

The beginning of the 55th Mission

-- by George Penfield

I graduated in Class 49A Pilot Training. (The second class in the Air Force.) I chose McGuire AFB, NJ, as the base I wanted. I had wanted to be a fighter pilot and I was headed to Willy (*Williams AFB, AZ*) after basic training. But because of a squadron of Turkish cadets that said they all had to go to fighters because they didn't have any multiengine aircraft in the Turk air force, the orders were changed to let a Turk go in my place.

The assignment I put in for and got when I graduated from Barksdale multi-engine school was to McGuire and a TAC unit that was flying B-26s and F-82s (Two F-51s put together as a twin-engine fighter.) However, when I got there, they were leaving and SAC had moved in with B-29s. This was February of 1949. I thought that I would go with TAC, but my orders were changed and I ended up in SAC as a co-pilot on B-29s.

This was the 91st Strat Recon Wing. Col Steed was the Wing Commander. I ended up in the 324th Strat Recon Squadron. Major Roger Howard was the CO and P. J. Hamm was the Operations Officer. The majority of the officers were (*mature*) first lieutenants. I might add that the Army Air Forces had stopped pilot training at the end of the war, and we were the first second lieutenant pilots they had seen in several years. About five of us had come to McGuire and we were a rare group.

The Air Force was pretty chaotic at this time because they hadn't been a separate service for very long. McGuire was an Army Air Field at Fort Dix and had been closed since the end of the war. It was all WWII buildings and was in really bad shape. The majority weren't painted outside or inside. My BOQ room was just that. A small unpainted room. It had one light bulb in the ceiling and a GI cot. Nothing else. When I went back to the BOQ Office and complained that there was no place to hang my clothes, the sergeant handed me some nails and said that I could pound them in the wall and hang my clothes there. While I was there I hung my clothes on the nails and lived out of a foot locker.

On the weekends and holidays the base was practically deserted. There was absolutely no (*available*) housing at McGuire and none nearby off-base. The Army had them all tied up. The only people on the base on the weekends were the single officers and enlisted men, and anyone that had duty such as airdrome officer. People were lucky to get housing in Trenton or Philadelphia.

My first flight in a B-29 was with George Doll's crew. I was the co-pilot. I had never been to B-29 school and knew nothing about a B-29. He briefed me just before takeoff on where the gear and flap switches were, and also where the switch to jettison the bomb bay tank. The mission was a long range one, 15+ hours, and we carried a 2250 gallon bomb bay tank in the rear bomb bay. Doll told me that we would be using the entire runway on takeoff and that

if we lost an engine, we would need to jettison the tank. He said that if he called to jettison the tank I was to push the switch and hold it because if the tank failed to go out or got hung up we'd crash.

My next flight was with 1Lt Robert Marshall. It was a standboard crew and he didn't have a co-pilot. Apparently he thought I was pretty good because I stayed on his crew until I got checked out as an A/C in RB-50s at Ramey AFB. I said that the AF was chaotic back then. Two flights and I'm a standboard co-pilot!

Our mission in the 324th at McGuire was to train electronic counter measure (ECM) observers and outfit the B-29 with ECM equipment. Apparently the AF had gone out and recalled, or found people with some ECM knowledge. A lot of them were kind of geeky. They didn't really wear their uniforms properly and had the college professor look about them. In the beginning, the ECM positions were the left and right scanners. They were also going out on the war surplus markets and buying back some of the gear they needed that had been dumped at the end of the war.

THIS WAS THE START OF (*WHAT WOULD BECOME*) THE 55TH.

A side note to the ECM observers. They could only be on flying status for three months at a time because they weren't rated at the time. The powers-to-be solved this by recalling a lot of pilots at the beginning of the Korean War and sending them through ECM school. They used their pilots rating to fly as EWOs. They still had to maintain their pilot proficiency.

My first Raven One was Harold Hackenberger. Eventually, they got the electronic warfare officer (EWO) a rating and let any of the pilots who wanted to, go back to primarily piloting. Hackenberger moved up and became my co-pilot in RB-50s and then in RB 47s. I think we were together for about 8 or 9 years.

I know that it was the 91st SRW, however, most of the personnel at McGuire went to Barksdale AFB, LA, and into the 55th. Most of the crews, maintenance personnel, etc., remained the same. Then we went to Ramey AFB, PI, with Howard as the CO and Hamm, the ops officer. When we finally ended up at Forbes AFB, KS, and Howard was still the CO and Hamm the ops officer.

So, if one looks at the outfit from the personnel standpoint, the 55th's mission started at McGuire in November of 1948. The only difference was that the name changed.

This is maybe, more than you wanted to know, but it's fun recalling the old times.

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(From an e-mail to Max Moore, 15 August 2011) History writ large from a true strat recon pioneer.