

Airpower Classics

Artwork by Zaur Eylanbekov

B-47 Stratojet



The B-47 Stratojet made Strategic Air Command the most powerful war instrument in history. The B-47's wartime mission was nuclear attack of the Soviet Union. It was fast, powerful, and numerous. Essentially there were two sets of B-47s, with two sets of crews. One comprised aircraft and crews optimized for delivering atomic weapons. The second was made up of reconnaissance, electronic jamming, and weather types. The latter group would troll Soviet air defenses, SAMs, and airborne intercept radars, trying to provoke a response. Two were shot down.

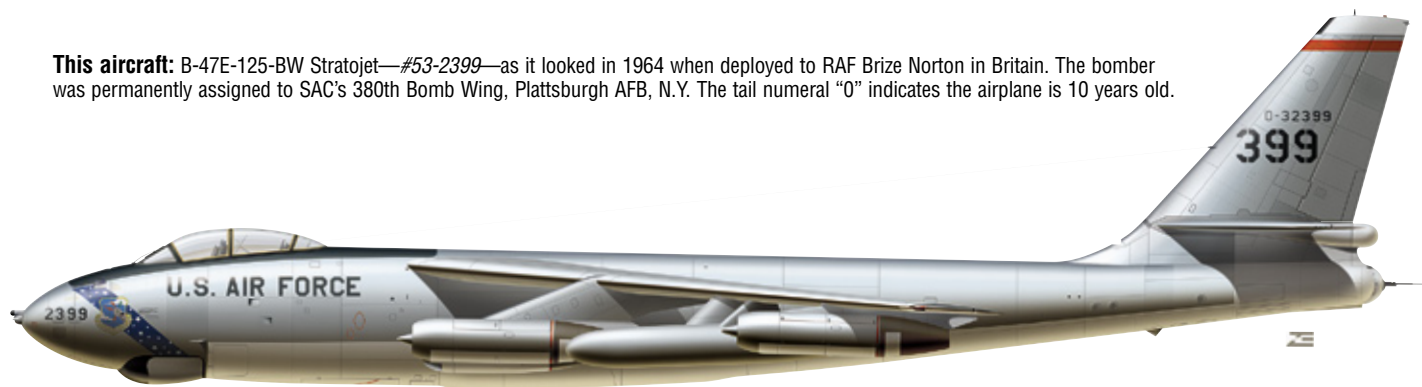
Jet engines were new when design work began in 1943. A turning point came in 1945; Boeing aerodynamicist George Schairer, having gained access to German plans and engineers, advised using swept wings in Boeing's design. The sleek, beautiful outcome was highly advanced but also temperamental. It did not become operational until 1951. With its 35-degree-swept wings, six

jet engines, drag and brake chutes, anti-skid brakes, and bicycle landing gear, the B-47 was far superior to its predecessors. In-flight refueling gave it intercontinental range. Its high cruise speed made Soviet fighter interception difficult. Flying the B-47 was a demanding task, and many were lost in landing or take-off accidents.

Beginning in 1953, B-47 wings rotated through bases in the Pacific, North Africa, and Britain. As Soviet defenses improved, USAF created new B-47 tactics, including the Low Altitude Bombing System (LABS)—use of an Immelman maneuver from low altitude and so-called “toss bombing.” In 1957, USAF began using “Reflex,” a system in which B-47 wings pulled 21-day “alerts” overseas. By 1957, SAC had about 1,800 B-47s (and RB-47s) in service, but that number rapidly declined as the Air Force brought on the new workhorse B-52.

—Walter J. Boyne

This aircraft: B-47E-125-BW Stratojet—#53-2399—as it looked in 1964 when deployed to RAF Brize Norton in Britain. The bomber was permanently assigned to SAC's 380th Bomb Wing, Plattsburgh AFB, N.Y. The tail numeral “0” indicates the airplane is 10 years old.



In Brief

Designed by Boeing ★ built by Boeing, Lockheed, Douglas ★ first flight Dec. 17, 1947 ★ crew of three ★ number built 2,049 ★ armament, two 20 mm cannon in tail turret ★ bomb load 20,000 lb ★ **Specific to B-47E:** six General Electric J47-GE-25 jet engines, plus 30 or 33 RATO bottles ★ max speed 606 mph ★ cruise speed 557 mph ★ max range 4,000 mi ★ weight (loaded) 230,000 lb ★ span 116 ft ★ length 109 ft 10 in ★ height 27 ft 11 in.

Famous Fliers

Gen. Curtis E. LeMay (SAC commander, CSAF); Gen. Russell E. Dougherty (SAC commander); Gen. David C. Jones (CJCS, CSAF); Col. Donald E. Hillman (leader of 1952 overflight of Russia); 1st Lt. James Obenauf (DFC in 1958 for heroism); Gen. Thomas S. Power (SAC commander); Gen. John A. Shaud (chief of staff, SHAPE); Gen. Walter C. Sweeney Jr. (commander, Tactical Air Command); Brig. Gen. Paul W. Tibbets Jr. (pilot of B-29 bomber *Enola Gay*); Editor's addition: Col. Walter J. Boyne, noted USAF historian.

Interesting Facts

Flown in some 19 variants ★ wing so flexible that tip could deflect through 17-foot-long arc ★ carrier of Bell GAM-63 Rascal “supersonic pilotless bomber” ★ RB-47s overflew Soviet Union in 1952 ★ two RB-47s shot down in Cold War ★ launched an anti-satellite missile against Explorer VI.



B-47s sometimes made rocket-assisted takeoffs.