

INTERDICT # 60
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OPERATION STRANGLE ¹

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After concentrating on interdiction by all Naval and Marine aircraft of the east coastal roads from the bomblines as far north as practicable during the period 29 Jan 51 through June 1951 -- (p 164)

"Nevertheless, by June 1951, it was apparent that in spite of the destructive and widespread attacks of the Carrier aircraft in the Navy's north-eastern area, the battlefield had not been interdicted. The enemy had been able to mount two large-scale offensives within a month, and it was obvious that sufficient supplies, troops and equipment were getting through from China to the front lines in North Korea. How, then, were the Chinese getting their supplies through?

The answer was plain. First, the bulk of the enemy rail traffic had simply shifted from the eastern to the western network. Unfortunately, the Fifth Air Force in Korea lacked aircraft which could deliver with pin-point accuracy a 2,000 lb bomb, the best weapon for attacking bridges. Second, the western network was larger. Third, the Chinese were placing more and more dependence on truck transport. The vehicle count of enemy trucks had jumped from 7,300 in Jan 1951 to 54,000 in May 1951. Fourth, practically everything was traveling at night; and fifth, the skillful and highly-organized repair efforts of the enemy were matching the rate of destruction."

During the last days of May 1951, General Ridgeway's HQ proposed a scheme by which the battlefield might be more effectively interdicted. Why not draw a line across Korea behind the Chinese lines, assign portions of it to the various air forces, and ask them to destroy every vehicle, every bridge, and every target in their section? The plan was adopted and served as the genesis of "*Operation Strangle*" under which the Navy would operate from 5 June to 20 September 1951.

¹ McMaster, Donald Williams, (Master of Arts Thesis, 1959). The Evolution of Tactical Airpower - With Particular Emphasis Upon Its Application by the U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corps in the Korean War, June 1950 - July 1953.

Accordingly, a one-degree strip of latitude across the narrow neck of North Korea - from 38° 15' N to 39° 15' N, just above the battle line, was selected. The traffic networks within this belt were divided into eight routes; the Fifth Air Force would take the three westernmost routes; the First Marine Air Wing would take the three eastern routes; and the Carriers of TF-77 were assigned the two central routes.

By late summer of 1951 it was apparent that "*Operation Strangle*" had failed. The reasons were simple; a bomb crater on an unpaved road could not stop a truck - the hole could be too quickly filled in or bypassed. Even a damaged highway bridge was no impediment. A simple bypass could be built, or a ford made across the unusually summer-dry streams. And in comparison to the rail networks, there was greater flexibility and greater area in the highway networks to make air attack very difficult.

The interdiction effort of the Carrier task force was now to enter its third phase. The first phase (breaking the Yalu bridges and bridges of the northeast rail net) had achieved success within the northeast net. The second one (breaking the highways) had not. An effort would now be undertaken to destroy railroad tracks as well as the bridges themselves.

Despite unusually favorable conditions, and despite the costly, vigorous, and prolonged effort just described, UN air power failed to isolate the Korean battlefield. ----

Notwithstanding the heavy damage inflicted by UN Airpower, the over-all air interdiction campaign in Korea had only partial success. Even when the attacks of TF77 were added to those of the Marine Air Wing and the Fifth Air Force, the combined destruction did not succeed in significantly restricting the flow of the enemy's supplies to the frontlines, or in achieving "interdiction of the battlefield". The attrition caused the enemy to triple and re-triple his efforts to supply the frontlines; it laid a terrible and costly burden upon his supply organization; it caused him widespread damage and loss. Yet no vital or decisive effect could be observed at the fighting front."

----- (p. 170)

An official Navy Dept. study² draws the following conclusions from "*Operation Strangle*":

"*Operation STRANGLE*", and Air Force and Army test of their joint theory that friendly air forces could effectively and conclusively isolate a battle area by attacks against the enemy's transportation systems, commenced in the summer of 1951 and ended in June 1952. The concept proved erroneous, and an analysis made by the Fifth Air Force acknowledged only annoying harassment of the enemy at staggering cost to ourselves There is no question that interdiction disrupted enemy daylight movements and reduced his daily supplies by a substantial margin. Yet the "isolation of the battlefield" was never achieved..... It should be noted that friendly air forces were favored by an almost total lack of enemy air opposition to our ground attack capability of the Fifth Air Force and all attached units, except for a token 96 maximum allowable sorties per day for direct support of ground troops, failed to achieve the objective of *Operation Strangle*."

In summary six major reasons are offered as to why air power failed to interdict the Korean battlefield. First, interdiction failed because of the ability of the Communists to absorb widespread and heavy punishment, and through the use of unlimited manpower, to keep their highways and rail lines operating. Second, interdiction failed in Korea because UN Airpower could not attack the sources and fountainheads of the supply lines. Third interdiction failed in Korea because of our inability to find and destroy at night, and in inclement weather, the small, individual, and often vital targets of interdiction which we were able to destroy in daylight. Fourth, interdiction failed because of the stalemated war. Had the fighting been fluid, the Communists' rate of usage would have increased greatly. Fifth, interdiction failed because of the very primitive nature of the enemy's exposed supply network. Sixth, interdiction failed owing to our inability to use the one weapon - the atomic bomb - in our arsenal which might have severed Communist supply lines in Korea. Seventh, interdiction failed because there was no concerted effort to capitalize on the effects of the effort by coordination with a strenuous ground offensive.

² USNavy Dept., CINCPAC, Korean War U.S. Pacific Fleet Operations, Interim Eval. Report No. 5, p.3.

