

SAC's



Strategic Air Command's airborne arsenal is showcased in these rare color photos.

A defining characteristic of the US Air Force has always been its ability to deliver fire and steel at very long range—a mission embodied in the bomber. For the first time since the late 1970s, the Air Force is about to award a contract for another such airplane: the Long-Range Strike Bomber. There was a time, though, when new bombers came fast and furious—during the Strategic Air Command era before the B-1, when each aircraft design was an urgent and hard push at the edges of the envelope for payload, speed, and range. Here, in color, are some snapshots of that era.

When the Soviet Union developed its own nuclear bombers and missiles, it was imperative that SAC bombers get airborne as fast as possible. Here, a swept-wing Boeing B-47 Stratojet, equipped with Jet-Assisted Takeoff (JATO) rockets, leaps into the sky.

Heyday

Photos from the collection of Warren Thompson



Photo by David Menard



1 Photo by Warren Bodie



2 Photo by Vincent Beebe



3 Photo by Ken Smith

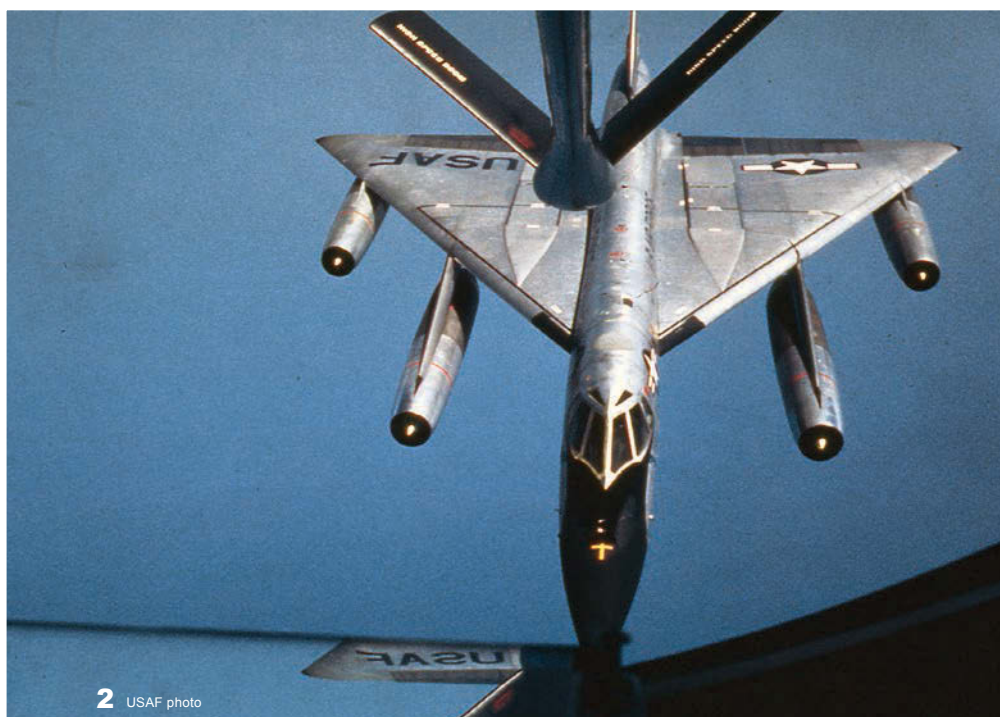


4 Photo by David Menard

[1] 98th Bomb Group Boeing B-29 Superfortresses return from a mission over North Korea in 1951. The World War II-era B-29 would soon be superseded by the up-engined B-50, and new bombers would follow every few years into the 1960s. [2] A B-47 and KC-135 tankers at Hickam AFB, Hawaii, deployed in 1962 for Operation Dominic, a series of live nuclear weapon tests in the South Pacific. [3] In August 1966, a Convair B-58 Hustler warms up engines after maintenance work. [4] B-58 Greased Lightning set a 1963 record—still standing—of eight hours and 35 minutes for the Tokyo-London run. The 305th Bomb Wing airplane averaged 938 mph for the 8,028-mile record flight. This shot shows off the B-58's three hatches.



1 Photo by Steve Richards



2 USAF photo

[1] A B-47 approaching Alaska is intercepted by a Lockheed F-94B Starfire. The B-47 was SAC's first all-jet, swept-wing bomber with a fighter-like tandem cockpit—a pioneer of many advances in one graceful platform. [2] A B-58 of the 305th Bomb Wing pulls up for a tanker top off. A total of 116 Hustlers were produced. Despite its cutting-edge speed, the B-58 only had a 10-year operational lifetime. [3] Note the German V-1 missile (or a Republic/Ford JB-2 copy) on this B-29's wing at Ladd AFB, Alaska. A squadron was testing "buzz bombs" in 1949.



3 Photo by Vincent Beebe



1 USAF photo



2 Photo by Ken Smith



3 Convair Aviation photo



4 Photo by Bob Amos

[1] A B-36 over Guadalupe in April 1949 during a routine training flight out of Carswell AFB, Texas. [2] The Peacemaker, shown here at Carswell, was a formidable and deadly aircraft. [3] The Convair XB-36, right, unofficially the "Aluminum Overcast," dwarfs a B-29 in a posed shot at Carswell in 1948. [4] Air Force Association founding member Jimmy Stewart, then a Reserve brigadier general, signs autographs for airmen after a long mission from Andersen AFB, Guam, to Vietnam in February 1966. Stewart was a highly decorated World War II bomber pilot who later made the movie "Strategic Air Command," featuring the B-36 and B-47, both of which he also flew.



1 Photo by John Hoffman



2 Photo by Warren Thompson



3 Photo by Warren Thompson



4 Photo by Ben Whitaker



5 Photo by Ray Shewfelt

[1] A flight of B-36 Peacemakers of the 11th Bomb Wing on a flight from Carswell to North Africa. [2] At Eaker AFB, Ark., Big Stick awaits takeoff. It's wearing an odd mix of B-52 paint schemes. [3] At Eglin AFB, Fla., a crew readies a B-58 for tests in carrying conventional bombs. The B-58 was meant to fly high and fast. The advent of surface-to-air missiles, however, forced it to lower altitudes, where it lost its speed advantage. SAC retired the Hustler in 1970. [4] An 11th Bomb Wing B-36 over Arizona. The B-36D got four jet engines in outboard pods to help the huge bomber gain altitude more quickly. [5] A B-47 over Algeria in 1955. On extended missions overseas, the Stratojet could carry jettisonable 1,760-gallon fuel tanks on each wing.



1 Photo by Ed Siert



2 Photo by George Gradel

|1| The B-58 had an enormous under-fuselage weapon pod, given the limited space available under its delta wings. This one is preparing to launch from a UK base in 1967. The B-58 appeared in the 1964 Cold War thriller "Fail Safe."
|2| Bristling with guns, a flight of B-29s flies over Britain circa 1948.
|3| The B-47's swept wings are evident in this image taken over Canada in the late 1950s. Though superseded by the B-52—which had a similar planform—the B-47 was adapted to recce and electronic warfare roles.
|4| A B-52E in the strategic paint scheme awaits a mission over North Vietnam in June 1968.



3 Photo by Chuck Balsden

4 Photo by Rod Breland





1 Photo by Ken Smith



2 Photo by Hank Marois



3 Photo by Bryan Aleksich



4 Photo by Bruce Chavis

|1| Using its drag chute to slow down, a B-58 touches down at Little Rock AFB, Ark., in 1967. |2| A B-52D at U Tapao RTAB, Thailand, readies for a 1970 mission, fully loaded with bombs. |3| In late 1964, a B-52 flies out of Andersen on its way back to Vietnam. The last B-52H was built in 1962, and yet the venerable bomber remains the backbone of USAF's bomber fleet today. |4| Leaving spectacular contrails, a B-52 starts the journey back to Andersen after a 1972 mission. SAC was inactivated after the Cold War, in 1992, but was brought back and renamed Air Force Global Strike Command in 2009. ✪