

PANTHERS AT WAR: KOREA, 1950–1953



During the first six months of the Korean War the majority of F9F flights were escort, road recco, and strafing, all of which involved use of the jet's 20mm guns. Later in the war, after the F9F-2B arrived, air-to-ground missions were added to the Panther's arsenal. For maximum-range missions, many squadrons found it best to remove the wing launch rails and carry only a full load of 20mm ammunition. This not only increased the aircraft's range and time over target, but enhanced the Panther's performance against enemy aircraft, should they be encountered. (Northrop Grumman History Center)



The USS Princeton (CV-37) made four deployments to Korea during the war. The Panthers shown here are from one of two F9F-5 squadrons, VF-153 and VF-154, which were serving with Carrier Air Group Fifteen. The deployment lasted from 24 January through 21 September 1953. (Northrop Grumman History Center)

When the Korean War broke out on 25 June 1950, the United States Navy had only one aircraft carrier in the region. Steaming in the Philippine Sea, USS *Valley Forge* (CV-45) with embarked Air Group Five (CVG-5) deployed with two Grumman F9F-3 Panther squadrons aboard—VF-51 and -52. Not only were the Panther's the first jet squadrons to respond to the Communist aggression, they represented the first Navy jets to enter combat. Initial engagements with North Korean pilots resulted in tremendous losses for the North, with many of its planes destroyed on the ground. Moreover, most of the aircraft flown by the North Korean Air Force (DPRKAF) during the early stages of the conflict were of World War II Soviet vintage, being piston-engined Yak-9s and Il-10 Sturmoviks. For the next three years, the Navy's jets, the Panther in particular, would provide the air-to-ground support for ground troops fighting against the North Korean and

Chinese armies, and on a few occasions would engage the high-performance Soviet-built MiG-15bis, which was being flown by both Chinese and Soviet pilots under the guise of the North Korean Air Force.

There is no question that the F9F played a significant role in the Navy's air campaign against North Korea. Throughout the conflict, 22 fighter squadrons and a single composite squadron, VC-61, would take the F9F into combat during 23 deployments. In total, seven variants of the Panther flew in the war—the F9F-2, F9F-2B, F9F-3, F9F-4, and F9F-5, plus two photoreconnaissance variants, the F9F-2P and F9F-5P.

U.S. Navy Carrier Deployments Based on Type^{lxvii}

Type	Deployments
F9F-2	18
F9F-2B	6
F9F-3	2
F9F-5	8
F9F-2P	11
F9F-5P	3

The F9F-3 flew with two squadrons, VF-51 and VF-52, which opened the war on the USS *Valley Forge*. The F9F-4 flew with Marine Corps units but did not



Panther jet fighters from the USS *Valley Forge* (CV-45) were first to respond to the outbreak of hostilities. VF-51 (shown here) and VF-52 both flew the F9F-3. Fighters from VF-52 scored the Navy's first kills of the Korean War, as well as the Navy's first jet kill, when two Yak-9 fighters were shot down on 3 July 1950. (Northrop Grumman History Center)



VF-91 deployed aboard USS *Philippine Sea* (CV-47) with Air Group Nine from late 1952 through mid 1953. Lt. (j.g.) Walter Spangenberg, who offered commentary for this book, served with VF-91 at that time. (Naval Aviation Museum)