The first 'round the world, non-stop flight, was truly an epic accomplishment, demonstrating the global capabilities of the United States Air Force. We look back to this record setting event in the following article by Harold Bourgeois of Largo, Florida, who also authored Jet Ambassadors in our Summer 1989 issue. We hope you will enjoy retracing the flight of the 'LUCKY LADY II.'

Lucky Lady's Flight (Top Secret)

By
Harold J. Bourgeois
Major, USAFR (Ret)

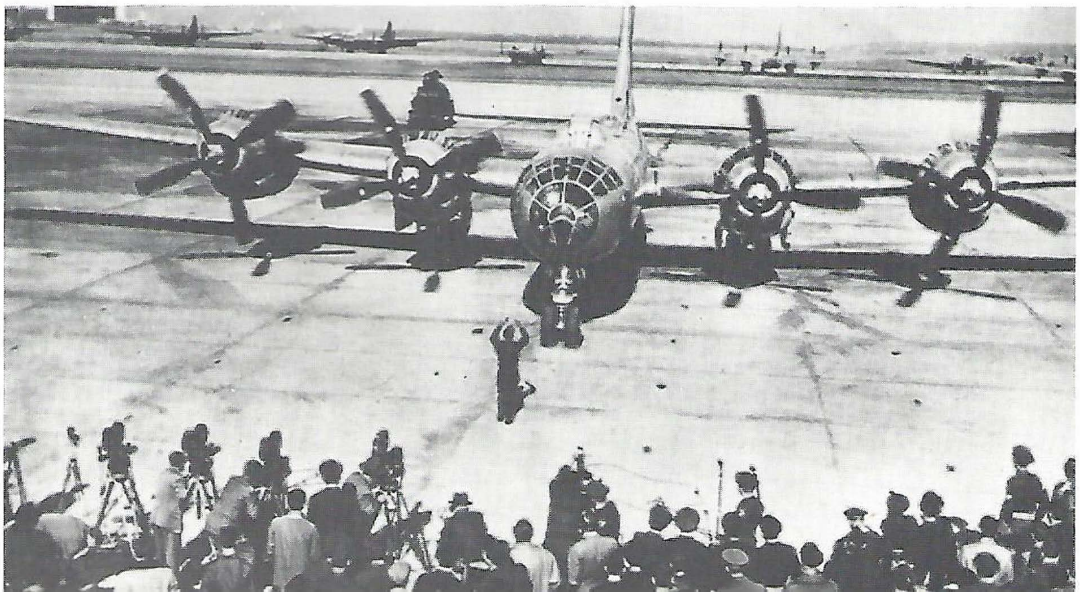
The big newspapers and national magazines raised hell in print because they had not been told in advance "...of the most spectacular flying achievement in the short history of aviation." The flight that caused one Strategic Air Command historian to exult: "The thing was done. The thing that had never been done before. The thing that the odds insisted could not be done!" For the record, the so-called impossible flight was completed when an oil-streaked Lucky Lady II touched down trailing smoke at Carswell AFB, Texas, at 0931 hours on March 2, 1949.

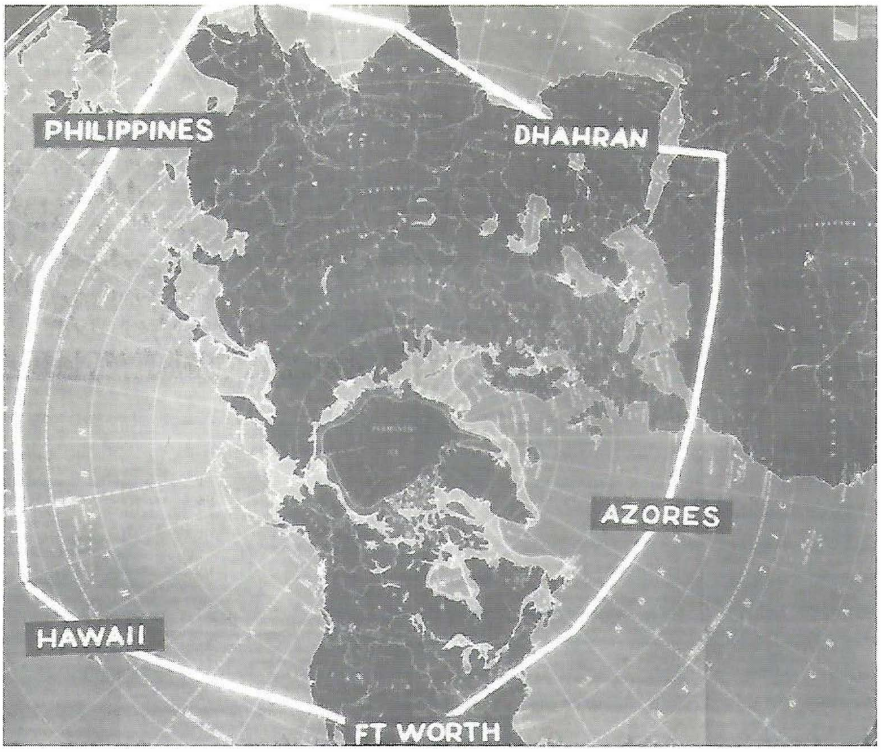
And yet, for all this hyperbole the flight of this B-50A, now, forty years later, seems almost a non-event. Voice a comment today about the Lucky Lady II, even in an animated discussion among supposedly knowledgeable air enthusiasts, then watch for the MEGO (Mine Eyes Glaze Over) syndrome to set in. Strangely, her non-stop, globe-girdling flight does not live in history like other aeronautical feats.

Perhaps her timing is partly to blame. World War II was too recently ended, and military heroics were old hat to readers of that era who were busy trying to restore normalcy to the globe just conquered by the Lady.

In sharp contrast to the Air Force historian's exuberance, Life magazine's editorial writer was piqued at having to learn of the first non-stop, around the

The 'Lucky Lady II' comes to a halt on the ramp before a crowd of well-wishers at Carswell AFB, Texas, after completing its 94 hour round-the-world flight on 2 March, 1949. (AP Wirephoto)





The route flown by 'Lucky Lady II' on its 94 hour, non-stop, round-the-world flight. The aircraft was refueled in-flight by KB-29 tankers over the Azores, Dhahran, the Philippines and Hawaii. (USAF)

world flight like everyone else--after it was over. 'The press was not universally pleased,' he wrote, 'especially at the secrecy that shrouded the flight.' Other editorialists adopted more of less the same attitude to temper their praise of the Air Force for sending up one of its B-50 bombers to fly more than 23,000 miles around the world without landing for refueling.

Second Pilot 1Lt Arthur M. Neal, of Vasalia, California, was responsible for naming the Lucky Lady II. He commanded the first Lucky Lady on a more leisurely 15-day around the world trip in 1948.

If one is inclined to think along those lines, he might say that Lieutenant Neal displayed psychic powers in selecting the names of his two aircraft, because 'luck' came into play almost from the outset. Out of the five B-50s primed for the mission, the Global Queen was chosen to make the initial attempt. If the Queen had to abort within an hour after take-off, the Lady was poised on the end of the runway with idling engines, ready to seek her historic niche. The Queen, wanting to live up to her name, continued majestically on her way. The hour up, the Lucky Lady II taxied back to the ramp--maybe not so lucky after all.

But she got to make her bid for fame the next morning, because late in the night the Queen's subjects (her engines) failed her, and forced her majesty to land in the Azores. On-lookers watching the 'lady in waiting' struggling to get her own 57 tons and 23 tons of fuel airborne were unaware they were watching history in the making. Their brief

'Lucky Lady II' takes off on its non-stop, globe-circling flight from Carswell AFB, Texas at 11:21 am, 26 February, 1949. (USAF)

glimpse at history ended when the Lucky Lady II disappeared into a 2,500 foot over-cast.

Although the fledgling Air Force's Strategic Air Command had invited sixty newsmen to assure that the historic flight received world-wide coverage, Lucky Lady's fourteen crewmen had not taken her up 94 hours earlier on a mere publicity stunt. Other headlines shared by Lucky Lady II in newspapers and magazines around the world spelled out the unspoken significance of her "first time" mission. Captain James G. Gallaher and his fellow crewmen carried a message. No -- several messages!

Two of the Lucky Lady's mid-air refueling points--Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, and Clark AFB, Philippines - clearly indicated to Russia that U.S. nuclear-carrying bombers could hit both European and Asiatic USSR from bases far removed from retaliatory strikes. Just in case the Soviets needed official clarification, SAC's General Curtis LeMay succinctly and bluntly stated, "This means that we can now deliver an atomic bomb to any place in the world that requires an atomic bomb."

LeMay's popularly quoted declaration was intended as much for the American Congress as for the Russians and our European allies. While there are no on-the-record reactions of the Russians, it did put a burr under at least one American politician's saddle blanket. Senator Millard E. Tydings, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, introduced a bill the following day to expand the Air Force to 70 air groups, a dramatic increase from the 48 air groups then planned in President Harry Truman's 1950 budget. With the outbreak of the Korean War only slightly more than a year in the future, The New York Times on March 3, 1949, reported that the flight of Lucky Lady II greatly bolstered the Air Force's chances of getting congressional approval for more money and more planes.

Another message from the Lucky Lady was directed toward the Air Force's sister service--the Navy. In effect, it undermined the Navy's plans for a similar flight using carriers instead of aerial tankers. Both services had been jockeying for more funds from the tight-fisted Congress to advance inter-continental bombing capacity. Lucky Lady's flight abruptly and decisively ended that interservice rivalry. There is no record of a similar attempt by the Navy.

In the span of just 94 Hours, the Lady thus decisively proved to naval aviation skeptics the capabilities of long-range bombers and effectiveness of strategic bombing.

SAC's commander pointed to the Global Queen's fate to silence press criticism of the Lucky Lady's secretiveness. LeMay stated simply that

W. Stuart Symington, Secretary of the Air Force and General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Chief of Staff, welcome home the crew of "Lucky Lady II" on 2 March, 1949 at Carswell AFB, Texas. (USAF)

a series of announcements and failures concerning the flight would have been embarrassing. In fact, he added, security for the mission had figured in SAC's plans as being a goal of equal value to the actual flight itself.

Still six months away from celebrating its second birthday, the USAF did not want egg on its face, and likewise did not want to lose out to the Navy's air arm in their competition for congressional funds. Failure of such an ambitious attempt as Lucky Lady's flight would have been sensationally splattered over the front pages of the press.

SAC's caution was well justified. Brigadier General J.B. Montgomery, Strategic Air Command Director of Operations, replied there was about a twenty-five percent chance of success when the Secretary of the Air Force asked him how SAC rated its attempt to complete a non-stop, around-the-world flight with a single plane. In fact, SAC's original blueprint had called for six B-50s to depart individually at 24-hour intervals. General Montogmery's optimism was not based upon SAC's aerial refueling experience. According to SAC Historians, as late as December 20, 1948, the 509th Bomb Group had made only a dozen refueling contacts, and the 43rd Bomb Group but one. Lucky Lady II was assigned to the 43rd Group.

The idea for the Lady's flight didn't just pop into a few skulls sheltered beneath brass hats. Rather, it filtered in after a B-50 made a 42-hour flight from Carswell AFB, Texas, to drop, undetected, a full-size simulated nuclear weapon into Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1948--a very symbolic act on a very symbolic date. The Air Force compounded the Navy's embarrassment when one of its B-36s sneaked in the same morning to simulate another nuclear bomb drop onto Japan's target of exactly seven years earlier.

Both the B-36 and the B-50 had made the flight from Carswell non-stop. But the B-50 had been refueled in flight on both legs of the round robin mission. Feeling it was on a roll, the Air Force ordered the B-50 to refuel for the third time upon its arrival over Carswell and proceed onto Montgomery, Alabama.

The infant USAF was vigorously crusading against the Navy's equally vigorous challenge to its long-range bombers and the idea of strategic bombing. And leading the crusade was the newly appointed SAC commander, General LeMay. Somebody on his staff must have been an expert in psychological warfare, because the B-50s ATA over Maxwell AFB exactly coincided with the general's address to an Air University audience in which he was forcefully staking out the Air Force's position on strategic bombing. Of course, it just happened that the speech was generously covered by the press.

The SAC commander was no slouch in the PR arena. Captain David B. Parmalee, Lucky Lady's flight engineer, told the

General Hoyt S. Vandenberg and General Curtis E. LeMay welcome Captain Gallagher, the aircraft commander of "Lucky Lady II," at Carswell AFB after his return from the history-making flight. (USAF)

writer that LeMay, knowing his remarks would be read in Moscow, concluded his speech with: "We can take off from Fort Worth, bomb Pearl Harbor, and return to Montgomery, Alabama, through mid-air refueling. That aircraft you hear circling overhead just did." (Parmalee was involved in planning the Pearl Harbor-Montgomery venture and the Lady's flight.)

SAC's security problem was two-pronged. First, the planners had to cope with terrific logistics problems of deploying and staging twenty KB-29 tanker aircraft at four points around the world. Intensive practice of refueling hook-up flights had to be conducted with five modified B-50s scheduled to make the flight. Also, SAC's Global Weather Service at Offutt AFB, Nebraska, had to be brought into the mission planning. Although the flight was intended to simulate normal combat conditions as nearly as possible, some slight modifications had to be made in the B-50s. None were required for the KB-29 tankers, but even with "low time" engines and no leaks on a four-day flight, the B-50s could be be expected to run out of oil somewhere between Hawaii and the California coast. Although each of the B-50's four engines had its own 70-gallon oil tank, a spare oil supply with a transfer system to selectively replenish any of the four main oil tanks was required. In spite of the large number of personnel involved in all of these preparations, no one, other than those with a special clearance, was aware of exactly what was being planned. Apparently, the immediate post-World War II airmen were extremely close-mouthed even with their wives, for the Air Force claims that not a single one of them was in on the "secret."

Such security measures were more or less standard operating procedure after the big war, so no really new innovations were required. But the Air Force almost had to peek into The CIA manual on covert operations to maintain a cloak of secrecy around Lucky Lady's true intentions once she embarked on her mission. In order to hide the fact that the flight was continuous, each of the five legs of the flight was logged separately. As Lucky Lady continued to the next refueling point, from the Azores Islands to Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, for instance, she filed her flight plan by using the number of one of the tankers which had just refueled her. In the event an alert operator on the ground might wonder about the same voice coming from supposedly

The crew of "Lucky Lady II" at Davis Monthan AFB, Arizona, prior to their history-making flight. Kneeling (L-R): 1Lt A.M. Neil, pilot; Capt G.E. Hacker, navigator; 1LT E.L. Rigor, navigator; Capt D.B. Parmelee, flight engineer; 1LT W.F. Caffrey, radar operator; 1Lt R.B. Bonner, radar operator; Capt James G. Gallagher, aircraft commander; and Capt J.H. Morris, co-pilot. Standing: SSgt M.G. Davis, gunner; SSgt R.G. Davis, flight engineer; TSgt V.L. Youny, flight engineer; SSgt D.G. Traugh, gunner; SSgt R.R. McLeRoy, radio operator; TSgt B.E. Cantrell, radio operator.(USAF)

different aircraft, a second radio operator would transmit while using the new number.

Lucky Lady did encounter an alert flight operations officer who nearly exposed the whole charade. He tried to force what he thought was a KB-29 tanker to return to Clark AFB, Philippines, Lady's third refueling point, when he realized the plane had insufficient fuel capacity to proceed to Honolulu as filed in its flight plan. This plane's number, of course, was the one Lucky Lady had assumed so as to continue its mission. Someone aboard one of the five tankers with more rank than the air operations officer finally persuaded the operator to forget the matter.

This writer doesn't recall when Ian Fleming's James Bond made his appearance on the literary scene, but the famous fictitious spy master would have applauded the Air Force's contorted efforts to keep the Lucky Lady's mission secret. What explanations (fabrications) are foisted off on other countries for permission to fly warplanes over their country in peacetime, and to base tankers on their airfields at strategically located points for a mission they must know nothing about? Of course, in the late 40s, the USA still carried the big stick on the international scene. What Uncle Sam wanted, Uncle Sam got. (Ah-h --those were the "good ole days," indeed.)

No exceptional problems were encountered at the first refueling point over the Azores, or the fourth over John Rodgers AFB in the Hawaiian Islands. But over Dhahran, Lucky Lady established another historic "first" on her flight. As Captain Gallagher wrote: "We ran into bad weather on our second refueling over Dhahran. Got the first tanker OK. However, the second refueling was hairy. Willie Sontag from Roswell really did a good job. Ran into a squall line with lots of turbulence, thunderstorms, etc. Believe that was a first. Refueling on instruments." 1Lt Roland B. Bonner, the radar officer who logged the flight, also singled out Lieutenant Sontag for his skillful performance over Dhahran. "Well, we made it again. We are full. Sontag (refueling pilot) flew a perfect job or we might still be there."

Trouble of another sort was

The Form 1 of B-50A serial number 46-010, "Lucky Lady II," covering the record-breaking flight. (Bourgeois)

FIRST NON-STOP AROUND-THE-WORLD FLIGHT

AIRCRAFT FLIGHT REPORT—OPERATIONS

WD AAF FORM No. 1 (REV. 1 OCT 45)

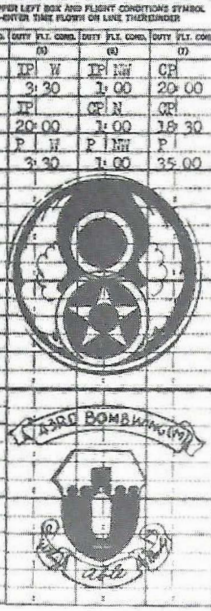
DATE	AIR FORCE OR COMMAND	BASE UNIT OR GROUP No. AND TYPE	SQUADRON No. AND TYPE	STATION
26 Feb thru 2 Mar 49	8th AF	43rd Bomb Gp (M)	63rd Bomb Sq (L)	DLAFB

ENGINEER OR MECHANIC IN CHARGE—NAME AND GRADE	AIRCRAFT TYPE, MODEL, SERIES	AIRCRAFT SERIAL No.
MSG-1 Atherton	B-50A	46-010

PRINT PLAINLY NAME (Last, First, Middle Initial), GRADE, AIN (Organization and Station if Transient)	USE AS DIRECTED LOCALLY	ENTER DUTY SYMBOL IN UPPER LEFT BOX AND FLIGHT CONDITIONS SYMBOL IN UPPER RIGHT BOX—ENTER TIME FLOWN ON LINE THEREUNDER: DUTY	DUTY FLT. COND.	DUTY	DUTY FLT. COND.	DUTY	DUTY FLT. COND.	FLIGHT DATA	TIME
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)		(8)	(9)
Gallagher, James G. Capt AO-49174	63/43	IP / 32:45	IP / N 37:00	IP / W 3:30	IP / NW 1:00	CP 20:00		TO Azores, Is. Lagens Fld.	09 00Z
Neal, Arthur M. 1st Lt. AO-748221	63/43	P / 17:45	P / N 37:00	IP / 20:00	CP / N 1:00	CP 18:30		FROM Ft. Worth, Tex. Carswell AFB	17 20Z
Morris, James H. Capt. AO-53056	63/43	CP / 17:45	CP / N 37:00	P / W 3:30	P / NW 1:00	P 35:00		MISSION T-18 / NO. OF LANDINGS 0	15 40
Hacker, Glenn E. Capt. AO-790077	63/43	N / 56:15	N / N 38:00					TO Saudi, Arabia Dhahran Fld	04 22Z
Riger, Earl L. 1st Lt. AO-2071830	63/43	N / 56:15	N / N 38:00					FROM Azores Is. Lagens Fld.	09 00Z
Bonner, Roland B. 1st Lt. AO-47946	63/43	VO / 56:15	VO / N 38:00					MISSION T-18 / NO. OF LANDINGS 0	19 22
Caffrey, William F. 1st Lt. AO-1054932	63/43	VO / 56:15	VO / N 38:00					TO Philippine Is. Clark Fld.	01 29Z
Parmelee, David D. Capt. AO-45072	HQ/SAC	E / 56:15	E / N 38:00					FROM Saudi, Arabia Dhahran Fld.	04 22Z
Davis, Robert G. SSG-3 AF-36465996	63/43	E / 56:15	E / N 38:00					MISSION T-18 / NO. OF LANDINGS 0	21 07
Young, Virgil L. TSG-2 AF-33602613	63/43	E / 56:15	E / N 38:00					TO Hawaiian Is. John Rodgers Fld.	10 10Z
Cantrell, Burgess G. TSG-2 AF-6948240	63/43	RO / 56:15	RO / N 38:00					FROM Philippine Is. Clark Fld.	01 29Z
McElroy, Robert R. SSG-3 AF-16116	63/43	RO / 56:15	RO / N 38:00					MISSION T-18 / NO. OF LANDINGS 0	22 41
Davis, Melvin G. TSG-2 AF-[illegible]	63/43	G / 56:15	G / N 38:00					TO Ft. Worth, Tex. Carswell AFB	15 35Z
Traugh, Donald G. SSG-3 AF-33464281	63/43	G / 56:15	G / N 38:00					FROM Hawaiian Is. John Rodgers Fld.	00 10Z
								MISSION T-18 / NO. OF LANDINGS 1	15 25
								SUB-TOTAL FORWARDED / NO. OF LANDINGS 7	94 15

Certified True Copy
James C. Selee Jr.
Commanding Officer
43rd Bomb Wing (M)

ENTER TOTAL FLIGHT TIME ON REVERSE SIDE



A Boeing B-50A being refueled in flight by a KB-29 during a training mission over Arizona prior to "Lucky Lady II's" celebrated flight. Althogh the B-50 shown is from the same unit as the "Lady," it is not "Lucky Lady II" as has often been reported. Note tail number of this aircraft is 6043 - the "Lady" was 6010. (USAF)

encountered during the third refueling over the Philippines. Fuel from the first tanker was transferred without incident, but the second tanker, which later crashed into a mountain while returning to Clark Field through an undercast, veered off course before the hose had been disconnected in Lucky Lady. The pilot of the tanker apparently thought all fuel had been transferred.

Captain Parmalee, one of three flight engineers on Lucky Lady, described how the problem was solved: "The chain that broke drove the reel and was powered by an hydraulic motor. We were carrying a couple of extra chains, but when we opened the packages to use one, we found that they were about six inches too long. We were also carrying a whole new winch. In as much as we were still proceeding on course to Hawaii, a quick decision had to be made as to whether we should change winches or spend time cutting and fitting a new chain. We chose to change winches. The job was completed in time for the second tanker to completely fill us up and after a few sighs of relief, we proceeded merrily on our way. Our happiness was short-lived, however, for we soon got the news that the second tanker had crashed..."

In the cockpit, Captain Gallagher saw the situation from a slightly different viewpoint. He had additional problems. The following is how he amended Captain Parmalee's version. "The winch problem happened at dusk. In order to take advantage of oncoming darkness, I reversed course to take advantage of the waning daylight. (Note: refueling had never been done at night). After getting the second tanker we did a 180 degree turn and proceeded warily on course.

"It was not an hydraulic problem. Instead of breaking as it was supposed to do when the tanker peeled off too soon, the 'weak link' in the cable held firm. Also, we proceeded warily, not merrily along, as Parmalee said. He was the engineer. I was the pilot," Captain Gallagher wrote. As noted earlier, it was a matter of different points of view. Captain Parmalee had solved his problem in the aircraft's tail, so all was "merry" in his eyes.

Much of the tension that had built-up during the flight's longest stretch over water eased somewhat when the tankers from John Rodgers Field, on Oahu, rendezvoused with Lucky Lady over Johnston Island to supply her with the fuel needed to return to Fort Worth, Texas. But the relief did not last for long, because the first tanker had difficulty getting the vital fuel to flow into Lucky Lady's nearly depleted tanks. With that problem corrected after a few minutes, the crew again relaxed and began counting down the few remaining hours before touching down on the same runway from which they had lifted off three days earlier.

Captain Gallagher and his crew really unwound when they made radar, and then visual, contact with the last of the tankers awaiting Lucky Lady over Tucson, Arizona, so as to escort her into Fort Worth. In his eagerness to complete the mission, Captain Gallagher had out-distanced the tankers. As a result, he

had to circle over El Paso, Texas, in order to complete the rendezvous.

The sixty photographers and reporters knew before being told specifically about their assignment that it was "big" when they saw Air Force Secretary W. Stuart Symington, Chief of Staff Hoyt S. Vandenburg, and General LeMay on the ramp waiting to greet Lucky Lady's crew. Each of the fourteen men who made the flight was later awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Force's Mackay Trophy of 1949.

The crew's DFC citation stated: "The successful execution of this historic flight demonstrated the feasibility of aerial refueling to extend the operating range of military aircraft and contributed other data of inestimable value to the future of military aviation." And the Mackay Trophy citation read in part: "These inflight refuelings resulted in a graphic demonstration that the range of the modern military aircraft is unlimited."

Many times during World War II, while flying off aircraft carriers, I would have welcomed the availability of aerial filling stations. And later, in the Korean War, I gratefully received into the left wing of my F-84 the flying boom, which evolved from the drogue system used in refueling Lucky Lady. Also, many a silent word of thanks went out to Lucky Lady's crew during hook-ups with a KB-29 tanker's boom in gratitude for the technique they introduced and proved feasible. Officially, the Air Force called her flight "a sort of graduation exercise for the air-to-air refueling technique." A view in which I heartily concur.

The Air Force wasted no time in despoiling any doubts that might remain in the minds of any would-be aggressor as to the practicability of mid-air refueling at subzero temperatures. SAC planners knew that the human and mechanical exposures necessary in mid-air refueling would suggest that such a task would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, at unusually low temperatures. Accordingly, on March 31, 1949, just four weeks after Lucky Lady completed her flight, 1Lt Patrick B. Lewis and his crew successfully completed a mid-air refueling in another B-50 over the icy shores of Greenland. This refueling was accomplished at a temperature ranging far below zero degrees centigrade. The feat didn't quite match Lucky Lady's headlines, but Russia understood the message, and that's what mattered.

After completing several goodwill flights to publicize the round-the-world feat, Lucky Lady was returned to her squadron to resume mundane duties for which she was built. She continued in normal squadron flight operations until

see "LADY"/page 35

The last "mission" of the "Lucky Lady II" was as a mobile display for the United States Air Force Orientation Group. She toured the country-side, spreading the Air Force story far and wide and encouraging young people to consider "Air Force Blue." (USAFOG)

"LADY" from page 11

one year after her brief time for glory, when she came to an inglorious end by bellying-in onto the western desert. According to Captain Gallagher, a flight engineer who was newly transferred from B-29s to B-50s, was responsible for her slithering along the desert knocking down large cacti. The fuel mixture control in the two aircraft worked in reverse to each other. The hapless engineer thought he was putting the mixture control into the "Full Rich" position, as he was accustomed to doing in the B-29, when he actually placed it in the "Cut Off" positions on a takeoff roll.

Captains Gallagher and Parmalee state that Lucky Lady was not destroyed by the crash or deliberately set afire to train Air Force fire fighters, as had been rumored. Both men, now retired, say Lucky Lady II is on display at Ed Maloney's "Planes of Fame" Museum in Chino, California--a suitably named retirement home for such a famous lady.☆