

'Keen' Reflections (Aug 2013)

(The following Memory Lane contribution is an edited compilation of e-mailed stories and recollections from [Richard \(Dick\) Keen](#), a career maintenance officer who served in the 55th SRW from 1964 to 1968 at Forbes and Offutt Air Force Bases.)

PART I

In my 26 years in the Air Force I never had a bad assignment, but my time in the 55th SRW provide some of my very fondest memories. First and foremost, as a direct result of being assigned to the 55th, I met my wonderful wife, Candy, niece of Sam Davis, a one-time EWO in the 55th at Forbes AFB, KS.

Some background on myself, so you can understand where I am coming from: I was a young maintenance officer in the 40th Bomb Wing at Forbes. When it shut down in 1964, I was transferred into the 55th. Most of my time was spent at overseas operational locations (OLs) – a 3-4 month tour at OL 1 in the UK; and several longer tours at OL 7 (Clark AB) in the Philippines. I was a bachelor at the time, so it was okay with me.

We first deployed as a detachment of the 55th to Clark in the summer of 1965. The project involved two RB-47s, tail numbers 295 and 296, and crews. It was called the "*Lightning Bug*" Project. As I recall the aircraft commanders were Major Bill Bowker and Capt "Mitch" Michaud. Others on the crews included Dan Curzon, Ham Kennedy, Lloyd Navarro, as memory serves.

We also forward-deployed a portion of the detachment to Bien Hoa in Vietnam to work with the 100th SRW folks at OL 20. About 30 of us went to Bien Hoa on that initial deployment and stayed for a couple of months.

After that we were able to convince the Wing to send us forward for shorter periods coinciding with specific mission tasks. We returned to Forbes in December of that year and then deployed at least two more times in 1966 and 1967.

Because of the unique system of Operating Locations at the time, and SAC's aversion to sending aircrews, aircraft and support personnel PCS, I was given opportunities as a unlike probably any young other maintenance officer. At OL 7 there were at most times, just four staff officers, including myself and the Det. Commander, Colonel Dan Gunn, who was TDY from Det 1, 3rd Air Division, at Yokota AB, Japan, so I was even allowed to diversify and work on Ops Orders.

There were only two people in the Philippines with the needed security clearances to be read-in on our mission: the 13th Air Force Commander and the US Ambassador to the Philippines.

I remember one time when the 13th Commander, General "Whip" Wilson, came in for an update briefing. Our detachment office was in the 13th Air Force Intelligence Secure Facility. The 13th AF intel director and his deputy followed the General into the room where we worked. When the general realized they were there (and without proper clearance), he threw them out with a torrent of expletives following them down the hall. Now that left an impression on me, who as a first lieutenant, sat rigid and stone silent in the rear of the room.

As a side story here, Sam Davis, mentioned earlier, was now PCS to Clark in a

C-97 unit. His niece Candy, the daughter of his wife Betsy's sister, came for an extended visit from Minnesota. Candy's mom had been to Forbes a few times and attended wing social functions, so she had met several crew members and their wives.

Uncle Sam Davis, and Colonel Gunn, were very protective of an attractive, college girl at Clark during the Vietnam build-up era, and set specific rules on her social life, which excluded dating practically anyone. But, as the lone bachelor in the detachment it was readily expected that I would date Candy. The short version is that Col Gunn insisted (basically ordered) that I take her out. Of course, Candy knew nothing of what her uncles' friends were doing. After the prodding I finally met her and as the cliché goes, the rest is history: we were married in 1969 and still are.

PART 2

As a result of my relationship with the Davis family, Sam's son Stuart recently asked for my assistance in ID-ing the other crewmembers in a photo he found of his dad. He also hoped to figure out the photo's origin.

By starting with the 55thWA web site, I contacted Max Moore, the Association newsletter editor, and his knowledge and 'sleuthing' came up with the info.



<<<< RB-47 Crew E-80
L to R: 1Lts Bob McMahon, nav, Tom Hoose,
CP, Sam Davis, EWO

Best 'guesstiments' are that the picture was taken on a late 1950s RB-47 deployment to Yokota AB, Japan. Given that it is a photo of three young crew members, a nav, a pilot and an EWO all in "party suits", the significance is that this was probably the first OL trip for the three of them. Hence the impractical white flight suits with belts and oversized cargo pockets.

Once I learned it was Tom Hoose, the story gets more personal. I was one of the Flight Line Maintenance Officers that tragic day in late 1966 at Forbes. Tom was

killed in a freak airborne accident during in-flight refueling on an AC-upgrade training flight.

During the early afternoon we learned of the mid-air incident, although there was no mention of Tom's death, just that there had been "injuries." Veteran 55thers might recall that the tanker was a bird (*Casey 01*) based at Offutt and maintained and crewed by the 55th, which made the news even more difficult. While the RB burned off fuel, preparations were made on the ground for what was going to be a very high speed landing. When the boom broke loose, not only did it come through the cockpit, striking Hoose, it also punched a hole in the right wing which meant, as I recall, the crew couldn't fully lower the flaps.

The IP was Major Dave Wayne. They all survived because he was following the rules during refueling and had his oxygen mask on with the visor down. When the incident happened, control of the plane was lost for a period and it dropped thousands of feet. The IP was able to regain control after managing to raise his visor. Had he not had his visor down he would have been blinded. (*The navigator was BJ Bates*) I also recall that there was a fourth crewmember on-board, Colonel Paxon, who was the 55th Vice CC and the senior commander of the 55th detachment at Forbes (the Wing had already stood up at Offutt and awaited the arrival of RC-135s.)

The IP made a perfect landing and then taxied to a side taxiway where the aircraft was met by staff, ground and medical personnel. After Tom's body was removed and some initial photography was done, the plane was turned over to another maintenance officer, Phil Metzler (*who later retired as a major general*) and me. We were tasked to take charge of the aircraft to make sure it was safe and secure until the accident investigation team took over. It was a very surreal and tragic day. I was never able to look Col Paxon in the eyes after that day as I knew what he had been through and I just couldn't address it.

This story also proves what a very small world it is. When I told my wife Candy that one of the people in the photo was Tom Hoose, she remembered the name and the event. Her aunt, Betsy Davis, had at some point told her that Sam had lost a good friend in a terrible accident. Candy and I had never talked about this before seeing the photo and learning that it was Tom in the picture.

PART 3

On a cheerier note, with the mention of party flight suits, I remembered when I was at RAF Upper Heyford there were a couple of missions that had to RON at the civilian airport in Edinburgh, Scotland, due to poor weather in England. The flight crew decided to have "Scottish plaid party flight suits" made to commemorate their stay. They also had me paint a "name" on the aircraft tail.

It turned out that based on the aircraft engine change schedule, that same crew had to fly the airplane back to Forbes. I had returned to Forbes earlier than they did, but before I left England, I reminded them they needed to get the name removed from the plane's tail.

Well, the aircraft landed at Forbes, and as you may recall, frequently the Wing Commander, who on this occasion I believe was Colonel Marion (Hack) Mixson, would meet the aircraft, as did the crew members' families and squadron mates.

Before exiting the aircraft the crew changed into their Scottish plaid "flight suits" to surprise their families. Col Mixson never acknowledged the "flight suits." He just kept going from person to person saying, "Who the hell painted that name on the tail?!"

Needless to say, I made myself very scarce.
