

THE IMMORTALITY OF "MY MARY LOU"

by Dr. Ted Jamison

WHILE ASSIGNED TO THE 95TH Bomb Squadron flightline at Pusan East Air Base (K-9) as a bomb loader during the spring and summer of 1953, I always admired the beautiful, sleek, black B-26 *Invaders* neatly parked along the ramp. That admiration produced color photographs of a number of the Douglas *Invaders*, and, despite the use of a cheap Japanese 35mm camera that I had purchased at the Fuchu processing station's PX in Japan before my flight to Korea, the slides were remarkably clear and sharp in color. For three decades, those slides remained stored and protected, rarely viewed, and often forgotten. About seven years ago, while assigned as historian for Headquarters Strategic Air Command at Offutt Air Force Base, I decided to see if quality prints could be made from the slides. I was pleased to see that the prints taken from the slides were strikingly vivid and sharp, and, by virtue of their color, rare photographs from the Korean War. Then, in 1988 I submitted an article to the AAHS *Journal* entitled "Nightmare of the Korean Hills: Douglas B-26 *Invader* Operations in the Korean War, 1950-1953." Several color prints were included with my draft typescript for Editor Bob Williams' selection for use in the article.

Among many photos sent, there was a particularly noteworthy view of a B-26B in the 95th Bombardment Squadron (L) (the old "Kicking Mule" squadron of Doolittle Raider fame), one of three squadrons belonging to the 17th Bomb Wing at K-9. The photo truly revealed the wear and tear of war on one *Invader*, and was certainly not my "prettiest" picture of a B-26. But I had wanted a good photograph of a B Model hardnose, and the 95th only had two at the time, one of which was soon lost on a mission in

1953. In any event, Bob Williams chose the photograph of B-26B tail number 435696, nicknamed "My Mary Lou," as the first of several to be included with the article. The *Journal* converted the color print to black-and-white, and the plane looked even more war-weary. I have often thought that when anyone looked at that 1953 photo of "My Mary Lou," they would have wagered that if any aircraft would likely have been destined for the boneyard and junked after the war, it would have been tail number 435696.

That particular *Invader* had been given its shimmering coat of black paint at McClellan Air Force Base, California, in early 1952 just prior to its deployment to the 17th Bomb Wing. The "beat-up" look of "My Mary Lou" a year later was the combined effects of notoriously harsh Korean weather along with numerous low-level sorties (few planes could match the B Model aircraft's strafing capabilities) over North Korea. Add the sand and dust that constantly swirled in K-9's valley, along with a probable delay in repainting—at Miho Air Base, Japan, the 17th Bomb Wing's Rear Echelon Maintenance Combined Operations (RE-MCO) location—and we have the photographic image of a worn-out bomber by spring 1953. There was also the saga of an aircraft that had flown over 100 combat missions during 1952-53 while assigned to the 95th Bomb Squadron, and had also suffered flak damage to the bomb bay area and gunner's compartment during one sortie. Frankly, I do not recall that any B-26 at K-9 looked so battle-tattered, as verified by several other photos taken of sister *Invaders* in the 95th, 34th and 37th Bomb Squadrons at Pusan East Air Base. Under the deceptive scratches and wear, however, there was a great aircraft that would achieve a measure of immortality.

Tail number 435696 had seen no

World War II action after it rolled off the Douglas Airplane Company line in 1944. The plane's service life began in May 1945 when Douglas delivered it to the Army Air Forces. Despite its later hard-nose B Model configuration at K-9 as seen in my 1953 photograph, the aircraft was originally produced as a C Model glassnose. Following acceptance trials at Kirtland Field, New Mexico, the plane was moved from one location to another: Salinas Field, California, Love Field, Texas, Grenada Field, Mississippi, and finally to Hobbs Field, New Mexico, where it remained until June 1947 when it was transferred to McClellan Field, California, for storage.

As in the case of many *Invaders* later deployed to Korea, tail number 435696 was removed from mothballs at McClellan. Many other B-26s came from storage at Hill Air Force Base, Utah. After being completely refurbished, painted, and converted to a B Model comprised of six horizontally configured .50-caliber nose guns, the future "My Mary Lou" arrived at K-9 in August 1952, ready for action. It should be added that technicians at McClellan and Hill spent an average of 6,500 manhours in rebuilding every B-26 *Invader* before deployment to the Far East.

"My Mary Lou" flew its final combat sortie on 27 July 1953, and I vividly remember our crew's loading of the last bombs on all 95th Bomb Squadron planes, including 435696—ground and aircrew personnel were on maximum effort during those last hours of the Korean War, and our B-26s were conducting turnaround missions for a 24-hour period. *Invaders* joined other United Nations aircraft in relentlessly pounding enemy lines far to the north as the war drew to a close. When the bombing stopped, aircrews and flightliners alike dropped in exhaustion, but cheering over the ceasefire.

After the war, "My Mary Lou," along with 29 other Douglas *Invaders*, returned stateside for assignment to the 345th Tactical Bombardment Group at Langley Air Force Base, Virginia. Later, tail number 435696 was moved to the Louisiana Air National Guard's 122nd Tactical Bomb Squadron at New Orleans

and subsequently deactivated in June 1957. The plane was sent to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base for storage, and eventual probable destruction in the smelter.

But in late 1963, "My Mary Lou" was purchased by the first of a number of civilian owners, while other *Invaders* at Davis-Monthan were being retrieved for use in combat in the Southeast Asia conflict.

After "My Mary Lou" was obtained by its civilian owner in 1963, the aircraft was utilized in a variety of ways—including drag racing over the Mojave Desert and flying the pylons at the 1980 Reno Air Races. Surprisingly, in spite of many years' non-military use after 1963, tail number 435696 was never modernized or "civilianized" and continued to carry most of its original equipment. The battle scars in the bomb bay and gunner's compartment acquired during the Korean War were also evident.

The Collings Foundation from Stowe, Massachusetts, a historical foundation founded to collect, restore and fly rare older aircraft, obtained "My Mary Lou" from Courtesy Aircraft, Inc., in 1984. The Collings Foundation was well known, particularly for its spectacular restoration of the B-24J "All American," the only fully restored J Model now flyable.

The foundation's new *Invader* acquisition was extensively restored at Clover Field, Houston, Texas, by a team of Texans first led by Tommy Garcia and the late Neil Christie. In 1986 the Collings Foundation converted "My Mary Lou" back to its original C Model glassnose configuration. Later, Tommy Garcia was joined by Russ Erickson and Rick Harris, both from the Houston area. Rick Harris, in the meantime, launched a thorough research project of the plane's history since 1944.

In the midst of Rick Harris' research and the continuing restoration of "My Mary Lou," my AAHS *Journal* article, "Nightmare of the Korean Hills," published in 1989, caught the eye of one of Harris' friends, Bob Roskuski from Fort Wayne, Indiana. He had been asked to keep a watch for any information on B-26s that might aid in the research. After seeing the photo of tail number

435696 heading up my article, Rick Harris quickly contacted me.

There was, of course, obvious astonishment over the coincidence, for Editor Bob Williams could have chosen any number of "pretty" B-26 photos that I had sent with my draft. At any rate, Rick Harris asked me to send him a color print of "My Mary Lou" so that the Collings Foundation could check the accuracy of its restoration markings and colors. As readers of this article can see, the results are striking. "My Mary Lou" has criss-

crossed the country many times for airshows and displays, and is proclaimed as the best-preserved, most accurately restored (and best looking) *Invader* in the country. The recent photographs speak for themselves. Today, the Collings Foundation continues to provide "My Mary Lou" for reunions, static displays and airshows, and can be seen at Houston Exec, Hobby Field, Houston, Texas. Interested parties should call Rick Harris at (713) 485-4351. □



Douglas B-26B, 44-35696, at Pusan East Air Base (K-9) in 1953.
(Ted Jamison Photo)

Douglas B-26C, 44-35696, after conversion with glass nose and with civil registration N8036E.
(Photo by Rick Harris)

A beautiful starboard side photograph of B-26C, 44-35696, showing the "Kicking Mule" emblem of the 95th Bomb Squadron.
(Photo by Patrick Bunce)

