

# DUAL-IDENTITY

A reconnaissance version of Northrop's mighty P-61 Black Widow played a vital role during the Korean War, as **Warren Thompson** details

Spy

**N**orthrop's P-61 Black Widow proved its worth as a devastating night-fighter during World War Two. Late in that conflict, efforts were made to develop the type into the XP-61E, a long-range fighter to escort B-29 bombers, but this variant – later renamed the F-15 Reporter and then RF-61C – was soon reworked and its role switched from aerial combat to reconnaissance. When hostilities ceased, the production of

propeller-driven aircraft reduced rapidly, with very few exceptions.

Fortunately, Northrop still had 'skin in the game'. Its Reporter was the first aircraft to continue in quantity production at the firm's Hawthorne plant post-war, albeit with the original contract for 320 airframes cut to 175. Ultimately, due to the advent of jet power, just 36 Reporters were completed, these being converted from P-61Cs that were part of a cancelled production run.

Initially, 20 aircraft were designated as the F-15A-1, while the rest were branded the F-15A-5. The Reporter had a revised centre pod, with the pilot and camera operator/navigator seated in tandem under a single, high-visibility 'bubble' canopy. The aircraft's six cameras were housed in an elongated nose, replacing the XP-61E's four guns. Production F-15As were powered by the same turbo-supercharged R-2800-73 engines as the P-61C.



In early 1946, the USAAF was keen to apportion the aerial mapping task to the peacetime F-15, which would conduct such flights mostly from the Japanese Islands, including those occupied by the enemy in the Pacific. Even after the Korean War started in June 1950, the only photos of Korea possessed by the US were those taken by the F-15A back in 1948. The US Marine Corps filled in the gaps with its recon-configured Grumman F7F-3P Tigercats in 1950.

### Long legs – and quick

The F-15's strongest features were its range and speed. The former was attributed to its impressive fuel capacity: two inboard main tanks carried 265gal (1,003lit) each, while two main outboard tanks held 400gal (1,514lit) apiece, and the substantial reservoir located

behind the rear crew member could accommodate 520gal (1,968lit). Speed came via the same two engines that took the night-fighter P-61 Black Widow into combat, but fitted to a much lighter airframe.

When World War Two came to an end, there were still vast tracts of the Pacific that were practically unknown. Even though the Allies had fought in the area, there was no up-to-date cartography available. The Army Air Corps assigned the 5th Reconnaissance Group to handle the task of 'mapping' the Pacific, including Japan, Korea and the Philippines, and the group's key component in this endeavour was the 8th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron, nicknamed the 'Eight Ballers'. This unit was reactivated in the spring of 1947 and attached to the 35th Fighter Group, then

stationed at Johnson Air Base (AB), Japan.

On June 24, 1947, the squadron received a call that it would be flying the F-15 and that the aircraft had been delivered and were ready to be collected at Kisarazu AB, Japan. Capt Rowan Jarvis and Lt Virgil Heistand would be the first pilots in the Far East to fly the Reporter in a forward area. The six groundcrew assembling the aircraft at Kisarazu were kept busy – by late July, there were four aircraft ready, with the same number again by late August.

The first pilot to conduct a photo mission in the Reporter in late July was Capt Wilmer Moore, who flew for a brief spell along the Japanese coast. On August 2, 1947,

**ABOVE** This F-15 was 'snapped' while en route to Johnson AB after photo-mapping some of the islands southwest of Japan.  
CHARLIE RUSSELL



**RIGHT** Capt Stan Alukonis and his camera operator, Capt Bill Moore, taxi out at Clark AB, Philippines, for a mission to photo-map the local coastline in February 1948.  
TONY LINKIEWICZ



**ABOVE** Lt John Biddle (left) and Capt Stanley Walden prepare for another long-range photo-mapping flight from Clark AB in the Philippines.  
CHARLIE RUSSELL

**BELOW** 'The Missing Link' was one of the 8th PRS's aircraft. This image was taken at Johnson AB, Japan, in April 1948.  
TONY LINKIEWICZ

a highly experienced photo-recce veteran from World War Two, Lt Col Benjamin K Armstrong, assumed command of the 8th. He formulated the complicated plans for the mapping of Japan and Korea, with details of the latter proving invaluable when South Korea was invaded by the North in June 1950.

The long, tedious photo missions began in the late summer of 1947, with all available aircraft concentrating on the Japanese mainland. During September, a detachment of three F-15s were sent to Kyushu to cover the western end of Japan. They operated from the expansive Itazuke AB, located on the northernmost tip off Kyushu, and flew missions lasting from four to seven hours each. By October that year, the 'Eight Ballers' had received their 16th Reporter – just two short of the full complement.

**Temporary groundings**  
Severe weather in the winter of 1947, along with a lack of spare parts, meant the F-15s had to cease

**“The aircraft’s six cameras were housed in an elongated nose, replacing the XP-61E’s four guns”**

operations for as much as ten days at a time. Fortunately, there were several aircraft at Kisarazu from which they could cannibalise necessary components.

Eventually, the squadron received orders to operate in warmer climes, with its new assignment to map the Philippines, while based at the islands' Clark Field. In January 1948, five F-15s under the command of Capt Stanley Alukonis took off on a mapping mission and the results were highly praised by

the commanding general of the Thirteenth Air Force. Toward the end of their deployment, the Reporters had increased their coverage to a total of 18,000 miles (28,968km). Lt Anthony Linkiewicz remembers a particular mission: “Our detachment was assigned to take pictures and one of these was to film the entire Bataan Death March route. The Death March war photos were supposed to be used





**LEFT** The 8th PRS spent most of its time at Clark AB throughout 1948. Finally, on March 25, 1949, use of the F-15 (RF-61C) was terminated and the unit's aircraft were transferred to Yokota AB, Japan.

TONY LINKIEWICZ

by the war crimes prosecutors in Tokyo to prove that water was available for the prisoners along the route. We never heard the results of our work, but hopefully we were able to contribute."

Top priority during the early months of 1948 was given to the photo-mapping of Japan and Korea. Due to the adverse weather and maintenance problems, the project fell behind and pressure was being exerted by Fifth Air Force to

bring the five F-15s back from the Philippines to help finish the task. There was a delay in executing this, which allowed two of the Reporters time to fly down to Manado, on the northern tip of Celebes Island (aka Sulawesi). This vast area had never been mapped. However, it was a crucial phase of the overall mission and provided complete coverage of Borneo to the west and Ceram to the east. The Celebes were, at the time, overseen by the Netherlands. Lt Charles C Russell recalls: "The Dutch supplied support for our detachment, by providing meals and a place to sleep, in exchange for some of the maps. There were 12 of us – four pilots and eight mechanics, which included communication experts. The pilots switched around on the missions: one day flying front seat and, on the other, navigating and operating cameras. We flew off a strip that looked like it had been paved at one time. It was extremely rough, but we completed our assigned job without a single mishap."

In May 1948, a detachment of five F-15s and crews was pulled from Johnson AB and sent to Itazuke in Japan. The aircraft were to photo-map the coastline beaches in that immediate area from an altitude of around 20,000ft. This project was given top priority, with no distractions, and it was completed in three days.

### Close to calamity

The only near tragedy for the 8th occurred on July 2, 1948. Aircraft '303' took off for a practice formation run, in readiness for a big July 4 airshow over Tokyo. Immediately after take-off, at a dangerously low altitude, the fire warning light for the right engine came on. The pilot feathered the engine but continued to lose height. His efforts to get back on the runway fell short as the F-15 crashed about 500ft (152m) short of safety. The crew managed to escape, but the aircraft was a total loss.

In August 1948, the F-15 was re-designated RF-61C and, on

**BELOW LEFT** Pilot Lt George Kroman poses beside his F-15 at Johnson AB, Japan, in 1947. At the time, the 8th PRS was in the process of photographing the coastlines of Japan and nearby islands.

GEORGE KROMAN





**ABOVE** Clark AB, Philippines, 1948. This crew is setting out on a photo-mapping mission in the southern part of the area. The B-17 in the background is from the 5th Photo Reconnaissance Squadron, also based at Clark. TONY LINKIEWICZ

**BELOW** Reporter 559323 gets ready to pull out of its revetment at Clark AB for a photo-mapping mission in 1948. TONY LINKIEWICZ

November 18, 1948, Capt George Kroman recalls a mission to photo-map South Korea: “The flight started at Itazuke, when I flew with 2d Lt Rolla Bishop, and our assignment was to take pictures of a certain area along the east coast, south of the 38th Parallel. We were flying at 20,000ft when we arrived in our area, which was the assigned altitude to start our film rolling. I believe the temperature outside of the cockpit was around 50° below zero. We were wearing sheepskin flying suits as the F-15 had no electric heated suit capabilities. I remember we were colder than

hell. When we completed our lines, Rolla said: ‘Let’s get down from here – I’m freezing my butt off!’ I said: ‘If you want to get down in a hurry, hang on and I’ll split S and get us down fast.’

“I remember cutting back on the power, pushing the nose down a little and starting a right-hand descending rollover. About three-quarters of the way through, I felt the aircraft shudder and it flipped completely over on its back. I could see the airspeed really falling off fast and the feeling we were falling upside down. The controls were completely limp – I could move

them in all directions with no results and it really scared the hell out of me. I could see the altimeter unwinding 19,000ft...18,000ft... 17,000ft... and I could see that the nose was slowly coming down until we were heading straight down with the airspeed building up like mad. I watched the airspeed go through the red line. This all happened incredibly fast. I don’t know what airspeed we hit, but I’ll bet it was well over 500mph.

“The guys in the 35th Fighter Group called the (F-15) ‘Whistling S\*\*\* Houses’ because of the noise the turbo-superchargers made.





assigned was completed. During the early part of September 1948, all Reporters in and around the Philippines were brought back to Johnson AB. The end of their operations came on March 25, 1949, when the 8th TRS was transferred to Yokota AB, Japan, minus their equipment and personnel. There it became the 82nd Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron.

**LEFT** This image was taken at Zamboanga, Philippines, in March 1948. The longest of the missions expended so much fuel that the aircraft tanks had to be full to the brim beforehand.  
TONY LINKIEWICZ

On April 1, the 82nd, which then consisted of the former 'Eight Ballers' personnel and their Reporters,

**BELOW LEFT** The sew-on patch worn by members of the 8th PRS. THOMPSON COLLECTION



was deactivated, placed on the inactive list and all aircraft were assigned to the 35th Maintenance Squadron at Johnson AB, being used for salvage, spares or other disposition. The crews

were sent to Yokota to work up on the new RF-80 aircraft. From the nine Reporters allotted to Air Material Command, a handful were operated temporarily by the Pennsylvania Air National Guard at Harrisburg, before they were also sent to the scrapyard. **FP**

While we were in this dive, they were really screaming like a German Stuka dive-bomber. In the dive, trying to pull out, I pulled on the elevator controls and they felt like they were anchored in concrete. They wouldn't budge. I remember looking at the ground rushing up at me and glancing at the airspeed indicator, scared stiff. I reached forward and gave the elevator trim tab a couple of quick pulls and it took effect immediately. We started one hell of a fast pull-out. I have no idea how close we came to the ground in the pull-out, although I am sure we were close

to going in. The flight back to Itazuke was uneventful and, when we landed, I got out and looked the F-15 over for any structural damages and it seemed okay. The film we had taken south of the 38 Parallel was [good] and we completed the mission we were assigned."

### **Mission accomplished**

The high-priority photo-mapping mission that the RF-61Cs had been

