

A star is born

Developed to be a Cold War warrior, the B-1B is ably performing a critical mission today as a conventional, not nuclear, bomber

By Erik Simonsen

With a thundering roar, the B-1B Lancer displaying the “Star of Abilene” nose art performed a low-level, high-speed pass over Dyess Air Force Base, Texas. That flyover, on June 29, 1985, marked the arrival of the first Rockwell B-1B bomber for the 96th Bomb Wing at Dyess. It came 30 years to the day after the first subsonic Boeing B-52 Stratofortress began its career with the Strategic Air Command.

With the arrival of the B-1B, a new supersonic, intercontinental-range bomber had joined the ranks of the U.S. strategic bomber force.

The B-1B Lancer evolved out of the B-1A program, which was canceled by the Carter administration in 1977 before going into production. During the ensuing years, extensive flight testing of the four B-1A prototypes continued and Boeing predecessor company Rockwell, hoping for a reversal of the production decision, kept engineers in place to refine the B-1’s capabilities.

The program was indeed reborn, after President Ronald Reagan took office in January 1981. During a national address

later that year, Reagan talked about the Cold War and a “window of vulnerability” in U.S. defenses. To help fill that gap, the president ordered the production of 100 B-1B bombers. Rockwell was awarded a \$20.5 billion contract in January 1982 to begin production of the bomber, now designated the B-1B.

“Every B-1B Team member took President Reagan’s statement seriously, and they all felt that they were fighting in the front-line trenches of the Cold War,” Sam Iacobellis, retired executive vice president and deputy chairman of Rockwell, and the B-1B program manager at the time, said recently. Later in the program, as the learning curve improved, four and sometimes five aircraft were built per month at the Rockwell plant in Palmdale, Calif. Only six years after the production contract had been signed, the 100th B-1B was rolled out.

With the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, the B-1B’s capabilities as a conventional bomber rose to the fore. It was decertified for nuclear missions and today carries an array of precision conventional munitions. It

is playing an important role in Afghanistan.

Maj. Scott Higginbotham, B-1B operational test director at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., has had recent B-1B combat experience in Afghanistan. “The standard mission duration was nine to 16 hours and involved three or more air-to-air refuelings—this allowed up to seven hours over-country to provide on-call close air support for coalition ground forces,” Higginbotham said.

A typical B-1B payload is 24 2,000-pound (900-kilogram) Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAM); each weapon can be uploaded with individual GPS-based target coordinates. On a sortie during Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan in early March 2002, Higginbotham told a ground controller that his B-1B had 24 JDAMs aboard and the controller called off four F-16s and assigned all the targets to the B-1B.

The smaller 500-pound (225-kilogram) JDAM has been certified on the B-1B with a primary goal to limit collateral damage. And nonlethal “show of force” missions now are common to avoid injuring civilians, according to Higginbotham. These involve a “tactical surprise” low-altitude, high-speed pass by the B-1B with engines in full afterburner while dropping flares and then going supersonic only 2,000 feet (600 meters) above the designated area. “It gets their attention,” Higginbotham said.

A compact tactical laser using the latest

in solid state technology is being developed to fit in the B-1’s weapons bay. As envisioned, the aircraft’s offensive systems officer would pinpoint targets and operate a rotating laser turret mounted on the underside of the aircraft. A prototype system could be ready for testing by 2014.

By then, it will have been nearly three decades since the “Star of Abilene” roared over Dyess Air Force Base on a hot Texas day and reported for duty with the Strategic Air Command.

The world has changed greatly since then—but so has the B-1B. And it continues to evolve. As a result, the bomber affectionately known as the “Bone” (B-One) to its crews should remain a viable platform, defending freedom around the globe, for many years to come. ■

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PHOTOS: The B-1B has been in operation with the U.S. Air Force since 1986. U.S. AIR FORCE

(Insets, from left) The “Star of Abilene” B-1B nose art. U.S. AIR FORCE In Afghanistan, the B-1B has performed nonlethal low-altitude, high-speed passes over enemy forces with engines in full afterburner. ERIK SIMONSEN/BOEING At the June 29, 1985, B-1B arrival ceremony, Don Beall (left), Rockwell president and CEO, and Sam Iacobellis, B-1B program manager, greet General Bennie Davis, commander of Strategic Air Command. BOEING ARCHIVES



Boeing B-1B Lancer: Long-range strategic/tactical bomber

Crew: Four—aircraft commander, pilot, offensive systems officer, defensive systems officer
Length: 146 feet (44.5 meters)
Wingspan: 137 feet (42 meters) forward position, wings swept 15 degrees; 79 feet

(24 meters) aft position, wings swept 68 degrees
Height: 34 feet (10.4 meters)
Speed: Mach 1.2 (more than 900 mph, or 1,480 kph)

Powerplant: Four GE F-101-GE-102 turbofans, with 30,750 pounds (137 kilonewtons) thrust each with afterburner