

6160th AIR BASE GROUP

LINEAGE

STATIONS

ASSIGNMENTS

COMMANDERS

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

EMBLEM SIGNIFICANCE

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

On 7 July 1950, the 6160th Air Base Group activated its boat section at Itazuke Air Base (AB), Japan, with one FP-47 (114-foot boat), one lieutenant, and four airmen. Shortly thereafter it became Detachment 1, 6160th ABG. The detachment commander, 1st Lt Phil Dickey, promptly moved out to reassemble all former boat crewmen still in-theater and whatever boats were still seaworthy. Dickey found the effort to acquire seaworthy boats easier than getting the crewmen, but Detachment 1 shortly counted seven 63-foot, eight 85-foot, and one 104-foot boats in addition to the original FP-47. His efforts to get the crews back together again, brought the lieutenant to the unfavorable attention of several senior officers, themselves frantic to get their own undermanned units ready for war. Phone calls from Fifth Air Force headquarters soon straightened out the senior officers, if not their antipathy toward the young officer. Lieutenant Dickey's word-of-mouth communications among the small crash rescue boat fraternity managed

to bring a beginning cadre of 85 airmen back together, and Detachment 1 was soon off to the war.

Detachment 1's small fleet of boats was immediately dispersed by FEAF throughout its entire area of operations. From south to north, the boats were stationed in Guam (Andersen AB), Okinawa (Kadena and Naha ABs), Japan (Haneda, Miho, Ashiya, Itazuke, and Brady ABs), and into the line of fire itself in Korea: Pohang (K-3), Pusan (K-9), Chinhae (K-10), Kunsan (K-8).

The understandable but erroneous perception persists that USAF "crash rescue" boats belonged to the Air Force Air Rescue Service (ARS), itself activated from the legislation that created an independent Air Force in 1947. With the activation of ARS, the boats reverted to local air base service organizations such as the 6160th Air Base Group

During the Korean War, the 22d Crash Rescue Boat Squadron threw its lot in with a collection of unconventional warfare "pirates" that took the unit a long way from its conventional mission; amazingly, young sergeants like "Boog" Farrish pulled it off.

A few boats operating in their designated rescue role in Korean waters went further north of the 38th parallel and the main line of resistance separating the massive Communist and US armies on the peninsula itself. These 85-foot boats, operating near Wonsan Harbor on Korea's eastern coast and especially near Cho-do Island off the west coast, found themselves between hundreds of small, seemingly deserted islands and the coastline itself. And in doing so, they found themselves operating in a war that no one had yet briefed them on, the secret spook war between CCRAK and the Communist forces on the peninsula. Inevitably drawn into this war, they went with the full blessings of the Fifth Air Force. By stationing themselves so far north to aid allied combat pilots ditching in the sea or even downed airman attempting to evade to the shoreline from further inland, the boats were seen by many as useful transport for another purpose. As the boat crews soon learned, the seemingly deserted islands were anything but empty.

Thousands of US-supported partisans were stationed on these islands to conduct unconventional warfare in Communist rear areas directly accessible from the islands. But seaborne transportation was in short supply and fast raiding craft virtually unobtainable, at least until Detachment 1 arrived in the area. Calls were made, meetings were held, and things changed in a big way for the airmen/sailors of Detachment 1. To assure the needed mission-response time to special operations boat requests (and to control a scarce asset), Fifth Air Force headquarters in Japan directed its own Operations Directorate to assume operational control of Detachment 1, with the 6160th ABG at Itazuke AB retaining administrative and logistical responsibilities. Boats were then placed on 30-day temporary duty status in Korean waters to yet another mysterious spook outfit specializing in warfare behind enemy lines. This, they would soon learn, was the Fifth Air Force's Detachment 2, 6004th Air Intelligence Services Squadron, described earlier as "the first covert collection agency of a tactical nature in the history of the U.S. Air Force."

The boat crews would also learn that attempting to use a unit's title as a means of guessing the unit's mission was a waste of time in special operations. The 6004th's Detachment 2 was a lot

more than a “covert collection agency,” or at least they sure seemed to need a lot of guns to collect whatever it was they wanted!

They needed fast boats too, and the boat crews soon learned their mission: transport and protect, when necessary, spies and saboteurs from Detachment 2 as well as CCRAK guerrillas on their nighttime forays into enemy-held territory. Their boats had the required size, range, and speed, but something more would be needed for this job if the boats were expected to go within rifle range of the very vigilant and jittery Communist coastal security force. Different combinations of firepower were experimented with before the boat crews settled on the reliable .50-caliber Browning heavy machine gun. Coming out of the barrel at 2,930 feet per second, the heavy slug had a maximum effective range of nearly one mile. Mounted in pairs, they were twice as devastating, but mounted in fours, they became the legendary quad-fifty of the Korean War.

Like the Navy’s famous PT boats of World War II, the crash boats’ defense was limited to firepower, speed, and the quick thinking of their commanders. Their wooden-hulled boats offered no hope should a serious mistake be made or simple bad luck catch up with its crews. By the summer of 1952, Detachment 1 had grown significantly from its initial cadre of 85 “sailors.” In July of that year, Headquarters USAF reorganized the detachment by activating the 22d Crash Boat Rescue Squadron at Itazuke Air Base.

Squadron strength stood at over 400 officers and airmen as all crash rescue boat detachments in theater were formed under the new squadron. On some missions, the boat crews took South Korean marine raiding parties ashore to do what all marines always seem to do best—disturb the peace, wreak havoc on bad guys, and cause sufficient unrest in the neighborhood to necessitate their early departure from the party. Other boat missions were more subtle, such as transporting bundles of forged North Korean currency for delivery to CCRAK agents for further distribution inland. The enemy’s economy has always been a legitimate target in war, and unconventional warfare could exploit opportunities far beyond the obvious use of conventional weapons. For example, in April 1952, FECOM’s Liaison Detachment (Korea) published a four-page document titled “Guerrilla Operations Outline, 1952.” It candidly notes in paragraph 11: North Korean Currency Exchange: Due to the large requirements for North Korean currency and the limited sources available, commanders will encourage bank robberies and other suitable means of procuring this currency.

The 24-hour-a-day pressure from an unforgiving sea and enemy coastal gunners never relented on the young NCOs commanding the boats. And not all the threats came from the coastline. In October of that year, the crew of R-1-664 caught a North Korean junk trying to infiltrate right into the harbor at Cho-do Island, one of the primary offshore US special operations bases. Two prisoners were taken, but the boat then sustained an hour-long attack by North Korean fighter aircraft. The fighters were accurate enough to wound one crewman and inflict minor damage to the boat. The story of the crash rescue boat crews in North Korean waters is a story of airmen taking the unconventional war to the enemy in a role far beyond the primary coast guard-like duties they signed up for in the beginning. Their courage, seamanship, and willingness to throw in their lot with the “Terry and the Pirates” world of CCRAK made them full-fledged but little-known members of the USAF’s special operations heritage.

Air Force Order of Battle

Created: 20 Jun 2011

Updated:

Sources