemy even before enemy troops entered the cities and villages. According to an order Stratemeyer gave to the commanding general of the Fifth Air Force, "Aircraft under Fifth Air Force control will destroy all other targets including all buildings capable of affording shelter."⁵² A USAF historical report, which was written during the Korean War (1953) and published in 1955, concluded that the prior destruction of all buildings in civilian areas "*would deprive* the Communists of badly-needed protection against the frigid weather and space for storing supplies."⁵³ George Barrett, a war correspondent for the *New York Times*, vividly described the horrible sight right after one such attack on a village in Korea: "A napalm raid hit the village three or four days ago when the Chinese were holding up the advance, and nowhere in the village have they buried the dead because there is nobody left to do so. This correspondent came across one old woman, the only one who seemed to be left alive, dazedly hanging up some clothes in a blackened courtyard filled with the bodies of four members of her family."⁵⁴ Stratemeyer recorded in his diary on 5 November 1950 that this horrible air policy was the "scorched-earth policy" that "General MacArthur reiterated."⁵⁵

However, MacArthur's scorched-earth policy was in reply to persistent re-

49. Korea Institute of Military History 1996, 116–24, 134–35.

50. Y'Blood 1999, 258.

51. Ibid., 261.

52. Stratemeyer 1950 (5 November).

53. USAF Historical Division 1955, 21.

54. Barrett 1951.

55. Y'Blood 1999, 258.

quests from FEAF's leading members. These commanders, who had taken part in massive bombing operations against civilian areas in the Far East during World War II, argued insistently for the indiscriminate bombing of North Korea since the outbreak of the Korean War. During his first meeting with General MacArthur, for example, Emmett O'Donnell, the newly designated commander of Bomcom, argued that USAF bombers needed to attack North Korean population centers with incendiary bombs: "to do a fire job on the five industrial centers of northern Korea," O'Donnell said.⁵⁶

General Curtis LeMay, commander of the Strategic Air Command (SAC) during the Korean War, told an Air Force panel in 1972 that O'Donnell's aggressive stance in Korea was in fact "his Plan."⁵⁷ LeMay insisted that USAF bombers could effectively destroy targets in North Korea by using incendiary bombs, which had shown their destructive power during World War II. In fact, SAC devised twin plans: the employment of incendiaries against target areas and the use of demolition bombs in precision attacks against industrial plants in the north.⁵⁸ SAC presented its plan to Major General Emmett O'Donnell for the UN commander's approval, but at that time, General MacArthur had already been given instructions by the Truman administration to implement the precision bombing policy mentioned above, and so did not accept SAC's proposal. Addressing O'Donnell by his nickname, MacArthur said: "No. Rosy, I'm not prepared to go that far yet. My instructions are very explicit."⁵⁹

General Stratemeyer, FEAF's commander general, also had ideas similar to LeMay's from the early months of the Korean War. Having built a reputation for excellence in air operations in Asia during and after World War,⁶⁰ Stratemeyer shared LeMay and O'Donnell's views about bombing civilian areas. William Y'Blood, who edited and published Stratemeyer's diary of the Korean War, described Stratemeyer as follows in the course of explaining his career in Asia during World War II: "Unconditional surrender, unlimited warfare, the seizing of all of the enemy's territory were the terms of reference with which he was most familiar."⁶¹

Although Stratemeyer was one of MacArthur's most loyal supporters,⁶² he

56. O'Donnell 1950.

57. LeMay complained to interviewers in 1972 that his plan, all out bombing campaign in Korea at the beginning, might have convinced the Communists that the UN forces were serious and ended the war. He said in the course of explaining the USAF's operations that "once you make a decision to use military force to solve your problem, then you ought to use it and use an overwhelming military force." Coffey 1986, 306.; Kozak 2009, 307.

58. USAF Historical Division 1951, 84.

59. Crane 2000, 32.

60. Stratemeyer was the commanding general of the Army Air Forces, the India-Burma Sector of the China-Burma-India Theater of Operations in 1943, and later became the commanding general of the Eastern Air Command and the South East Asia Theater Command. From July 12, 1945 to January 1946, he was the commanding general of the Army Air Forces, China Theater. Finally, in April 1949, he became the commanding general of the Far East Air Forces, the position he held on the day of the outbreak of the Korean War. Y'Blood 1999, 1-9; Tucker 2000, 619-21.

61. Y'Blood 1999, 29.

62. Stratemeyer publicly revered and defended General MacArthur even after his retirement from the Air Force. See Y'Blood 1999, 28-29.

consistently argued for a massive blitz on Pyŏngyang by over one hundred B-29s to “ensure elimination of remaining targets in one strike”⁶³ and “air attacks on the city of Sinuiju with all available air means”⁶⁴ in spite of Washington’s precision bombing policy and General MacArthur’s own opposition. According to Stratemeyer’s diary, MacArthur “desired to hold in abeyance the one bang attack on P’yŏngyang.”⁶⁵ On 27 September 1950, just a day before MacArthur’s decision not to attack P’yŏngyang, General Doyle O. Hickey, chief of staff of the Far East Command, reported to MacArthur that “there was a distinct possibility that the UN might move north of 38° N. Lat. and, after hostilities have ceased, assume the responsibility for rebuilding many of the NK facilities destroyed by our medium bombers.”⁶⁶ Furthermore, on 3 November 1950, when Stratemeyer requested MacArthur’s permission to burn the city of Sinuiju, MacArthur refused, saying, “Strat, I have no objection to the destruction of military targets anywhere in North Korea, but I do not want barracks buildings or any other facility in Sinuiju destroyed at this time.” In the face of General MacArthur’s opposition, Stratemeyer continued to argue for the destruction of Sinuiju by aerial bombing. Stratemeyer requested authority to go in low over Sinuiju with fighters using napalm or other weapons, but MacArthur noted the difficulty of such an action. Then Stratemeyer discussed with MacArthur the marshaling yards that are east of the viaduct that joins onto the bridge that connects Sinuiju and Antung in China. In the end, MacArthur said, “hit that.”⁶⁷

In addition, MacArthur granted permission for the incendiary bombing of Kanggye, a city near Sinuiju at the end of his long meeting on 3 November 1950. Stratemeyer told MacArthur that as a lesson he could burn some other towns in North Korea, and he indicated the town of Kanggye, which he believed was occupied by enemy troops. MacArthur answered: “Burn it if you so desire. Not only that, Strat, but burn and destroy as a lesson any other of those towns that you consider of military value to the enemy.”⁶⁸ This was MacArthur’s first expression of his intention to burn Korean cities and villages with incendiary bombs. And as mentioned above, the official enunciation of a scorched-earth policy was issued in a meeting of key figures of the UN forces on 5 November 1950. The revival of MacArthur’s scorched-earth policy in the Asia-Pacific region was responsible for the deaths of countless Korean civilians during the remainder of the war, as we will see.

3.2. Indiscriminate Bombing of North Korea after November 1950

General MacArthur’s new aerial bombing policy showed its formidable power immediately. The B-29 medium bombers that had been put on standby due to the absence of suitable targets in North Korea were moved back to the front. Armed with the incendiary bombs that had been used with such destructive

63. Stratemeyer 1950 (27 September).

64. Stratemeyer 1950 (17 October).

65. Y’Blood 1999, 210.

66. Craigie 1950.

67. Y’Blood 254.

68. Ibid.

force against Japanese towns and villages during World War II, the B-29s began a campaign to obliterate targets in North Korea. Beginning with the bombing of Kanggye by twenty-two B-29s on 5 November 1950, FEAF launched attacks against North Korean cities and towns on a daily basis. These attacks included Sinuiju – sixty-nine B-29s, 8 November; Sakju-Pukch'öng-Ch'öngjin – thirteen bombers, 9 November; and Ch'öngjin-Ŭichu – thirty-three B-29s, 10 November.⁶⁹ A self-assessment conducted by FEAF after every bombing operation calculated the destruction of North Korean cities in these percentages: Manp'ochin, 95 percent; Kointong, 90 percent; Sakchu, 75 percent; Ch'osan, 85 percent; Sinŭichu, 60 percent; Kanggye, 75 percent; Hŭich'ön, 75 percent; Namsi, 90 percent; Ŭichu, 20 percent; and Hoeryöng, 90 percent.⁷⁰ The massive bombing operations, which had originated in the northern part of the peninsula, spread to the entire area of North Korea as the NKA and CPV armies advanced toward the south.

General Stratemeyer justified the leveling of all buildings in Kanggye in a message to General Vandenberg immediately after the raid: “Entire city of Kanggye was virtual arsenal and tremendously important communications center, hence decision to employ incendiaries for the first time in Korea.”⁷¹ In addition to the destruction caused by B-29s, B-26 light bombers and fighter-bombers also participated in scorched-earth operations against North Korean cities and villages. Their mission under the scorched-earth policy was the *complete incineration* of urban areas and the destruction of small villages. A report by a fact-finding group from Women’s International Commission for the Investigation of War Atrocities Committed in Korea revealed the following about the destruction by aerial bombing:

Everybody who was interviewed stated that when the first wave of incendiary bombs had been dropped those who went out into the street to attempt to put out the fires were systematically machine-gunned by low-flying aircraft. The almost *wholesale* burning of the town was caused by the systematic machine-gunning of civilians who were attempting to put out the fires.⁷²

The Office of the General Staff of the Supreme Command of the Soviet Army also described the bombing process in similar terms: “From seven to ten minutes after bombing operations, fighter-bombers appeared and carried out a sweeping mission of the target area from the air.” This report was not publicized as public propaganda, but as a confidential analysis of USAF’s military actions.⁷³

Fighter-bombers such as F-51s and F-80s contributed not only to the wholesale burning of urban areas but also to the destruction of rural areas, their more important missions, as mission reports of fighter-bomber flights attached to a

69. Headquarters of the U.S. Air Force 1950.

70. USAF Historical Division 1955, 21.

71. Y’Blood 1999, 259.

72. Women’s International Commission for the Investigation of War Atrocities Committed in Korea 1951, 10. Emphasis added.

73. Office of the General Staff of the Supreme Command of the Soviet Army 1953.

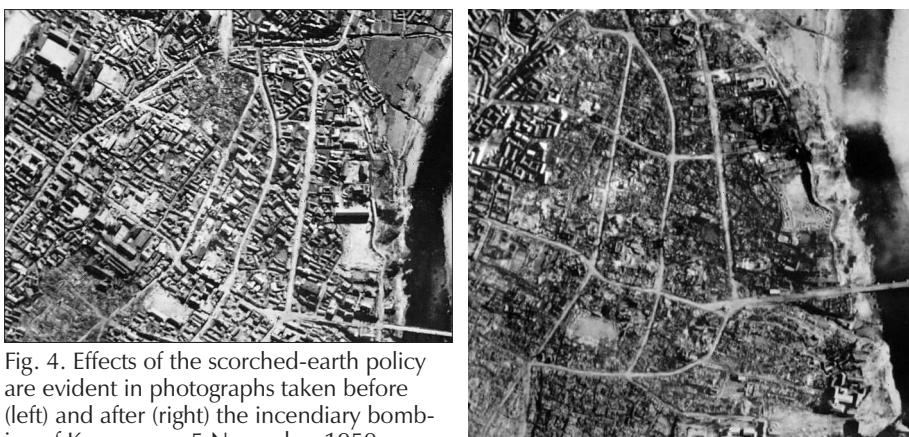


Fig. 4. Effects of the scorched-earth policy are evident in photographs taken before (left) and after (right) the incendiary bombing of Kanggye on 5 November 1950.

(Credit: National Archives and Records Administration)

Twelfth Fighter Bomber Squadron (15 November 1950) show: all seven flights⁷⁴ designated villages or towns as their main targets; all seven flights used napalm, which they had rarely used earlier, as their primary weapon; and seven flights attacked a village as their final target right before leaving the target area.⁷⁵

Thus, fighter-bomber pilots were not bound to search carefully for targets, such as enemy troops or supplies. After-mission reports show that most fighter-bombers searched for enemy troops and supplies in their target areas, but when they failed to discover any enemy presence, they would launch an “indiscriminate attack” on any village in their area. The presence of enemy troops or evidence of supplies in a village was not needed to justify air operations against civilian areas. Under the scorched-earth policy the very existence of the villages in North Korea was reason enough.

On 17 November 1950, General MacArthur had explained the effects of USAF’s air operations to John J. Muccio, U.S. ambassador to Korea, in these stark terms: “Unfortunately, this area will be left a desert.”⁷⁶ The term “this area” in MacArthur’s remark meant the whole area between “our present positions and the border.” Given MacArthur’s stature, his comment may be read not simply as a prediction but as an expression of his clear intentions. Sadly, MacArthur’s statement became a horrible reality in a very short period of time.

During the winter of 1950, most cities and villages in North Korea were transformed into a heap of ashes. Tibor Meray, a correspondent in North Korea during the Korean War, reported that when he crossed the North Korean border in August 1951 he witnessed “a complete devastation between the Yalu River [the border between China and North Korea] and the capital,” Pyŏngyang. There were simply “no more cities in North Korea.” He added, “my impression was that I am traveling on the moon because there was only devastation—every city was a collection of chimneys. I don’t know why houses collapsed and chim-

74. A “flight” means, “an Air Force organization entity which exists or functions as a subdivision or detachment of a squadron, or as a unit with its own authorization.” Heflin 1956, 209.

75. Twelfth Fighter Bomber Squadron 1950.

76. Muccio 1950.

neys did not.”⁷⁷ In May 1951 the report of an international fact-finding team⁷⁸ investigating war atrocities in North Korea declared: “The members, in the whole course of their journey, did not see one town that had not been destroyed, and there were very few undamaged villages.”⁷⁹

After July 1951, UN forces and North Korean and Chinese forces made steady progress toward their common goal of achieving an armistice agreement to their advantage. But even during the negotiations period, USAF aerial bombing continued day-in and day-out until 27 July 1953, the first day of the cease-fire. Furthermore, when armistice negotiations came to a standstill over the repatriation of prisoners of war, the USAF devised what they called their “air pressure strategy.” Designed primarily to put political pressure on North Korea’s negotiators, this new strategy ignored some of the existing political and military limitations applied to air power and used air power as a form of direct political pressure. Colonels Richard Randolph and Ben Mayo took charge of planning the air pressure strategy, selecting proper targets of air operations. Noting the scarcity of “gold targets” in North Korea, they suggested that the solution to the targets problem would be to attack targets that were the least un-remunerative. They explained, “It is believed that once the concept—destruction—is clearly stated and made known to all operations and intelligence agencies, targets can be found, developed, and successfully attacked.”⁸⁰

On 26 June 1952, three months after Ralph and Mayo’s new air strategy had been submitted, the FEAF Target Committee proposed that FEAF’s combat operations policy should be rewritten sufficiently to direct the Fifth Air Force and FEAF Bomcom to maintain “air pressure” through destructive operations rather than continue with the old policy. General Otto P. Weyland, commanding general of the FEAF in 1952, approved the recommended action on 29 June 1952.⁸¹ As the air pressure strategy emerged as the USAF’s operative military plan, North Korean towns and villages were again designated as the major targets to be destroyed by the bombers although “finding lucrative targets in war-torn North Korea did not promise to be easy.”⁸²

As part of this new strategy, FEAF’s Fifth Air Force selected thirty-five villages and towns as targets for destruction by B-26 light bombers; later on, the number rose to seventy-eight.⁸³ FEAF fighter-bombers also joined in the bombing of civilian areas in accordance with “Operations Plan 72-52,” which began in July 1952. The purpose of this operations plan, which continued until the end of the war by virtue of the air pressure strategy, was to systematically destroy all “supply ar-

77. Thames Television, “Transcript from the fifth seminar for the documentary entitled ‘Korea: The Unknown War,’” November 1986; Cumings 2004, 30.

78. Team members included Helde Cahn (East Germany), Lily Waechter (West Germany), Bai Lang (China), and Trees Soenito Heyligers (The Netherlands).

79. Women’s International Commission for the Investigation of War Atrocities Committed in Korea 1951, 40–41.

80. Randolph and Mayo 1952; USAF Historical Division 1956, 26.

81. USAF Historical Division 1956, 34.

82. *Ibid.*, 26.

83. Fifth Air Force 1953, 5-9; USAF Historical Division 1956, 99–100.



Fig. 5a. The scene of complete devastation of an area near P'yongyang in North Korea. (Source: FEAF January 1953. Credit: National Archives and Records Administration)



Fig. 5b. A house in North Korea being burned in a napalm attack by USAF bombers. (Source: FEAF 1953. Credit: National Archives and Records Administration)

“eas” (meaning all buildings and facilities) that enemy troops could use.⁸⁴ A FEAF Bomber Command report written right after the Korean War indicates the level of destruction: Of the more than 17,000 tons of bombs its bombers had delivered during the war, almost 10,000 had been dropped on 110 supply areas.⁸⁵ USAF bombers reported an attack on houses newly built over the ruins of a city as the destruction of “supply facilities.” Consider, for example, the following reports that accompanied the two USAF photos reproduced above.

The report attached to photo Fig. 5a above shows what the USAF perceives to be a “supply area.” The report explains:

This area near Pyŏngyang in North Korea was a center for military supplies *intended* for Communist troops along the battlefield. But *the Red troops never got them*. U.S. Air Force fighter bombers and “Superforts” spotted them first. When they finished with their bombs and napalm, this scene of complete devastation was all that remained.⁸⁶

Members of the USAF thus regarded all facilities in North Korea that could be used by the enemy troops as supply centers. The report attached to photo of Fig. 5b above similarly illustrates USAF perceptions of supply areas and enemy barracks:

This photograph tells better than words the effect of napalm tanks dropped by B-26s of the 452nd Light Bomb Wing on enemy barracks and supply buildings. The mammoth fire-filled smoke is roaring from a barracks building near Nae-ri in west central Korea following an attack around noon, Monday, January 29, 1951.⁸⁷

The structure in photo Fig. 5b (above) was a thatched-roof house typical of village farmhouses in Korea during the war. The USAF gave no explanation as to why this civilian home was considered to be “enemy barracks.” In fact, almost all

84. Fifth Air Force 1952 (5 October); Fifth Air Force 1952 (20 October).

85. FEAF Bomber Command 1953.

86. FEAF January 1953. Emphasis added.

87. FEAF 1951.

of the reports of photos I examined in the U.S. National Archives offer similar explanations that labeled civilian areas as supply centers or enemy barracks. Furthermore, some Korean War pilots interviewed by John Sherwood in 1992–93 also “rationalized the destruction of [a] civilian village by defining it as guerilla headquarters.” But other pilots such as Raymond Sturgeon regarded their missions on civilian areas as “mass killing.” Sturgeon told Sherwood, “I can’t say I enjoyed it. You’re there and that’s what you do, but some guys absolutely loved it. We were instructed to hit civilians because they did a lot of the work.”⁸⁸

The true nature of the air pressure strategy became evident in bombing operations directed against reservoirs in North Korea. This military operation started in May 1953 when rice planting, the most important agricultural process in Korea, had just been completed. The destruction of reservoirs was an important military action from political and psychological standpoints rather than from a military one. By bombing the reservoirs UN forces aimed to prevent North Korea’s people from producing rice, their staple food. A shortage of food would cause great suffering not only to the enemy troops but also to North Korean civilians. Twenty reservoirs were clustered around Haechu, where most of North Korea’s rice was produced; 75 percent of the rice paddies in the Haechu area depended on these irrigation facilities. FEAF commanders knew that the destruction of the Haechu reservoirs would cripple the North Korean economy and would thus be a great psychological shock to North Korea’s leaders and civilians.⁸⁹ According to an air staff study written during the Korean War, “attacks on the irrigation dams, it was believed, would produce useful psychological reactions, since farmers would tend to blame the war, and thus the Communists, for exposing their crops to attack and destruction.”⁹⁰

The first irrigation dam selected for attack was the Toksan reservoir, located about twenty air miles north of P’yŏngyang, an earthen and stone structure that held back the waters of the Potong River. Fighter-bombers of the Korea-based Fifth Air Force were selected to strike the first blow against the irrigation dam complex. Accordingly, twenty F-84s of the Fifty-eighth Fighter Bomber Wing hit the Toksan reservoir on the afternoon of 13 May 1953. The attack not only destroyed over six miles of the Kyŏngŭi main-line railroad and seven hundred buildings in P’yŏngyang, it also caused inestimable damage to thousands of acres of planted rice.⁹¹

On 15 and 16 May 1953, two groups of twenty-four F-84s attacked the Chasan irrigation dam. The reservoir was located near P’yŏngyang, and held back the waters of the Taetong River, which ran through the capital of North Korea. Fig. 6 (below) shows on-rushing waters from the Chasan reservoir surging over field after field of young rice. Besides the damage to the rice paddies, the photo also reveals many bridges, highways, railroads, and houses standing in the path of

88. Sherwood 1996, 103–5.

89. Quarterly Review Staff 1957, 166–73.

90. *Ibid.*, 171–72.

91. *Ibid.*, 172–75.

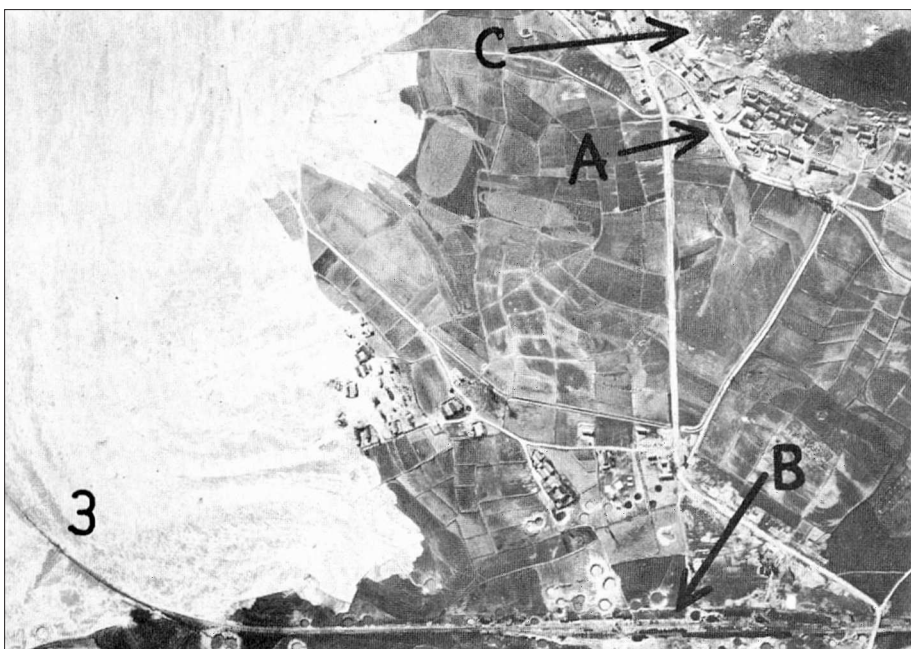


Fig. 6. Waters from Chasan reservoir rushing toward villages and rice paddies in Haechu. (Number 3 and letters A, B, and C are USAF target designations.) (Source: Quarterly Review Staff Study 1957, 178)

the devastating floodwaters.⁹² The number of bomb craters near the houses and roads in this photograph reveal that this area had already been harshly damaged even before this tragic flood.

The bombing of reservoirs and destruction of Korea's staple food were intended to make both troops and civilians lose their will to fight, even as armistice negotiations were reaching their end point. Bombing operations such as these attacks on the food supply of Koreans in the north were clearly incompatible with the USAF's policy of precision bombing of military targets.

Bomb damage assessments done at the time of the armistice revealed that eighteen of the twenty-two major cities had been at least half obliterated. The tally sheet shows the percentages of the area destroyed in each city as follows: Chinnamp'o = 80 percent; Ch'ongjin = 65 percent; Haechu = 75 percent; Hamhŭng = 80 percent; Hŭngnam = 85 percent; Hwangju = 97 percent; Kanggye = 60 percent; Kunuri = 100 percent; Kyomip'o = 80 percent; P'yongyang = 75 percent; Sariwon = 95 percent; Sunan = 90 percent; Wŏnsan = 80 percent; and Sinanju = 100 percent.⁹³

In his memoirs, General William Dean, a POW in North Korea during most of the war, gives one of the most revealing examples of the results of the USAF's aerial bombing:

The town of Huichon [Hüich'ön] amazed me. The city I'd seen before—two-storied buildings, a prominent main street—wasn't there any more;

92. Ibid., 176.

93. 548th RTS 1953.

most of the towns were just rubble or snowy open spaces where buildings had been. The little towns, once full of people, were unoccupied shells. The villagers live in entirely new temporary villages, hidden in canyons or in such positions that only a major bombing effort could reach them.⁹⁴

Dean's memoirs published in 1954, right after the war, clearly described horribly devastated cities and villages in North Korea. But historians of the Air Force in the 1950s cited these memoirs to justify their air operations. Just like the FEAF reports during the war, the historians of the USAF again depicted the civilians as personnel and towns as communications centers: "General Dean's description of the Communist village supply dumps and the 'snowy open places [*sic*] where buildings had been' revealed the real impact of the destruction of these supply, personnel, and communications centers."⁹⁵

4. Conclusion

In the early months of the Korean War, the USAF conducted its air war operations with limited objectives and means. USAF bombers were not permitted to attack border areas between North Korea and China or the Soviet Union and they were bound by official policy to the precision bombing of military targets only. Furthermore, the USAF refused permission for the use of atomic bombs and incendiary bombs, weapons that had shown their tremendous destructive power in the Far East during World War II. These measures were put in place to ensure the protection of civilians. Early in the war senior officers in FEAF expressed their discontent with the limitations policy-makers in Washington had placed on them. Pointing to the military benefits of massive bombings of population centers during World War II, the officers found it hard to understand Washington's limitations based on political and diplomatic requests. So Generals Stratemeyer (FEAF), LeMay (SAC), and O'Donnell (FEAF Bomcom) argued vehemently from the war's early days on that FEAF bombers should be allowed to use incendiary bombs against population centers in North Korea. But such urgings were frustrated by officials in Washington in the first phase of the war.

However, China's entry into the war in November 1950 changed the momentum in the seemingly intractable conflict between politicians in Washington and military officers in the Far East. General Douglas MacArthur ignored one of Washington's two established air policies, designating cities and villages in North Korea as the main targets of bombers. And he even allowed them to use incendiary bombs. Officials in Washington sat by and watched as MacArthur implemented these policies. Facing possible defeat in this critical military situation, Washington officials did not reveal their position on MacArthur's scorched-earth policy. The prohibition against bombing in the border areas was adhered to very well until the end of the war, but as soon as China entered the war restrictions limiting precision bombing solely to military targets disappeared.

94. Dean 1954, 272–75.

95. USAF Historical Division 1956, 122.

From then until the end of hostilities on 27 July 1953, the USAF continuously targeted cities and villages in North Korea as their crucial targets as political and military situations dictated. In July 1952, the USAF launched yet another strategy, called the air pressure strategy, in order to get the upper hand in the armistice negotiations by putting military pressure on both enemy troops and civilians. The bombers of the USAF more harshly began to destroy many cities and villages that had already been leveled by continuous bombings. And as a typical example of the air pressure strategy, in May 1953, when the armistice negotiation had almost reached its final stage, USAF bombers destroyed many reservoirs in North Korea in order to disrupt the production and distribution of the enemy's food staple.

Washington did limit the use of atomic bombs and the bombing of targets in North Korea's border areas in order to prevent the Korean War from expanding into World War III, but it did not impose a limitation on targets for destruction in North Korean territory. After General MacArthur officially issued his scorched-earth policy on 5 November 1950, cities and villages throughout North Korea were regarded as important military targets to be erased from the earth. In fact, the USAF had no limitation on targets in North Korea for about two years in what was called a "limited war." Given the price that North Korean civilians paid as a result of U.S. air strikes one wonders how the U.S. war in Korea could be called a war for the freedom of the Korean people. Furthermore, given the USAF's unlimited attacks on cities and villages in North Korea one wonders how the war can be called simply a "limited war."

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