

Chinese crewmen pose in front of one of the Soviet-made Tu-2 *Bat* bombers that survived the disastrous daylight attack on Taehwa-do on 30 November 1951.



Fight for the Northwestern Islands

September-December 1951

by Michael E. Krivdo

This article provides greater detail on the events of the fight for the guerrilla-held northwest islands. The 'Battle of Taehwa-do,' as some books refer to it, reflected the new interest that Far East Command (FEC) placed on keeping those islands under friendly control. It reveals how important those islands were for FEC elements that used them as a base for gaining early warning and intelligence on the enemy. As seen in other articles in this issue, possession of the northwest islands provided the FEC with safe areas where rescue assets like helicopters and boats could be employed to recover downed pilots or aircrew.¹ As a result of the fight for control of those islands, FEC reorganized its forces to better defend the islands in the future and island defense became an implied task for all guerrilla units.

On the night of 5 November 1951, Chinese Communists landed on the guerrilla-held islands of Ka-do and T'an-do, only forty miles southeast of the mouth of the Yalu River. Supported by nine Tu-2 *Bat* bombers and sixteen prop-driven La-11 *Fang* fighters backed by MiG-15 jets, the Communists quickly drove the guerrillas off the islands, forcing them to flee ten miles in fishing boats to their main

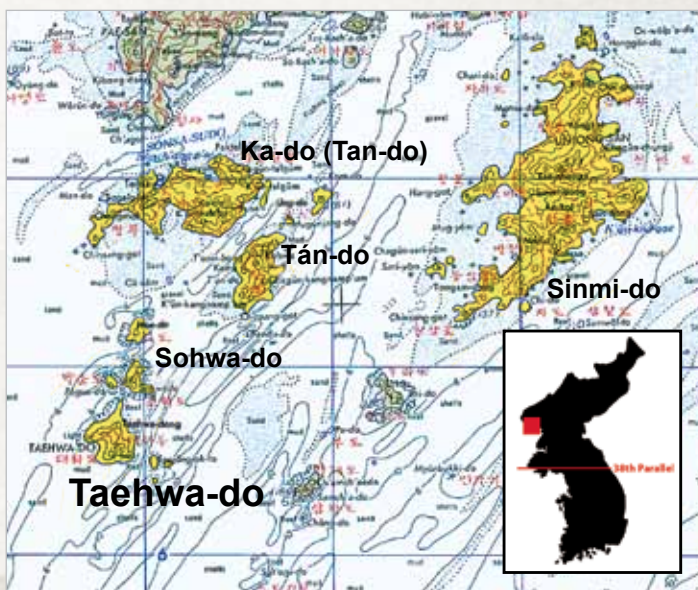
base on Taehwa-do. Little more than a week later, on 15 November, eleven enemy bombers hit friendly positions on Taehwa-do in a daylight attack to soften them up for an assault. The commander of Task Force (TF) TAEHWA-DO, British second lieutenant (2LT) Leo S. Adams-Acton (earlier on Operation SPITFIRE), quickly discerned the pattern and directed his guerrillas to improve their defensive positions. Adams-Acton also reported the developments to his commander at TF LEOPARD on Paengnyong Island, requesting naval gunfire and air support assets to help him defend against the impending attack. The British Destroyer HMS *Cossack* (D-57) proceeded to the island and Air Force planners prepared their own surprise for the Chinese.²

Beginning on 16 November, the Chinese Air Force bombed Taehwa nightly, methodically working over the guerrilla positions. When the *Cossack* arrived, it provided Adams-Acton with two British Royal Marine naval gunfire spotters and radios to efficiently call and adjust the ship's four 4.5-inch guns from Taehwa-do. Adams-Acton then planned and executed a raid on Ka-do on the night of 24-25 November to keep the Communists off-balance. The raiders, backed by accurate naval gunfire from the *Cossack*, swiftly landed and caught the Chinese by surprise. The guerrillas inflicted damage to the enemy and carried away several prisoners who confirmed the enemy's intent to seize Taehwa-do.³

While the guerrillas were raiding Ka-do, Chinese troops landed on nearby Sohwa-do (a small island northeast of Taehwa-do) and quickly pushed the men of Donkey 13 off the tiny island. The survivors withdrew to Taehwa-do, where Adams-Acton fitted them into his defensive scheme. Meanwhile, nightly Communist airstrikes by up to a dozen Chinese Tu-2s continued.⁴ Things were rapidly coming to a head in the northern islands.

The main Chinese assault on Taehwa Island began just before midnight on 29 November. Small folding wooden boats transited between the islands and disgorged Chinese assault troops in the initial waves, followed closely by a *sampan* fleet fitted with mortars and rockets. Once ashore, the disoriented but determined Communists fought their way inland as Adams-Acton's men called and adjusted naval gunfire into the massed formations. Fighting continued throughout the night and into the next day. Meanwhile, the Far East Air Force planned a trap of its own in what would become one of the largest air battles in the war.⁵

Original tactical map of the Taehwa-do area, about forty miles southeast of the mouth of the Yalu River that separates the People's Republic of China from North Korea. Note the locations of the surrounding island groups: Ka-do (Tan-do), T'an-do, Sohwa-do, and Sinmi-do.



When the attacking Chinese soldiers called for a daylight air strike against the guerrillas, a group of twelve Tu-2 bombers and sixteen La-11 fighters left their bases north of the Yalu River and sprinted toward Taehwa-do. But this time the Americans had anticipated that action and were waiting to pounce. As the bombers crossed into North Korean airspace and proceeded to their target, a prepositioned group of thirty-one American F-86 *Sabre* jets dropped out of the clouds behind them. Calling “Come down and get ‘em,” the mission commander, Air Force Colonel (COL) Benjamin S. Preston, Jr., led the attack on the unsuspecting Chinese aviators.⁶ “Everybody was going wild,” one F-86 pilot reported. “The sky must have been chock-full of lead. Planes were smoking, there were splashes below, and radio fight-talk was intense. It was the damnedest violent action I ever saw – kill-or-be-killed destruction!”⁷ Eighteen Communist MiG-15s soon joined the fight but could not stop the slaughter. In the end the Air Force shot down eight Tu-2s, three La-11s, and one MiG-15, damaging and scattering the rest. The Chinese Air Force never again attempted a daylight bombing raid in Korea.⁸

On the ground, the Chinese fought hard for the island even as their negotiators returned to the table at Kaesong and settled on a line of demarcation that curiously avoided any mention of the northwest islands.⁹ Adams-Acton and his men put up a determined stand backed by occasional air support and responsive gunfire from two destroyers, the *Cossack* and the HMS *Cockade* (D-34). His two British naval gunfire spotters moved along the lines, accurately adjusting deadly fires onto the massed enemy. Yet despite their losses, the Chinese steadily pushed the guerrillas into a pocket on the south end of the island.¹⁰

Finally, just after 0200 hours on 1 December, the island fell. Guerrillas fled the island by boats, rafts, and even walked the reefs south as far as they could go to avoid the Chinese. In the final stages of the fight Adams-Acton, two British naval gunfire spotters, and American Sergeant First Class Charles B. Brock, Jr., were trapped in a bunker and could not evacuate. They were captured and sent to a North Korean POW camp. 2LT Adams-Acton was later executed by North Korean guards while escaping a month before the other three were repatriated during Operation BIG SWITCH (August 1953).¹¹

The guerrillas had valiantly fought for the islands. FEC ordered them to be retaken. Within a month the guerrillas had captured Taehwa-do and its outlying islands. This time the guerrillas held it for a year before evacuating it as part of the Armistice deal. But the temporary loss of Taehwa-do and the northwestern islands led to another effort to reorganize Army guerrilla operations. ♣

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Endnotes

- 1 See the article: Michael E. Krivdo, “E&E: West Coast Aircraft Recovery and the Guerrilla-Held Islands,” xx, in this issue of *Veritas*; Kenneth P. Werrell, *Sabres over MiG Alley: The F-86 and the Battle for Air Superiority in Korea* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 104-106.
- 2 Frederick W. Cleaver, George Fitzpatrick, John Ponturo, et al., “UN Partisan Warfare in Korea, 1951-1954,” AFPE Group Technical Memorandum ORO-T-64, Johns Hopkins University, Operations Research Office, June 1956 (hereafter ORO Study), 34, 155; Ed[ward C.] Evanhoe, *Darkmoon: Eighth Army Special Operations in the Korean War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 130-31; ChineseDefence.Com, “Bloody Ride to Taehwa-do Island - the PLAAF’s Costly Defeat over Korea,” 3 August 2011, on Internet at: <http://www.chinesedefence.com/forums/chinese-air-force/629-bloody-ride-taehwa-do-island-plaafs-costly-defeat-over-korea.html>, last accessed on 6 February 2013; Werrell, *Sabres over MiG Alley*, 107. **Ed Evanhoe’s version misidentifies some of the islands and has the timing of the attacks wrong. The dates used in this article are based on the actual combat reports from the engagement and not on the filing of the report. In addition, because the northwest islands were less than ten minutes flying time from the Chinese airbases at Antung, the bombing of Taehwa-do was the first reported employment of Soviet-made Tu-2 bombers during the war;** (James A. Field, Jr., *History of United States Naval Operations: Korea* [Washington, DC: GPO, 1962], 423).
- 3 Werrell, *Sabres over MiG Alley*, 107; U.S. Navy Historical Division, “Korean War: Chronology of U.S. Pacific Fleet Operations, July–December 1951,” entry for 24-25 November 1951, available on the Internet at: <http://www.history.navy.mil/wars/korea/chron51b.htm#sept>, last accessed 10 December 2012; Paul M. Edwards, *Korean War Almanac* (New York: InfoBase Publishing, 2006), 254; Evanhoe, *Darkmoon*, 130.
- 4 U.S. Navy, “Korean War: Chronology of U.S. Pacific Fleet Operations, July–December 1951,” entry for 6 November 1951; Goldhamer, *1951 Korean Armistice Conference*, 141-42.
- 5 Werrell, *Sabres over MiG Alley*, 107-108; Pacific Air Force, “This Week in USAF and PACAF History 26 November – 2 December 2012,” on the Internet at: www.pacaf.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-121126-042.pdf, last accessed on 6 February 2013, 2.
- 6 Werrell, *Sabres over MiG Alley*, 108-109, quote from 108.
- 7 Werrell, *Sabres over MiG Alley*, 108-109, quotes from text.
- 8 Werrell, *Sabres over MiG Alley*, 108-109, quotes from text; Pacific Air Force, “This Week in USAF and PACAF History 26 November – 2 December 2012,” 2; 51; Edwards, *Korean War Almanac*, 260-61. **Two USAF F-86 fighter pilots (MAJ George A. Davis, Jr. and MAJ Winton W. ‘Bones’ Marshall) became ‘aces’ as a result of their victories in the fight over Taehwa-do. MAJ Davis earned the honor of becoming the first American pilot to become an ace in two wars (WWII and Korea).**
- 9 Walter G. Hermes, *Truce Tent and Fighting Front, United States Army in the Korean War* ([1965], reprinted; Washington, DC: GPO, Center of Military History, 1973), 179-81. **In what became a familiar pattern, the Chinese and North Korean forces utilized the breaks in Armistice negotiations to strengthen their positions. In this instance, the Communists actively sought to break off talks to seize the guerrilla-held islands on their weak flank.**
- 10 U.S. Navy, “Korean War: Chronology of U.S. Pacific Fleet Operations, July–December 1951,” entry for 29 November and 1 December 1951; Edwards, *Korean War Almanac*, 260-61; Evanhoe, *Darkmoon*, 131-33.
- 11 U.S. Navy, “Korean War: Chronology of U.S. Pacific Fleet Operations, July–December 1951,” entry for 29 November and 1 December 1951; Edwards, *Korean War Almanac*, 260-61; N.a., “Big Switch is Open,” *Life*, 17 August 1953, 22-23; Evanhoe, *Darkmoon*, 131-33; “Korean Repatriated POWs,” on Internet at: http://oktibbeha.msghn.org/Korea/Korean_Repatriated_POWS3.html, last accessed on 12 December 2012. **British 1LT Adams-Acton was executed by North Korean guards at the Camp Two POW compound on 16 July 1953. Adams-Acton and another guerrilla command officer, 1LT Albert W. Naylor-Foote, captured on the East Coast in February 1952, had planned an escape in the early morning before muster. Naylor-Foote hit a guard on the head with a rock, but failed to knock him unconscious. The guard recovered and alerted other guards who chased Adams-Acton and deliberately shot him, killing him instantly. Naylor-Foote managed to hide while the guards were focused on Adams-Acton. Naylor-Foote avoided any punishment for his role in the escape attempt and was repatriated a month later during Operation BIG SWITCH. On 13 April 1954, the British War Office commended 1LT Adams-Acton for his “gallant and distinguished services” as a POW. See; “List of Royal Northumberland Fusiliers Killed in Korea,” on internet at: http://www.fusiliers-association.co.uk/Northumberland/RNF_Killed_in_Korea.htm, last accessed on 2 January 2013; *London Gazette*, 13 April 1954, 2207, quote from text; Harry E. Ettinger, interview by Jared M. Tracy, 17 November 2011, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Defense Prisoner of War-Missing Personnel Office (DPMO), Korean War Aircraft Loss Database (KORWALD), Loss Incident Summary 520202, available on the Internet at: <http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/korea/reports/air/>, last accessed on 8 February 2013; S[imon]. P. MacKenzie, *British Prisoners of the Korean War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 119-20.**