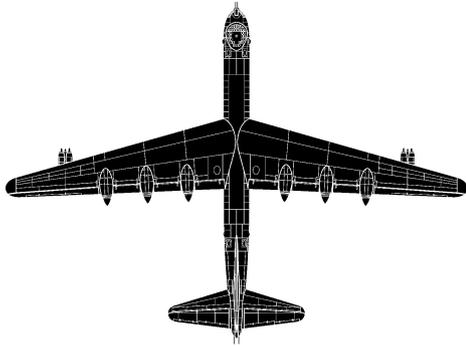


Airpower Classics

Artwork by Zaur Eylanbekov

B-36



The gargantuan B-36, in service during the period 1948-59, was USAF's first true intercontinental bomber. It made heavy use of magnesium to reduce weight and was widely known as the "Magnesium Overcast." Another nickname—"Big Stick"—denoted its role as the strong sword of Strategic Air Command in the early days of the Cold War.

The B-36 dated to the World War II year of 1941, when it seemed Britain might fall and US Army Air Forces might have to carry out bombing operations against Germany from US bases. USAAF called for a 5,000-mile unrefueled range and a 10,000-pound bomb load. Consolidated won the competition and got a production contract in 1943. The result was the largest combat aircraft in history; one pilot likened it to "sitting on your front porch and flying your house around." It had six pusher engines, huge wings, and crew compartments fore and aft connected by an 80-foot tunnel. Because of

its nuclear prowess, the B-36 was perceived as a threat to carrier aviation by Navy officials, a fact which led to an unsuccessful effort to kill it and a subsequent "Revolt of the Admirals" in 1949. The basic design was enhanced when the Air Force added four turbojet engines to increase the bomber's speed and carrying capacity. The B-36 deployed operationally only twice, during the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the Hungarian revolt against Soviet occupation that same year. While it never dropped a bomb in anger, its very existence had a deterrent effect on US enemies. Some think it may have prevented direct Soviet entry into the Korean War on the side of North Korea and China.

The last B-36 stood down in 1958 and was retired soon after, leaving the Air Force with an all-jet bomber force. Yet no one who saw it in flight or heard the roar of its 10 engines ever forgot it.

—Walter J. Boyne

This aircraft: B-36H—#51-5718—as it looked in spring 1953 when assigned to USAF Strategic Air Command's 42nd Bomb Squadron, 11th Bomb Group, at Carswell AFB, Tex.



In Brief

Designed, built by Consolidated-Vultee ★ first flight Aug. 8, 1946 ★ crew of 15 ★ number built 385 ★ **Specific to B-36D:** six P&W R-4360-41 radials + four GE J47-GE-19 turbojets ★ armament 16 20 mm cannon in 8 turrets ★ bomb load 72,000 lb nuclear or conventional bombs ★ max speed 439 mph ★ cruise speed 225 mph ★ max range 7,500 mi ★ weight (loaded) 357,500 lb ★ span 230 ft ★ length 162 ft 1 in ★ height 46 ft 8 in.

Famous Fliers

Gen. Lew Allen Jr., USAF Chief of Staff 1978-82; Maj. Gen. Christopher S. Adams Jr., SAC chief of staff 1982-83; Gen. Walter C. Sweeney Jr., TAC commander 1961-65; Brig. Gen. Richard E. Ellsworth, namesake of Ellsworth AFB, S.D.

Interesting Facts

No official name; "Peacemaker," often used, was unofficial ★ first US thermonuclear weapon delivery system ★ took part in six live nuclear weapon tests ★ featured in 1955 film "Strategic Air Command," starring Jimmy Stewart ★ used to test feasibility of atomic-powered aircraft ★ initial tires 9 feet tall, with enough rubber for 60 car tires ★ 32 lost in accidents ★ one-third built as or converted to RB-36 reconnaissance models ★ suffered two "Broken Arrow" incidents, one in Canada and one in New Mexico.



A B-36 at the 1949 National Air Fair in Chicago.