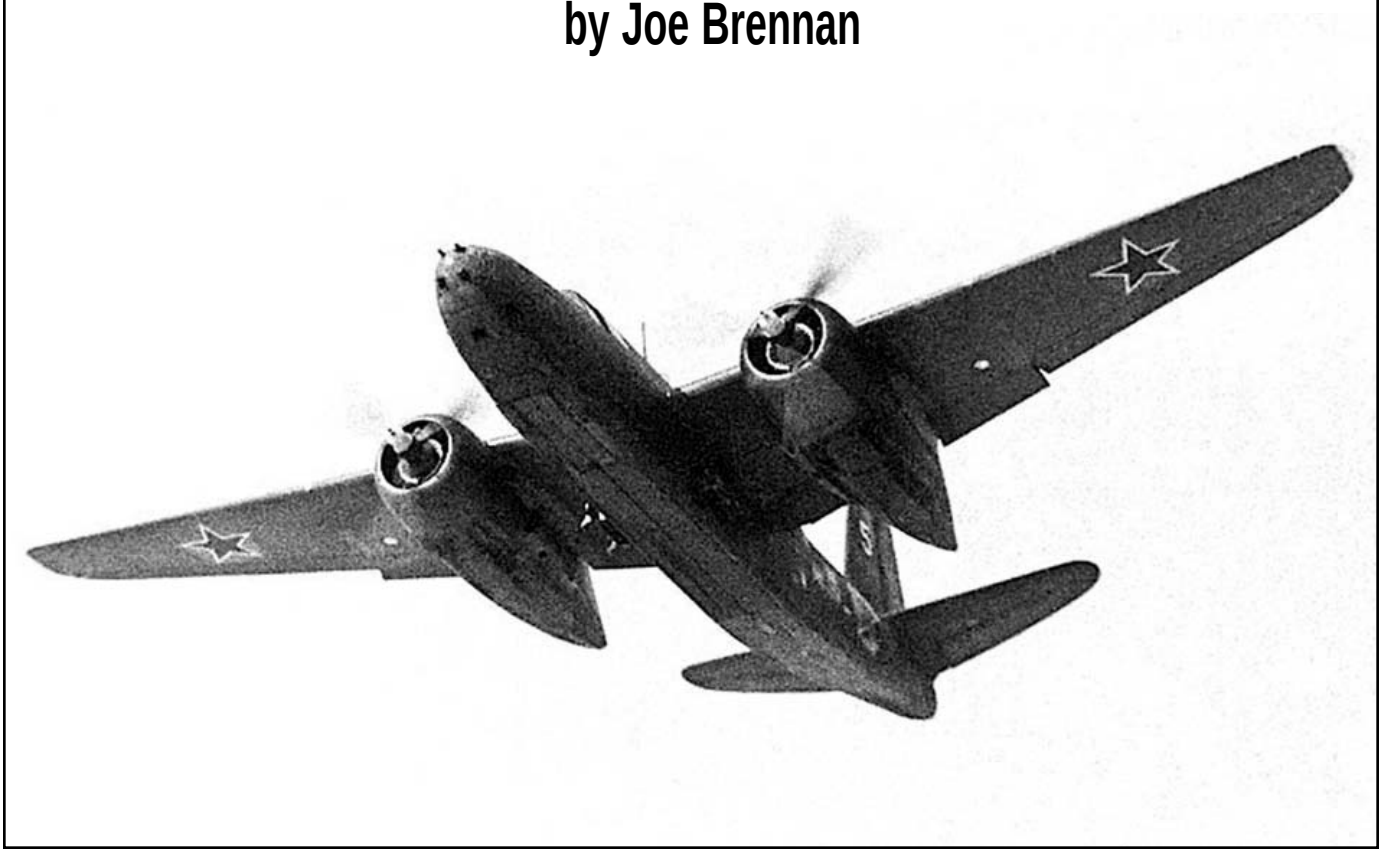
Korean War First: VF-53 vs. the Soviet Fleet Air Arm

by Joe Brennan



A-20G Boston's *of the Baltic Fleet Air Arm circa 1944. Credit: S.G. Shamanskiy photo via A.N. Kalinovskiy, courtesy of www.bellabs.ru*

Early September 1950 was a time of transition between phases of the Korean War. Air Group 5 from *USS Valley Forge* (CV-45) had initiated USN carrier air combat operations in Korea, as the only available USN carrier in the Far East, with strikes against North Korea on 3 July in concert with *HMS Triumph*, partly aimed at neutralizing North Korean air power and resulting in the first jet victories in naval aviation history, by VF-51 F9F-3s against North Korean Yak-9Ps over Pyongyang's main airfield. That first day also yielded a pair of inconclusive brushes with airborne Yaks for VF-53s F4U-4Bs, plus some opportunities to strafe grounded North Korean aircraft. The subsequent operations of CVG-5 soon settled into the alternating routine of periods on the line engaged in interdiction and direct close air support missions for UN ground forces retreating into the Pusan Perimeter, plus replenishment, and short periods at bases and anchorages in Japan.

When *Valley Forge* departed Sasebo on 25 August to act again as the core of TF 77, in concert with *USS Philippine Sea* (CV-47) embarking Air Group 11, the Inchon landing forces were already beginning to assemble. And the mission of TF 77 reflected the crosscurrents between changing phases of the conflict: strikes in the Seoul-Inchon area and as far as the North Korean capital to begin to prepare and isolate the objective area for the landings which would cut off the North Korean forces in the south, but alternating with emergency calls for close air support by UN units hard pressed in the opening stages of the Korean People's Army's final Great Naktong offensive against the Pusan Perimeter. But another incident would also occur which foreshadowed a yet more distant phase of the war, direct intervention not only by the armies of China, but also the air arms of the Soviet Union.

TF 77 headed back north in the Yellow Sea on the morning of 4 September for strikes in west-central Korea after a day of replenishment interrupted by CAS missions in support of UN units in the Perimeter.[1] A strike on a Pyongyang area bridge by two divisions at 1000/K started VF-53's operations for the day, followed by another at 1300/K, and just afterwards a division was launched for task force CAP,[2] led by LTJG Richard E. Downs with wingman ENS Edward V. Laney, section leader ENS Eugene L. Franz and his wingman ENS John Abbott, call sign "Cherry Tree." A *Corsair* CAP division from *Philippine*

A section of VF-53 F4U-4Bs, 1950. Credit: Laney

Sea, a *Valley Forge* AD-4W and a *Philippine Sea* AD-4N on 20 mile circle ASP rounded out the routine defensive precautions of the task force, which was operating about 50 mi W of Packnyung (Sir James Hall) Island off the west coast of Korea, near the 38th parallel, and about 120 miles ESE of the Sino-Soviet base at Port Arthur (now Lushun) on the west side of the Yellow Sea.

At 1329 the picket destroyer *Herbert J. Thomas* (DDR-833), detected bogies bearing 030 true, 20 miles out, (approximately 60mi ENE of the task force center) estimated altitude 10,000 ft. The VF-53 division got an intercept order under control of "Radish," *USS Fletcher* (DDE-445) at 1330 just as the raid split, with one bogey turning north in the direction of Hai Yang Island, while the second continued on course 160 true, 180 knots. At 1336 the *Corsairs* obtained visuals on the bogey.[3]

VF-53 (the second VF-53, re-designated second VF-124 1958-1994) had only been established in 1948 yet many of its pilots, including Downs, had flown in WW II and at least two, though none in his division this day, had been credited with aerial victories in that war. Downs had also coincidentally been one of the pilots to tangle with North Korean aircraft back on 3 July, when a Yak-9P jumped his division on pullout from an HVAR run on Pyongyang Main field, settling on his tail before being driven off by wingman ENS K. E. Thomson with a pass that regrettably yielded no concrete result due to inadvertently unarmed guns.[4] Now Downs led the division down toward the bogey, which shifted course at first to the east, not directly home, before coming around gradually almost due north, and nosed down increasing its speed 40-50kts. The division split into sections with Downs' section 1,500 feet directly above and Franz' section echeloned to starboard; permission was obtained to fire if fired upon.

But what was the bogey? The potentially hostile nature was

A A-20G on the Douglas Aircraft Santa Monica flightline awaits delivery to Russia (Photo courtesy of Boeing Historical Archives).

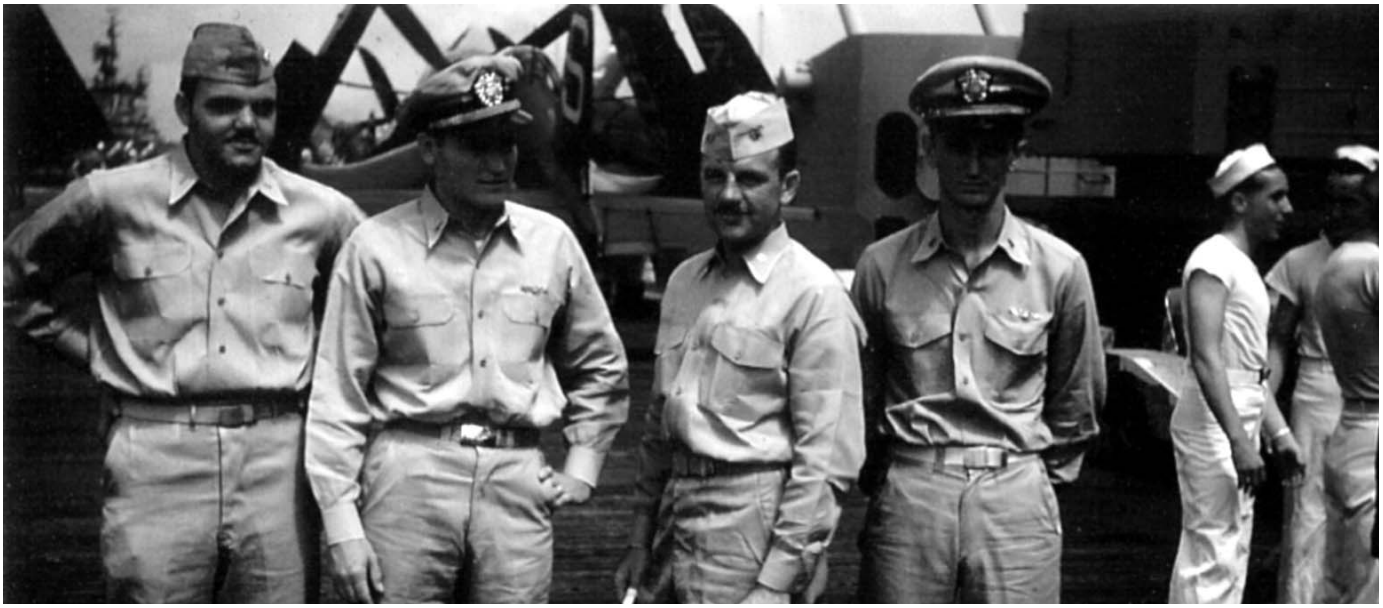
clear from a red marking on the rear fuselage spotted by Downs, which Franz further identified as a star. But the olive drab, radial twin prop, high wing, single tail bomber-type carried no other visible markings except a white mark at the base of the vertical tail. The VF-53 aviators did not determine a type at the time, only commenting on the general resemblance to a P2V *Neptune* and similar size to a JM *Marauder*, as well as further noting the dorsal gun position, and that the long engine nacelles protruded beyond the wing's trailing edge.[5]

A-20G Bostons *of the Baltic Fleet Air Arm circa 1944. Credit: S.G. Shamanskiy photo via A.N. Kalinovskiy, courtesy of www.bellabs.ru*

All these uniformly accurate observations were inconsistent in one way or another with the later identification of the bogey as an IL-4 (low wing, stubby engine nacelles) or Tu-2 (twin tail).

The bogey was a Douglas A-20G *Boston*[6] of the 36th Mine-Torpedo Aviation Regiment, 589th Mine-Torpedo Aviation Division, Fleet Air Arm (VMF), Red Banner Pacific Fleet, flying from Port Arthur. Aircraft commander Senior Lt. Karpol's crew consisted also of pilot Lt. G. Mishin and gunner Sgt. A. Makaganov.[7] In later diplomatic communication the Soviets claimed the aircraft was on a training mission, but routine reconnaissance seems more likely. There is no evidence it carried the offensive armament of VMF A-20 torpedo bombers, twin externally mounted 45cm (17.7in) 36 AN torpedoes, yet the 36th had previously shown the potential danger of those weapons in its hands. The first *Boston III* (DB-7 or A-20C) bombing regiment in the Black Sea Fleet in January 1943, the 36th pioneered the use of *Bostons* as torpedo bombers in the theater that summer, and had accumulated an impressive claimed record of shipping sunk by the following spring when it converted to the A-20G and transferred to the Northern Fleet.[8] The leading pilot of the 36th in the Great Patriotic War, Aleksandr Rhyklov, Hero of the Soviet Union, was credited with five large transports among other sinkings, plus two aerial victories, by May 1944.[9] Nor was the 36th a total stranger to Korean combat operations: transferred to the Pacific Fleet in July 1945 in the build up to the Soviet entry into the war with

VF-53 F4U-4B. Credit: Laney



The engaging section, Dick Downs (second from left) and Ed Laney (right) with LT Lou Lauback (left) and LCDR Joe Murphy (VF-53 XO, second from right) USS Valley Forge, 1950. Credit: Laney

Japan, with a strength of fourteen A-20Gs, it flew one of the last bombing missions of the war, destroying a bridge in Japanese occupied Korea on 14 August 1945[10] before becoming one of the first Soviet air units to re-occupy Port Arthur later that August, where it was still based in September 1950.

A-20s remained in Soviet service after the war mainly in VMF torpedo regiments, being more quickly retired from the tactical air forces (VVS) in favor of the Tu-2. And if not armed with torpedoes on this day in 1950 the A-20G still had, in addition to its forward firing guns, a .50cal M2 ventral tunnel gun and two more .50s in a Martin electric powered dorsal turret, the latter about to radically increase Downs' concern about the A-20s true intentions, and seal the fate of Karpol and his crew.

Now having over taken and positioned himself directly above the descending A-20, Downs noticed puffs of smoke, which he at first attributed to engine exhaust, before realizing they were bursts from the dorsal turret. Quickly informing "Radish" he would open fire and receiving acknowledgement, Downs led Laney into a high side run from the right toward the Soviet torpedo bomber, even then cautioning his wingman not to fire unless the turret gunner fired again, but Makagonov did open up again. Downs' pass, supported by a suppressive long range burst from Laney, yielded no visible results, but as Laney closed the range to as little as 300ft, with the attitude having decreased to only 1,500ft, his four 20mm's hit home, first setting the A-20's starboard wing and engine afire then as he continued firing breaking off the tail section with such violence that Downs and Abbott both later commented on the apparent wood and fabric construction of the bomber (actually all metal), which entered a flat spin and exploded on impact with no 'chutes sighted, 50 miles bearing 350 true from the task force center.[11] Laney had fired twelve hundred 20mm rounds.[12]

Soviet accounts speak of no fewer than eleven attacking *Corsairs* and a crash at 1244 Beijing time, one minute after VF-53 recorded the crash at 1343/K. It's not clear if this information comes from a contact report by Karpol's crew or later misinterpretation of U.S. information,[13] in any case, under the impression a friendly crash had occurred the *USS Thomas* rushed to the scene and pulled a body from the water, that of Gennadiy Mishin, the pilot.[14] Artificial respiration was administered but Mishin was declared dead after an hour. A number of his effects were recovered and inspected, including his ID book and party membership card, as well graphs and recon sketches. These items established the nationality of the pilot, but if a more profound intelligence analysis was performed based on translation of the materials, the results are unknown. The conclusion was, however reached that the bomber had been aiding North Korean forces, and had constituted a threat to TF 77.[15] The former statement seems a reasonable hypothesis based on the bomber's presence in the area, perhaps supported by its turn to the east upon interception, but there is no known evidence of Soviet coordination of its air operations with the North Koreans at that time. The aircraft

Ed Laney receives the Air Medal for the "Russian bomber shootdown." Credit: Laney

Map: The Russian Bomber Incident. Credit: James A. Field, History of United States Naval Operations: Korea

was certainly a threat to the VF-53 *Corsairs* once it opened fire, however. Mishin's body was embalmed, and contrary to some reports it appears only his remains were ever recovered or returned to the Soviets, in 1956.[16]

The possible implications of the incident for Soviet intentions in Korea gave some pause to the Inchon planners in the following weeks, but events would prove those misgivings premature. It does not appear such incidents were sought by the Soviets as pretexts to become involved in Korea. And subsequent incidents resulting from U.S. border violations, such as another involving Lend Lease aircraft when 49th Fighter Bomber Group F-80s mistakenly strafed Soviet tactical air forces (VVS) 821st Fighter Regiment Bell P-63s near Vladivostok in October, were apparently not major catalysts to the SinoSoviet intervention. That was instead a product of the basic military situation on the ground after the success at Inchon and the UN advance on the Yalu.

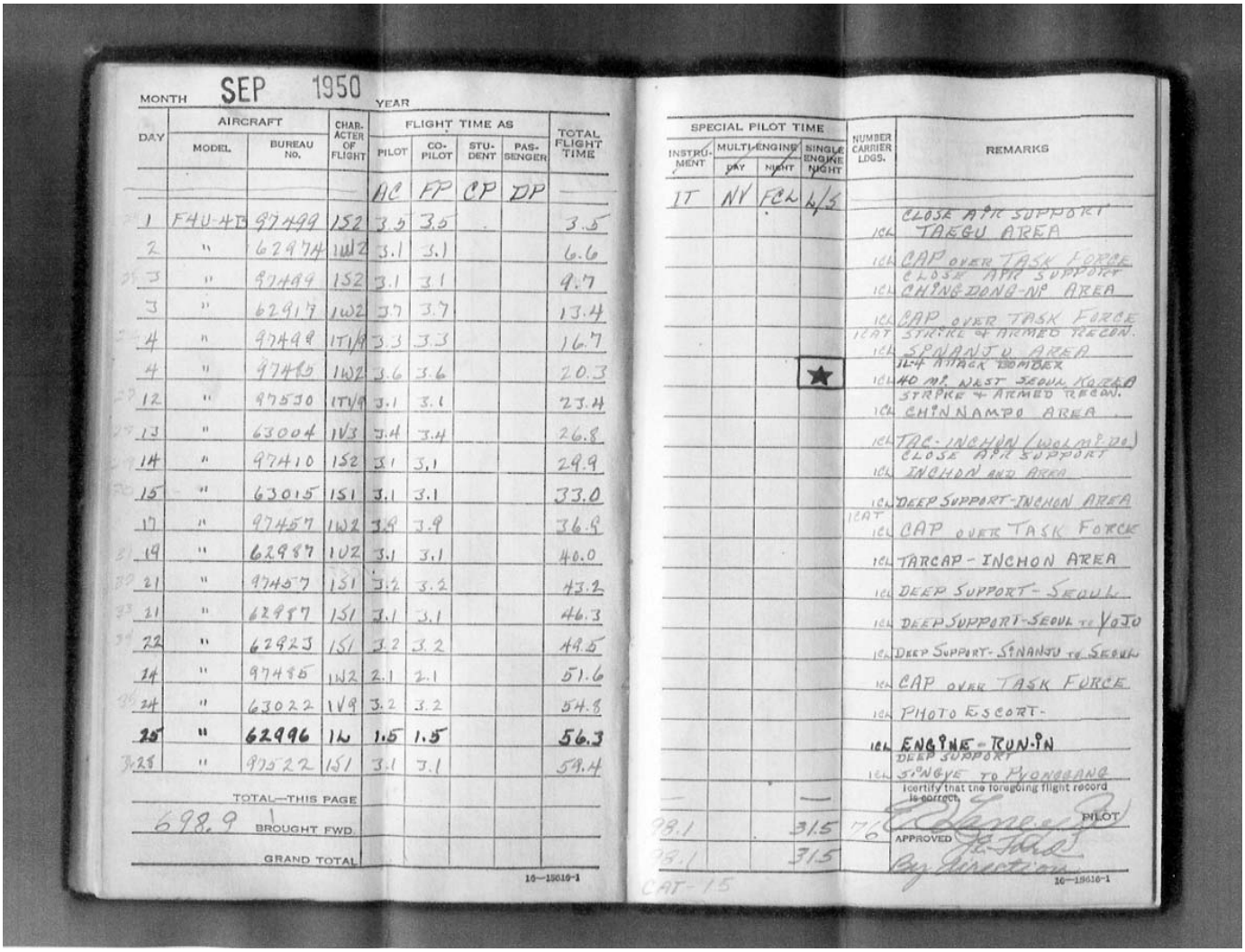
Still the 4 September 1950 incident was the first clash between Soviet and U.S. air units in Korea, and resulted in the first of some 300 Soviet manned aircraft downed in aerial combat in the conflict, and not the last from the VMF, though the great majority of subsequent Soviet losses were aircraft of the VVS. It was not the first deadly encounter between USN and Soviet aircraft in the cold war, that having occurred in a tragically reversed situation the previous April when four Soviet La-11s downed a VP-26 PB4Y-2 *Privateer* in the Baltic with the loss of all 10 crew. Nor interestingly was it the first destruction of a *Boston* by the USN: VF-41 F4F-4's destroyed 11 of 13 French DB-7 *Bostons* of GB I/32 on the ground at Cazes airfield near Casablanca 8 November 1942.[17]

But Ed Laney's aerial victory was the first and last for VF-53. q

Valley Forge (CV 45) with CVG-5
(1 May 1950–1 Dec 1950)

Squadron	Aircraft	Tail Code
VF-51	F9F-3	S
VF-52	F9F-3	S
VF-53	F4U-4B	S
VF-54	F4U-4B	S
VA-55	AD-4/Q	S
VC-3 Det C	F4U-5N/AD-3N NP	
VC-1 1 Det	AD-3W	ND
HedRon 1 Det	F4U-5P	AZ
HU-1 Det	H03S-1	UP

Above Tail CodeTable: Valley Forge Air Group 5 September 1950 Source: United States Naval Aviation 1910-1995 Appendix 25, Naval Aviation History Office http.//wwwhistoiy.navy.-mil/branches/nhcor&)4. htm



MONTH SEP 1950 YEAR

DAY	AIRCRAFT MODEL	AIRCRAFT BUREAU NO.	CHARACTER OF FLIGHT	FLIGHT TIME AS PILOT	CO-PILOT	STUDENT	PASSENGER	TOTAL FLIGHT TIME
				AC	FP	CP	DP	
1	F4U-4B	97499	152	3.5	3.5			3.5
2	"	62974	1W2	3.1	3.1			6.6
3	"	97499	152	3.1	3.1			9.7
3	"	62917	1W2	3.7	3.7			13.4
4	"	97499	1T1/A	3.3	3.3			16.7
4	"	97485	1W2	3.6	3.6			20.3
12	"	97530	1T1/A	3.1	3.1			23.4
13	"	63004	1V3	3.4	3.4			26.8
14	"	97410	152	3.1	3.1			29.9
15	"	63015	151	3.1	3.1			33.0
17	"	97457	1W2	3.9	3.9			36.9
19	"	62987	1W2	3.1	3.1			40.0
21	"	97457	151	3.2	3.2			43.2
21	"	62987	151	3.1	3.1			46.3
22	"	62923	151	3.2	3.2			49.5
24	"	97485	1W2	2.1	2.1			51.6
24	"	63022	1V9	3.2	3.2			54.8
25	"	62996	1W	1.5	1.5			56.3
25	"	97522	151	3.1	3.1			59.4
		TOTAL—THIS PAGE						
	698.9	BROUGHT FWD.						
		GRAND TOTAL						

16—19616-1

SPECIAL PILOT TIME: INSTRUMENT	MULTI-ENGINE: DAY	MULTI-ENGINE: NIGHT	SINGLE ENGINE: DAY/NIGHT	NUMBER CARRIER LDGS.	REMARKS
IT	NY	FCL	4/5		
				1CL	CLOSE AIR SUPPORT TAEGU AREA
				1CL	CAP OVER TASK FORCE CLOSE AIR SUPPORT
				1CL	CHINHAE-JINHAE AREA
				1CL	CAP OVER TASK FORCE
				1CAT	STRIKE & ARMED RECON.
				1CL	SUNANJU AREA
			★		12.7 MM ATTACK BOMBER
				1CL	40 MI. WEST SEOUL KOREA
					STRIKE & ARMED RECON.
				1CL	CHINNAMPO AREA
				1CL	TAC-INCHON (WOLMI-DO)
					CLOSE AIR SUPPORT
				1CL	INCHON AND AREA
				1CL	DEEP SUPPORT-INCHON AREA
				1CAT	
				1CL	CAP OVER TASK FORCE
				1CL	TARCAP - INCHON AREA
				1CL	DEEP SUPPORT - SEOUL
				1CL	DEEP SUPPORT-SEOUL TO YOJO
				1CL	DEEP SUPPORT-SUNANJU TO SEOUL
				1CL	CAP OVER TASK FORCE
				1CL	PHOTO ESCORT-
				1CL	ENGINE-RUN-IN
					DEEP SUPPORT
				1CL	SUNGYE TO PYONGYANG
—			—		I certify that the foregoing flight record is correct.
98.1			31.5	17	PILOT
98.1			31.5		APPROVED By Direction
CAT-15					

16—19616-1

The bomber kill recorded in Laney's logbook as of 11-4-1950. Credit: Laney

References:

1 Valley Forge CV-45 Action Report 25 August-6 September 1950, Naval Aviation History Branch, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC.

2 John R. Bruning, *Crimson Sky: The Air Battle for Korea*, 40.

3 VF-53 Top Secret Serial 002 (declassified) 6 September 1950, Subject: Attack and Destruction of an Unidentified Aircraft in the Yellow Sea 4 September 1950, Korea, Miscellaneous file, Naval Aviation History Branch, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC.

4 VF-53 Personal Accounts July-November 1950, VF-53 file, Operational Archives, Naval Historical Center, Washington, DC. Thomson later became VF-53's first combat loss, to ground fire 25 July 1950, he died in captivity 3 January 1951 according to the list kept by fellow POW PFC Johnnie Johnson at the infamous Tiger Camp in Noth Korea.

5 VF-53 Top Secret Serial 002

6 A-20s in US service were *Havocs*, export and lend-lease models *Bostons*, though sometimes later also *Havocs* in British parlance, but always *Boston* to the Soviets, the largest user of the type.

7 Aleksandr Kotlobovskiy and Igor Seidov, "Goryachee Nebo 'Kholodnoi Boiny"' (Hot Sky in the Cold War), Mir Aviatsii No.2 (10) 1995.

8 Vladimir Kotelnikov, *Bostony v Sovetskom Soyuze* (*Boston* in the Soviet Union), 37, 41.

9 Kto est' kto (Who's Who [in RussianAviation]): <<http://www.airforce.ru/staff/who_is_who/index.htm>>. At least one major 36th MTAP success in WW II can be confirmed, disabling the German transport *Boj Feddersen* (6689grt, 1914) in the Black Sea 10 August 1943, later sunk by the Soviet submarine D-4. However also sadly included in the 36th's torpedo hits was one which sunk the Soviet submarine Shch. 402 in error 21 Sep 1944.

10 Kotelnikov, 53.

11 VF-53 Top Secret Serial 002.

12 Correspondence with Edward V. Laney.

13 "Victims of the Undeclared Wars", Izvestiya, as recorded in Task Force Russia Document (TFR) 219, Joint Commission Support Directorate (JCSD), Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO).

14 Ibid.

15 VF-53 Top Secret Serial 002

16 JCSD DPMO Task Force Russia Weekly Report 9-22 January 1993, 13th Report.

17 John Lambert, *Wildcats over Casablanca*, 14.