

TAC Tanker Tales
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Banquet Program Speech by Ruf Mewborn (continued from Page 1)

After the tanker squadrons were deactivated we were all scattered to various assignments and the KB-50 organizations became history. A history that was never recorded. After the discussions with the Langley historian and the Air Mobility Command's historian, it's obvious we never got a good page in the history books. We hope to change that and with your help and under the direction of our historian John Bessette that can be done.

Looking back at the beginning of this history, the TAC Tanker business was not a pretty picture. In 1953, most of our tactical aircraft were still in the Far East with the Korean Armistice having been signed on 27 July of that year. There was only one squadron, the 421st at Yokota. They had eight KB-29s and on a max effort they could launch 3 or 4 tankers. They were in Japan to support the F-84 and B-45s.

Most of the procurement dollars were going to SAC to replace the B-29s, B-50s and B-36s. The B-47 had its first flight in 1950 and was coming online and the B-52 was going into production. Boeing was rapidly building the KC-97 to provide the refueling for the Strategic Force. The KB-29 was not capable of meeting this need. The Air Force transferred them to the Tactical Air Command which now owned all the tactical fighters and basically no tankers.

The 420th at Alexandria AFB, LA received the first KB-29s. After becoming operationally ready they were transferred to RAF Sculthorpe in England. The 429th at Langley was activated in July 1954 and received 18 KB-29s from SAC. A lot of them came from Bergstrom AFB, TX. The 622nd at England AFB, LA, was the next to be activated in July 1955. The 427th received their tankers at Robins AFB, GA, and moved to Langley in January 1959.

So now we had 6 squadrons flying very old KB-29s, refueling a high speed fighter at low altitude and low airspeed. This was not a very efficient or safe operation. So something had to be done. Boeing built 371 B-50s for the Air Force and they were used by SAC in their nuclear deterrent force until they were replaced by the B-47s and B-52 in the 1950s.

The Air Force contracted with the Hayes Aircraft Corporation in Birmingham, AL, to convert 136 of these b-50s to tankers and we had our first KB-50 in January 1956 and by November of 1957, all of the KB-29s had been retired and by the end of 1957 all of TAC's squadrons had received their full complement of KB-50s. The J-47 jet engines

were added and in 1958 we saw the performance greatly improved. The jets decreased the ground roll on take off by 30%, making an 8000 foot roll on a 9000 foot runway a comfortable 6300 feet.

With their newly acquired tanker fleet TAC began planning to enter the Cold War and cover the brush fires that SAC could not attack with their nuclear force. The Composite Air Strike Force was formed to quickly respond to Communist threats around the perimeter of the Communist world. It was very successful and the tanker squadrons with dedicated crews and the KB-50J were the workhouse of the strike force.

In 1958, the strike force was selected to receive the Mackay Trophy. This is awarded yearly by the Air Force for the most meritorious flight of the year by an Air Force individual or organization. Previous recipients include Eddie Rickenbacker, Chuck Yeager, Jimmie Doolittle, and the Thunderbirds. General Weyland, TAC commander, acknowledged that without the 4505th Air Refueling Wing this achievement would not have been possible.

The Mackay Trophy Award was presented to the Tactical Air Command Composite Air Strike Force X-ray Tango for Operation Mobile Zebra. The citation reads:

"The Tactical Air Command Composite Strike Force X-Ray Tango distinguished itself in preparing and deploying tactical and support elements to the Far East during the period 20 August to 9 September 1958. The speed and efficiency with which units completed the hazardous trans-Pacific flights is evidence of the outstanding airmanship of the crews and the skill and efficiency of the support personnel. In slightly more than sixteen flying hours, after being alerted in the United States, the first tactical element of this nuclear strike force was on combat patrol in the Far East trouble area. The outstanding professional skill and devotion to duty displayed by all members of the Task Force reflect great credit upon it and the United States Air Force."

So those of you in the 4505th Wing in 1958 can claim credit for being a part of this Mackay Award to TAC.

Now to verify this even further, I want to introduce our guest speaker. General Talbott's bio is covered in the program and I won't repeat that for you. By way of introduction we have a film that documents his historic flight in an F-100C in 1956 when he won the Bendix Trophy and set a transcontinental speed record from LA to Philadelphia.