

Lebanon 1958 and the Composite Air Strike Force

By Edward Stellini

This article is based primarily on the author's memories and notes. It also relies on historical sources including information in an article in the Saturday Evening Post in September 1958, titled "Operation Double Trouble" by James P. O'Donnell, who deployed with the troops. Ed.



1st Lt. Ed Stellini at Myrtle Beach circa 1957.

The 354th Fighter Group, known as the "Pioneer Mustangs," was considered the top fighter group in World War II. It flew 18,334 sorties, destroying 956 enemy aircraft, 701 in the air, to establish the highest air-to-air combat record of any fighter group. The group also destroyed numerous bridges, railroad cars, tanks, gun emplacements, ammo dumps, and buildings. On 31 March 1946, the Group was deactivated. Ten years later, in July 1956, the 342nd Fighter Day Wing was activated at Myrtle Beach AFB, SC. Less than five months later, in December, the Wing was reactivated as the 354th Fighter Day Wing, and included the same squadrons as the old 354th: i.e. the 353rd, 355th, and 356th. The best World War II fighter

group was put under the command of Colonel Francis Gabreski, the Air Force's top living fighter ace. Lt. Col. Rex Barber, one of the P-38 pilots credited with shooting down Admiral Yamamoto, the architect of the Pearl Harbor attack, near Guadalcanal in 1943, was named Wing Inspector. Later, a fourth squadron, the 352nd, was formed with aircraft and pilots from the other three squadrons.

In January 1957, six of us more senior pilots in the newly formed Wing were sent to George AFB, California, to check out in the F-100 and begin ferrying aircraft to Myrtle Beach from west coast bases to equip the squadrons. Pilots were assigned from gunnery training school and other fighter wings such as the 50th Wing at Hahn AB, Germany.

During the first year and a half, the main activities of the Wing were checking out new pilots in the F-100D, conducting transition and instrument training, getting up to speed on nuclear warfare capabilities, and training in tactical nuclear delivery. We did very little conventional training other than some air-to-air firing on the rag (banner target) and air-to-ground strafing and bombing at Poinsett Range near Shaw AFB, SC.

F-100 Meets the KB-50J

By May 1958, we were pretty much operationally ready and were beginning to train in air-to-air refueling with the KB-50J. By the end of June, most of us had become proficient in day hookups and were starting night training.

The KB-50J had four reciprocating and two jet engines. Three basket-type drogues—one from each wing pod and one from the tail—reeled out for air refueling. The tanker flew at about 20,000 feet at about 310 knots TAS. The fighters cruised above 30,000 feet at about 550 knots TAS. Once the flight saw the tankers it would descend to tanker altitude splitting up into 2-ship elements, slow down, and come in from behind, slowly easing up to a position just behind the extended drogues. For the receiver pilot, the hookup involved flying alongside the drogue at the tanker's speed, about 220 knots indicated, and, while flying formation with the tanker and watching the drogue out of the corner of his eye, moving forward until the refueling probe on his right wing connected with the drogue. If he was lucky, he could hook up in one to three attempts. Once hooked up, refueling began, and as the aircraft got heavier, he added power. He disconnected when the tanker told him that he had a full load, which he double checked with his fuel gages. The time to refuel, if carrying 'bathtubs' (450-gallon external tanks) and pretty low on fuel to start with, was about ten minutes.

On 1 July 1958, the designation of the unit was changed to the 354th Tactical Fighter Wing. We were no longer considered to be only a clear-air-mass day fighting organization.

Crisis in the Middle East

In early July 1958, the situation in the Middle East was gaining much attention. Muslim Arab nationalists in Lebanon were rebelling against the government. The President of Lebanon asked the United States for help. He was concerned that his regime was in danger of being ousted by his enemies, with the support of the communists. On 14 July, news about a lightning coup and bloodbath in Baghdad reached Washington. Pro-communist army officers had overthrown the government and declared Iraq a republic. King Fasa'il and Prince Abdul Ilah were killed. President Eisenhower decided to send 10,000 Marines to Lebanon as a show of force and to send air and additional ground troops to support the operation.



354th FDW morphed to the 354th TFW in 1958.



KB-50s could handle up to three aircraft at a time.

Within an hour, a flash alert went out of the Pentagon to two troop carrier wings at Ardmore AFB in Oklahoma and Seward AFB in Tennessee. Three squadrons (about 50 C-119s and C-130s) were ordered to the Middle East.



"Incirlik Tower, the 355th TFS Huns have the field in sight."

Alerts went out to various tanker, bomber, fighter, and reconnaissance bases. These included: KB-50J tankers and B-57 medium bombers at Langley AFB, VA, F-100s at Myrtle Beach AFB, SC, RF-101s and RB-66s at Shaw AFB, SC, and several F-86Ds at ADC bases. These forces were designated "Composite Air Strike Force Bravo" in the 19th Air Force's Emergency War Plan. The plan specified that the base of operations was Incirlik AB near Adana, Turkey. Incirlik was built in 1954 and was not highly publicized, probably due to U-2 operations there. A Turkish major commanded the base. There were about 2,000 U.S. Air Force officers and airmen in the Base Support Group called TUSLOG (The U.S. Logistics Group).

The alert also went out to the Army. About 1,800 paratroopers in Germany began mobilizing for the trip to Incirlik to serve as backup to the Marines who would land in Lebanon.

The Plan addressed differences in planes, speeds, ranges, and air-refueling techniques and required that all must be phased into a stringent priority timetable to avoid bottlenecks and stack-ups. The "air-superiority" fighters were to be at Incirlik before the transports arrived. The tankers had to be out over the Atlantic and in the Mediterranean area before the fighters arrived at the air-refueling rendezvous points and had to be available for the slower bombers that would follow. Then they were to proceed to Incirlik for operations in the theater. The transports had to go to the various bases to pick up flyaway kits and maintenance personnel and take them to Incirlik as soon as possible to support operations.

The 19th Air Force was a small mobile headquarters located at Foster AFB, TX. It set up to take over operational control of the Composite Air Strike Force (CASF) as soon as it became airborne. The commander of the operation was Major General Henry Viccellio [Butch's father]. While General Viccellio and his staff were en route to Incirlik, they coordinated all activities during the deployments and arrived at Incirlik on 16 July to command air operations.

On 14 July, the 354th Wing was notified at 0945 to put the Plan into effect, and at once began planning for the 6,400-mile deployment to Incirlik. In fact, we were aware that there was a high likelihood that we would be deploying to the Middle East ever since we began air refueling training in May and had already done some planning. The planning involved two sections of 12 aircraft each—Resort Alpha (355th), Resort Bravo (352nd). A third section of aircraft, Resort Cocoa, was to follow as required. Alpha crews were immediately sent home to pack and were told to be back as soon as possible to help with the flight planning and to be briefed. Alpha was to launch at 1550. Bravo crews were told to go home and get crew rest because they would launch about eight hours after Alpha. Cocoa flight was to follow the next day.

Resort Alpha Launches

Resort Alpha was led by the 355th's Commander, Lt. Col. Devol "Rock" Brett. Each flight of four in our section included a two-seat F-100F with a pilot in the back seat to help with navigation. The aircraft were to fly to the first refueling point over the Atlantic, halfway between Bermuda and Nova Scotia, then proceed to the second refueling point over the Azores, to the third refueling south of France in the Mediterranean, and finally on to Incirlik. Resort Bravo and Cocoa sections were to follow the same flight path. The only navigation aids were several CS-54 "Duckbutts" with radar-steering capability, the tankers in the refueling areas with their radars, a little contact flying when we were over land, plus a lot of dead reckoning over water. Some of the pilots had made trans-Atlantic crossings before, but not non-stop flights.

Resort Alpha section, cruising at 30,000 feet at 550 knots burning about 3,000 pounds of fuel an hour of the 8,000-plus pounds aboard at full load, crossed Cape Fear, Virginia, and headed out over the Atlantic. About an hour out, Alpha passed the first and only Duckbutt (of the three that were supposed to be on station). Two hours after takeoff, as the sun set, the section spotted the tankers. Each tanker was to take on two fighters, but because of last-minute changes in plans, only three tankers showed up, and one of those aborted due to low fuel. In the confusion, one fighter disconnected with only half a load and a second got no fuel. Colonel Brett ordered those two fighters to head north to the emergency field at Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. But Dartmouth was socked in when they arrived, so they headed for Greenfield, Nova Scotia. One aircraft landed (the one piloted by Capt. Shelby Evans, the squadron ops officer). The second aircraft ran out of fuel and the pilot bailed out, landing near the town of Caledonia, Nova Scotia.



The 355th TFS was the first deployment.

By then, it was dark. There were cumulus buildups and thunderstorms in the area and the tankers were moving in different directions. One tanker with a single F-100, piloted by Lt. Dan Walsh, took a 120-degree turn. Their speed was down to 260 knots and altitude was about 15,000 feet. By the time Walsh disconnected and climbed back to 35,000 feet to get above the weather, the rest of the section was 150 miles ahead.

After losing 25 minutes in the refueling area, the nine remaining F-100s proceeded on to the Azores for their next air refueling, but the section was broken up into singles and 2-ship elements and communications had broken down. Not all aircrews could talk to all others.

En route to the second refueling, three more Duckbutts were supposed to be on station but only two were there. Two of the pilots, Lt. Clyde Garner and Lt. “Zeke” Zielinski, didn’t know where they were, and had about ten minutes of fuel. It was about midnight. Zielinski called “MAYDAY, MAYDAY.” Garner saw a large red glow below and thought Zielinski has crashed and exploded. He had 700 pounds of fuel when he spotted what he thought was a tramp steamer. He circled it and got ready to eject when he realized the glow he saw was an active volcano on one of the Azores islands. Zielinski got a DF signal from Lajes AB, found Garner, and escorted him to the field. After landing they bought a bottle of bourbon for the DF operator in the tower.

At the refueling rendezvous, Brett had only five minutes of fuel as he approached the tankers. The weather was clear but extremely turbulent. At refueling altitude, about 20,000 feet, the hookups began, but the turbulence was bad and two tankers ran short of fuel while the Huns were attempting to hook up. Brett and three others made only partial hookups and had to land at Lajes. (Later, I recall Brett telling me that he was so mad at the tankers that if he had ammo aboard, he might have fired off a few rounds. He was joking, of course.) Brett ordered the remaining four aircraft to form up as a single flight and head for the next refueling south of France. The four aircraft were piloted by Capt. George Branch and Lt. Russ Youngblood in an F-100F, Lt. Dan Walsh, Lt. Craig Fink, and Lt. Jim Cartwright. In about an hour they saw first light and made landfall on the coast of Portugal. GCI gave them a positive fix. They called the tankers, and they reported the weather was good. Six tankers were on station, more than needed, and the flight to Incirlik was uneventful. By the time they landed, the five pilots had been in the air for 12 hours and 35 minutes. Later, all five received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Resort Bravo Gets Ready

About 1800 on 14 July, while Resort Alpha was scrambling in the first refueling area, Resort Bravo (352nd) crews were busy drawing lines on maps and preparing flight logs for their mission. Much of the planning had been done for Resort Alpha, but there were a number of changes (e.g., weather, Duckbutt availability, tanker availability). Lt. George Waring, the squadron intelligence officer, and I had the day off. We and our wives went to Charleston, SC, for the day. On the way home, we passed the base and saw all the activity on the ramp—refueling trucks, C-130s with engines running, an unusual number of aircraft departing and arriving. So we went by 352nd ops to see what was happening. The pilots were preparing navigation packages and going over maps. The weather officer was there with his charts. So were most of the other senior staff.



The 352nd TFS was the second deployment.

Lt. Col. Franklin Fisher, 352nd Commander, filled us in on what was happening and told us to go home, pack our bags, and get right back. Waring was not an F-100 pilot and would deploy in a C-130 with other staff. Colonel Fisher told me that because I had not been in crew rest like the other pilots, I would also go in a C-130, even though I was one of the squadron’s flight commanders. Waring’s wife (they were newlyweds) and my wife (five months pregnant) didn’t understand what all the fuss was about and really didn’t think much of us “bugging out,” but they didn’t say much about it. When we returned to ops, at about 2000, Colonel Fisher said he thought I should be part of the flight, but because I had already been up for 14 hours, I would have to go in the back seat of one of the F-100Fs.

Based on tanker availability, launch time was set between 2400 and 0100. For the next few hours, maintenance got 12 aircraft ready, and briefings went on in ops: weather, flight routing, nav aids, survival, emergency airfields, flight surgeon, intelligence and more. Pilot-to-aircraft assignments were made and coordination continued with Duckbutt and tanker operations. Pilots studied their charts, packed their planes with their chutes, dinghies, survival kits, life vests, vacuum jugs with water, flight lunches, and “Go Pills” (Dexedrine). The Wing Deputy Commander was at ops and was trying to talk to each pilot and keep things on track with maintenance. About an hour before time to go out to our aircraft, the F-100F I was supposed to fly in went on a red “X” (out-of-commission). The pilot was assigned an F-100D, and I was told to take another F-100D.

The launch line-up was to have three flights of four aircraft each. Four aircraft would take the active runway at a time in “finger-tip” formation. Elements of two would take off at 5-second intervals. Colonel Fisher was in an ‘F’ with Lt. Bernie Reck in the back seat. Reck had been a navigator before becoming a pilot. With him in the lead aircraft, our confidence in mission success was pretty high. The second flight was led by Major Stan Mamlock, the operations officer, in the other ‘F’. I was No. 4 in the third flight of four.

Resort Bravo Launches

The active runway was 10. Takeoffs began about 0100. After becoming airborne, Colonel Fisher couldn't get his gear to retract and aborted. He told Mamlock, "You've got the stick." The second flight was airborne and the third was on the runway. On takeoff roll, No. 2 called out a malfunction—hydraulics or something. After No. 2 rolled off the runway, the last element of two ran up to military power and went into afterburner. Just as we began to roll, No. 3 called out "high exhaust temperature" and said he was aborting. I rolled past him, got airborne, and bent around to join up with the eight aircraft in front of me over the town of Myrtle Beach heading northeast in the pitch-black night. When we were all together and in radio contact, Mamlock gave us our new position numbers. I was Resort Bravo 9.

The night was clear and the trip to the first refueling rendezvous, about the same location where Resort Alpha refueled, was uneventful. Although Alpha's first refueling occurred while Bravo crews were still in the briefing room, we were kept in the dark (no pun intended) concerning the results of Alpha's experiences. (Probably just as well.) Alpha's second refueling (or fiasco) was underway about the time Bravo was getting ready for takeoff.

About two hours later, we began our rendezvous with five tankers, two fighters to each tanker and me on the fifth one. The night was dark and the weather between 25,000 and 30,000 feet was mostly broken and turbulent. After several attempts, I hooked up, and in about 10 minutes I had a full load. After coming off, I looked for the lights of the other F-100s and tankers, and all I saw was my tanker's lights. I asked the tanker, "Where is everybody? Where did everybody go?" His reply: "We don't know. We're low on fuel and heading for Bermuda. We turned right about 20 degrees about 10 minutes ago." I thought to myself, "The middle of the Atlantic in the middle of the night is a rather lonely place. I should be in bed now. This has not been a boring day."

I tried to contact Bravo Lead and only got static. I began to debate with myself, should I head for Nova Scotia, should I head back to Myrtle Beach, or should I press on and try to find the rest of Bravo? (Little did I know that Dan Walsh had gone through the same thing just a few hours before.) I had a full load of fuel, a flight log someone made out for me when I was a candidate for the back seat of an F-100F, and daylight was imminent. I figured I could dead reckon to the refueling rendezvous at the Azores. I had already started climbing through the broken cumulus clouds. I called Bravo Lead several times, and Mamlock began to cut in. He said they were above the cloud tops, which were about 30,000 feet, and on a specific heading. I continued climbing and correcting my heading to compensate for the earlier right turn while I was on the tanker. Shortly after I broke out of the cloud deck, I saw several contrails up ahead. (I thought about how great it would be if the autopilots installed in the F-100Ds were operational. But they weren't because of their lack of reliability.)

About 30 to 40 minutes from the Azores, I caught up with the rest of Bravo and let down with them for our second refueling. We all managed to hook up, even though we were in and out of the clouds and the air was turbulent. As we proceeded to the third refueling in the Mediterranean, we got a call from Colonel Brett, who was now airborne from Lajes and well ahead of us. He informed us that due to the weather in the refueling area south of France, the tankers had canceled. He told us that we had been directed to divert to Chateauroux AB in France, about 120 miles south of Paris. Brett landed his flight of six at Chateauroux, then proceeded on to Wheelus AB, Libya, and on to Incirlik.

Our flight proceeded on to Chateauroux and landed after being in the air for almost 10 hours. I had been awake for 28 hours and had not taken any Go Pills. We were all exhausted. We got a bite to eat and went to sleep. The next morning, we took off, went across the Alps, passed over Rome, and landed at Wheelus. There we had lunch and went on to Incirlik.

Operations at Incirlik

The 355th and 352nd set up operations in the 100-plus degree temperatures along with the other groups in the CASF. The paratroopers built a tent city and whiled away their hours trying to keep cool by lounging under the wings of the transports parked on the ramp. In the next few days, Resort Cocoa made the trip with additional crews and aircraft. Their flight was made under more optimal conditions—good weather, good tanker support, and shorter legs. But even they had some problems. One pilot lost his canopy over Corsica. He then lost his maps and navigation aids and couldn't hear. His wingman brought him into a French airfield. Another pilot got hypoxia and his wingman brought him into an airfield near Rome.

For two months we sat runway alert, flew instrument-training and combat air patrol missions along the Syrian and Lebanon coastal areas, and spent our free time studying the targets we had been assigned.

In early August I was sent to Wheelus, our rear-echelon maintenance base, to spend a week performing functional test flights on aircraft coming out of maintenance. While there, I went to base ops and caught a hop to the island of Malta, my parents' birthplace. I had hoped to spend a couple days looking for relatives whom I had never seen, or even knew I had. I got a C-47 flight taking some Air Police there to guard one of our aircraft that crashed the day before. I went into base ops and began asking how to get to Valletta and Sliema, where my parents were born and grew up. A guy who worked in ops noticed that I was a U.S. Air Force captain and assumed I was from the U.S. He asked if I might know his wife's uncle who lives in America. I said something like, "America is a big place, so I doubt it." The guy had been in the RAF during WWII and married a local woman. He said his wife's uncle, a widower, married a widow about a year ago. Now that sounded

familiar. My mother married a widower a year ago. Talk about coincidences! The first person I meet on Malta is related to me. During the next couple of days my new friend took me to meet my father's brother and sister and a bunch of cousins I never knew I had. My next problem was how I was going to get back to Wheelus. A couple days later, my friend called me to say there was a U.S. Army plane going to Wheelus.

By September, many of the aircraft in the CASF had returned to their home bases. Crews from the 353rd were deployed to Incirlik and replaced crews and aircraft that deployed during the scorching hot month of July. The 355th left first, and the 352nd left a couple of days later. On the return trip, we went from Incirlik to Wheelus, then on to Chateauroux, where we spent the night. The next day we flew to Lajes, refueled, and went non-stop to Myrtle Beach, refueling over Bermuda.

The Aftermath of CASF Bravo

The deployment of the 353rd was the beginning of regular TAC squadron rotations overseas. After a while, squadrons from the 354th Wing stopped going to Incirlik and began rotating to Aviano AB, Italy.

In September 1958, as a consequence of the troubles we had air refueling over the Atlantic due to weather (which generally tops out at 25,000 feet), TAC directed the 354th Wing to examine alternative air-refueling procedures. I was tasked to head a flight test program with F-100s and KB-50Js to come up with a better refueling profile. The solution we came up with was a descending-while-refueling profile (which we dubbed "tobogganing"). After hooking up at 28,000 feet (instead of 20,000), we set partial flaps (using the circuit breaker, because there was no intermediate position) and started letting down. We were normally fully loaded by about 24,000 feet. This profile allowed a section of fighters to make a clear-weather rendezvous and hookup near cruising altitude (most of the time). By starting refueling above weather, receivers could avoid cloud buildups during most, if not all, of the operation. And we saved fuel by not descending below 24,000 before climbing back to cruise altitude.

In 1959, the 354th started practicing refueling with the 4-jet engine C-135F, which had a single "flying" tail boom with a drogue operated by a boom operator. The 12 C-135s modified to this configuration eventually went to the French Air Force. The 134 KB-50J/Ks were replaced by KC-135s in the mid-1960s, but a few were still available in 1965 for use in Southeast Asia for emergency refueling of fighters over enemy territory. ■



The 353rd TFS was the third deployment.

