

USS Bataan CVL-29 Korean War History

by Timothy L. Francis



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In 1949, heightened international tensions between the United States and NATO on the one hand, and the Soviet Union and communist China on the other, led the Truman administration to ask for more military spending. In response, the Defense Department's budget, and the Navy's, began to expand in 1950. Bataan was recommissioned on 13 May 1950 at Philadelphia, Capt. Edgar T. Neale, in command. On 25 June, while fitting out the light carrier, her crew heard of the North Korean communist invasion of South Korea. Two days later, under United Nations (UN) auspices, the United States intervened in the conflict. Suddenly needed to train and deliver pilots and aircraft to the Korean theater, Bataan stood out for the west coast on 15 July, passed through the Panama Canal on the 21st, and arrived at San Diego on 28 July.

Bataan spent the next four months conducting training operations out of San Diego. These included general crew drills, ship handling, and task unit operations. She also embarked naval air squadrons for carrier landing qualifications and antisubmarine warfare exercises. On 16 November, Bataan loaded Air Force cargo and personnel and sailed for Japan, arriving at Yokohama on 28 November. After unloading her cargo there, and at Kobe and Sasebo, she sailed on 14 December to report for duty with Task Force (TF) 77 off Korea's northeastern coast.

Bataan joined the task force on 16 December at a critical juncture in the conflict. Since 24 November, when some 30 Chinese communist divisions had intervened in the Korean war, bitter fighting had forced UN troops to retreat from the Yalu and Taedong Rivers. By mid-December, the American and South Korean troops on the east coast had fallen back to Hungnam. The soldiers, along with their vehicles, supplies, and almost 100,000 Korean refugees, were being shipped south to the Pusan perimeter. On 22 December, Bataan began flying Vought F4U-4 fighters ("Corsairs") of Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 212 over Hungnam to help cover the final phase of this evacuation. Her planes, along with aircraft from Sicily (CVE-118) and Badoeng Strait (CVE-116), provided air cover to ground forces and shipping in the port area. Following the end of the evacuation on 24 December, her "Corsairs" then flew armed reconnaissance and close air support missions over the central mountains along the 38th parallel.

On 31 December, a second communist offensive pushed south toward Söul and Hanchon. In an attempt to stem the tide, Bataan was reassigned to Task Group (TG) 96.9 on the west coast of Korea. There, her planes attacked enemy troop concentrations below Söul, helping to stall the communist push south. After a replenishment period at Sasebo between 9 and 15 January 1951, Bataan relieved HMS Theseus in the Yellow Sea on the 16th.

Wearing the flag of Commander, Task Element (CTE) 95.1.1, Bataan's mission was to blockade the west coast of Korea. This duty, shared with a British escort carrier, consisted of nine days flying and one day of replenishment at sea, one day on passage to Japan and back, and then a week in Sasebo or Yokosuka for rest and maintenance. While on station, Bataan generally flew 40 sorties a day--eight defensive CAP flights with the remainder divided between close air support (CAS), armed reconnaissance (AR), and interdiction missions. For CAS of ground forces, tactical air controllers usually called in Bataan's "Corsairs" for bomb, rocket, and napalm attacks on known enemy positions. Daylight AR missions concentrated on halting enemy road traffic and bombing rail yards and bridges. The first patrol revealed the dangerous nature of this work when, between 16 and 26 January, VMF-212 lost three "Corsairs," along with two pilots, to enemy small-arms fire.

Over the next two months, Bataan conducted three more Yellow Sea patrols. In February and March, the light carrier supported the UN counterattack toward Inch'ŏn and Sŏul, concentrating her air attacks on the Chinnampo area. These flights also included air spotting missions when cruisers St. Paul (CA-73) and HMS Belfast fired on targets ahead of advancing UN troops. Of the three "Corsairs" shot down by communist antiaircraft fire during these missions, two pilots were safely rescued by search and rescue (SAR) helicopters.

On 8 April, after the fast carriers of TF 77 sailed south to Formosa--because intelligence reports suggested the Chinese communists might attack there--Bataan and HMS Theseus replaced them in the Sea of Japan. The two light carriers, screened by a pair of American destroyers and four British Commonwealth escorts, kept up their "multinational" part in maintaining the west coast blockade. "Corsairs" from VMF-312 along with British Fairey Mark 5 ("Firefly") and Hawker Mark 11 ("Sea Fury") fighters, bombed and strafed communist supply routes near Wŏnsan, Hamhung, and Sŏngjin. Five aircraft and one pilot were lost to communist antiaircraft defenses.

After a short visit to Sasebo between 16 and 20 April, Bataan resumed her alternating patrols with HMS Theseus off the west coast of Korea. On 21 April, in an unusual incident, two "Corsairs" of VMF-312 were "jumped" by four Yakovlev Type 3U fighters ("Yaks") near Chinnampo. Marine Corps Capt. Philip C. DeLong shot down two of the Russian-made "Yaks," and heavily damaged a third, while 1st Lt. Harold D. Daigh, USMCR, shot down the fourth. According to Capt. DeLong, the North Korean pilots "were considerably inferior in flying ability to the Japanese of World War II."

The following day, communist troops began another heavy attack toward Sŏul, and Bataan's planes flew 136 close air support sorties against them over the next four days. After a brief period of replenishment and upkeep at Sasebo between 27 and 30 April, Bataan returned to the Yellow Sea on 1 May. In company with HMS Glory, she launched 244 offensive sorties against enemy troop concentrations, helping to stall and then reverse the communist offensive by 10 May. Later in the month, Bataan's "Corsairs" concentrated on the destruction of junks and sampans in the Taedong Gang estuary until bad weather canceled flight operations. During these strikes, one pilot and plane was lost after being hit by 40-millimeter ground fire east of Anak.

Relieved on 3 June by a British carrier, Bataan proceeded to Japan that evening. The following morning, she flew off the planes of VMF-312 to Itami Air Force Base, and moored at Sasebo that afternoon. On 5 June, the light carrier steamed to Kobe, where the rest of VMF-312 left the ship. After moving on to Yokosuka for her annual administrative inspection, Bataan departed Japan for home on the 13th, eventually mooring in San Diego harbor on 25 June.

Following two weeks of rest and recreation for her crew, Bataan steamed to Bremerton, Wash., on 9 July for an extensive overhaul at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard. When those repairs were complete, Bataan steamed to San Diego on 7 November for underway and refresher training. Over the next 10 weeks, she conducted carrier landing qualifications and ASW exercises in preparation for a second deployment to the Far East.

Bataan got underway for Yokosuka on 27 January 1952, arriving in Tokyo Bay on 11 February after weathering a severe winter storm. There, she embarked Scouting Squadron (VS) 25 and, in company with Chevalier (DDR-805), steamed south to Buckner Bay, Okinawa, for ASW exercises. Between 24 February and 12 April, Bataan conducted three "hunter-killer" antisubmarine warfare exercises in the waters around Okinawa. Intended to prepare Allied forces to fight the Soviet submarine fleet in the event of Soviet intervention in Korea, these exercises pitted Bataan's aircraft, including helicopters, against "enemy" submarines Blackfin (SS-322), Caiman (SS-323), and Greenfish (SS-351).

After refueling and replenishing at Yokosuka and Sasebo, the light carrier embarked Marine Attack Squadron (VMA) 312 at Kobe and departed Japan for operations off Korea on 29 April. She relieved HMS Glory as CTE-95.1.1 that same day and began combat sorties on the 30th. Ever since June 1951, the war in Korea had been bogged down in a military stalemate, with both sides heavily dug in along the 38th parallel. Tasked with interdicting communist supply routes between Hanchon and Yonan, Bataan's planes flew 30 offensive sorties a day, bombing supply dumps, railway tracks, bridges, and road traffic.

Her only aircraft loss of this "line tour" took place on 22 May when a "Corsair" was shot down by ground fire north of Pyongyang. While two other fighters provided cover, the pilot was rescued by an Air Force helicopter. That same day, another "Corsair" ejected a hung rocket while landing on Bataan. The rocket bounced forward on the flight deck and exploded, injuring three crewmen. She suffered no other losses that month and on 28 May she was relieved by HMS Ocean.

After sailing to Yokosuka for repairs to her flight deck, Bataan conducted three more Yellow Sea "line tours" in June and July, continuing the slow and frustrating task of attacking communist supply lines. The light carrier steamed to Kobe on 4 August, and then on to Yokosuka on the 8th, before sailing for home two days later. The warship arrived in San Diego, via Pearl Harbor, on 26 August.

Bataan entered the Long Beach Naval Shipyard on 11 September for an overhaul, remaining there for three weeks. She then conducted two weeks of carrier qualification landings, with VS-21, VS-23, and VS-871, until she began preparations for her third Far Eastern deployment on 19 October. The warship stood out for Okinawa on 28 October, steamed via Pearl Harbor, and anchored in Buckner Bay on 15 November.

Although fears of Soviet intervention in Korea had diminished, ASW exercises remained important to the units operating off Korea. Bataan conducted two such operations, one between 23 and 29 November and another between 17 to 23 December. The first operation included an "opposed" sortie against Sea Devil (SS-400) and Scabbardfish (SS-397), "hunter-killer" submarine searches, and general ASW patrols. She also practiced jet aircraft tracking with North American F-86 fighters ("Sabres") operating out of Kadena airfield in Japan. The second exercise included electronic counter-measure (ECM) intercept exercises against Segundo (SS-398) and long-range ASW training with Lockheed P2V "Neptunes."

On 9 February 1953, after two more transit ASW exercises between Buckner Bay and Yokosuka, Bataan embarked VMA-312 for operations off Korea. She relieved HMS Glory as Commander, Task Unit (CTU) 95.1.1 on the 15th and began flying combat missions that same day. In addition to the usual armed reconnaissance patrols along the coast, her Marine Corps "Corsairs" pummeled Chinese troop concentrations south of Chinnampo and on the Ongjin peninsula. These attacks were especially useful because friendly partisan reports indicated Chinese troops were massing for attacks on UN-controlled islands close to the mainland.

Bataan conducted four more "line tours" between 7 March and 5 May. Despite the bad flying weather associated with the spring thaw, VMA-312 continued to attack the enemy troop concentrations and supply dumps reported by friendly partisans. The "Corsairs" also worked over roads, railways, and especially bridges, as flood waters hampered communist repair efforts.

After two days of liberty at Yokosuka, Bataan sailed for home, via Pearl Harbor, on 10 May, arriving in San Diego on the 26th. She was undergoing repairs there on 27 July when her crew heard of the armistice signed at Panmunjom in Korea. She then loaded planes and equipment destined for Japan and sailed on 31 July for a round-trip voyage to Kobe and Yokosuka. Returning to Pearl Harbor later that month, she reported for a pre-inactivation overhaul on 26 August. After moving to the San Francisco Naval Shipyard, Bataan was decommissioned on 9 April 1954 and assigned to the Pacific Reserve Fleet at San Francisco. Although she was reclassified an auxiliary aircraft transport and re-designated AVT-4 on 15 May 1959, her name was struck from the Navy List on 1 September 1959. She was sold to Nicolai Joffe Corp., Beverly Hills, CA, on 19 June 1961 for scrapping.

Bataan received six battle stars for her World War II service and three battle stars for her services during the Korean conflict