



Rex Replay

Once again, as in 1938, the bombers show they can find ships at sea.



USAF photo

Left, in a scene reminiscent of the famous 1938 Rex interception, two 2nd Bomb Wing B-52s fly past Military Sealift Command's 2nd Lt. John P. Bobo, a maritime pre-positioning ship, over the Atlantic Ocean east of Bermuda. The primary mission was to find and identify Bobo as it traversed a large area.

By Adam J. Hebert, Executive Editor

In August, three massive B-52 bombers took off from Barksdale AFB, La., with a straightforward mission: Quickly find and identify a moving surface ship somewhere out on the high seas. The mission was an opportunity for the Air Force to validate its expanding ability to perform long-range homeland defense operations.

The bombers quickly found the ship. The B-52 crews did not fire any weapons at the US Navy ship in this exercise, but confirmed that they could have used their targeting pods and laser guided weapons to attack if they had been ordered to do so, such as if the ship had been taken over by terrorists transporting weapons of mass destruction.

The flight was a tribute to the legendary 1938 mission in which three new B-17 bombers intercepted the Italian ocean liner *Rex* roughly 700 miles east of New York City. That intercept proved the Army Air Corps could perform a long-range intercept mission previously reserved for the Navy.

This time, however, the bombers were equipped with the latest targeting pods and data link systems and were flown by a mix of active and Reserve crew members.

Taking off at dawn from Barksdale, the three-ship flight proceeded across the southeastern United States and over the Atlantic Ocean. There, the three B-52s each took on fuel from a lone KC-10 tanker, and headed for a search zone east of the British island of Bermuda, roughly 900 miles east of Charleston, S.C.

Upon takeoff, the bombers only had a ballpark idea of where the target would be, and the ship was in motion throughout the mission.

The crews expected the first challenge to be finding the target vessel, which in this case was the Navy maritime pre-positioning ship *2nd Lt. John P. Bobo*. The B-52s found *Bobo* without difficulty, and the Litening targeting pods borrowed from a Reserve unit for use on the active duty bombers allowed the flight to quickly confirm that this was, indeed, the correct ship.

The threat of terrorism, concern about the vulnerability of the nation's ports, and the massive number of ships on the world's seas make the ability to intercept a suspicious vessel far from the US coast important.

The B-52s then flew past *Bobo* numerous times for identification and photographic purposes. This showed two things: It is hard to spot a ship

from a distance with your eyes, but it is easy when you have the proper radars and targeting pods.

Vanishing Target

Mission commander and pilot of the lead aircraft, Rex 51, was Lt. Col. Robert Nordberg, commander of Air Force Reserve Command's 917th Operations Support Flight, based at Barksdale.

Nordberg explained that the flight was able to find *Bobo* so quickly because the B-52s' radars searched nearly the entire target area to quickly zero in on the vessel.

The repeated passes showed how difficult it is to visually identify a ship on the high seas, however, even a ship as large as the 40,000 ton *Bobo*, which can carry enough materiel to support a Marine air-ground task force for 30 days. From 15,000 feet, the ship and its wake seemed to vanish into the ocean.

"The threat's out there," said Col. Robert E. Wheeler, 2nd Bomb Wing commander. The US is facing an enemy that is different, adaptive, and determined, he said, and the Air Force is "morphing" to address the threats. The Litening targeting pods used on this mission can be moved from one B-52 to another in three hours. Wheeler repeatedly praised the additional capability that the targeting pods, which are still in short supply, bring to the bombers.



At the controls of the lead B-52 before takeoff at Barksdale AFB, La., is Lt. Col. Robert Nordberg, commander of AFRC's 917th Operations Support Flight.



A pair of BUFFs head for the runway at Barksdale at the beginning of the day's mission. The bombers would gather intel for US Northern Command on their way back to base.

years after the original 1938 *Rex* mission, the Italian luxury liner actually did fall victim to airpower. On Sept. 8, 1944, a combined force of RAF Bristol Beaufighters and USAAF P-51 Mustangs attacked and capsized the liner at the north end of the Adriatic Sea.

Sixty-three years after *Rex* went down, no such fate awaited *Bobo* and its American crew, but the return from Bermuda was also significant. The three B-52s found themselves on US Northern Command's air tasking order.

The Air Force's bombers must be able to perform global strike missions from their home stations, a capability Wheeler said was ably demonstrated during the 10-hour, 3,500 mile flight Aug. 24.

This mission, he noted, was performed at the same time that the wing had six B-52s and 279 airmen deployed to Andersen AFB, Guam, on an Air and Space Expeditionary Force deployment to beef up long-range firepower in US Pacific Command's area of responsibility.

New Connectivity

Also playing a major role in the mission was the Evolutionary Data Link (EDL), a laptop-based system that allowed the B-52 crews to stay in contact with the air operations center at Barksdale without using radios. The EDL system was high-maintenance, and kept the crew of *Rex* 51 constantly busy, but it securely delivered messages, mission updates, and intelligence from "national assets" to the crews.

The airmen also used the system to feed information back to the AOC—including the first images of *Bobo* shortly after it was intercepted.

Nordberg said the connection to the AOC is "critical," because it allows a team of intelligence experts to evaluate a situation, relieving the two officers in the front of a B-52 from determining whether a target is legitimate or not.

The mission also recalled 2004's



Lt. Col. Kelly Lawson (far left) greets Capt. John Cornett on the crew's return to Barksdale, as Maj. Melvin Green (far right) and other airmen prepare equipment.

Resultant Fury exercise, which ended with a spectacular finale, when fighters and bombers destroyed USS *Schenectady* and other floating targets near Hawaii.

Various bombers and strike aircraft launched Global Positioning System satellite guided Joint Direct Attack Munitions linked to the Affordable Moving Surface Target Engagement system at the decommissioned warship.

This summer's mission was different, however, in that the target vessel was actively steaming and not merely adrift.

At the height of World War II, six

The crews were tasked to find and gather intelligence on "targets of opportunity" specified by NORTHCOR. The B-52s gathered imagery of three locations in the southeast United States—a dam, a bridge, and an airport parking ramp. This portion of the mission simulated the need to gather intelligence for homeland defense and disaster relief missions.

The three bomber crews briefly considered overflying the three NORTHCOR targets sequentially, but ultimately chose to split up the bombers. Each B-52 filed new flight plans and headed to its own separate target on the trip back to Barksdale. ■