

OPERATION HOME RUN



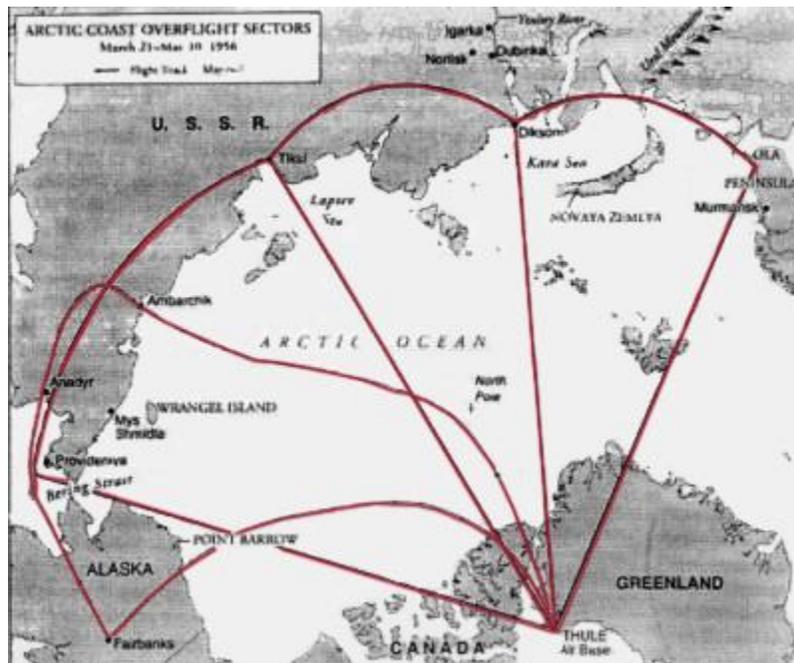
This article is being written to honor those Air Crews and the outstanding Maintenance and other Support troops who participated in Operation Home Run.

In early 1956 President Eisenhower authorized Photo and Electronic overflight missions of the entire northern slope and interior portions of the USSR from the Kola Peninsula to the Bering Straits, an approximate 7000 mile round trip. Missions would be flown out of Thule AFB Greenland. Accordingly, sixteen photo capable RB-47E model aircraft of the 10th Recon Sq from Lockbourne AFB, four RB-47H Electronic collection capable aircraft from the 343rd SRS and the 38th SRS Forbes AFB, plus 27 KC-97 Air refueling Tankers from various Air Force Bases along with various Squadron Maintenance and other Supporting Personnel of the 55th SRW were directed to take part in this Operation.

The four Crews selected were:

38th SRS	38th SRS	343rd SRS	343rd SRS
AC B. Barrett	AC R.Campbell	AC D Grant	AC R Hubbard
CP D.Waller	CP J. Gyulavics	CP D Wells	CP C Aslund
N J. McDonnell	N P. Caselton	N A Benziger	N R Mayer
R1 Phil Mitchell	R1 B. Rosser	R1 C Waters	R1 G Duer
R2 S. Elliott	R2 P.Fortin	R2 C R Smith	R2 R Thompson
R3 Bill Kane	R3 T.Everling	R3 N Yanuzzi	R3 M Sawyer

Missions would be flown between 21 March and 10 May 1956. A total of 156 combined aircraft sorties were flown during Operation Home Run. In 2001 the mission details were declassified and this is their story.



GENERAL ZONES OF INTEREST

During the 1956 time frame of the Cold War era, if the Cold War had turned into a Hot War, many of the SAC Bombers would penetrate Russia via the over the Pole flight plan when enroute to their targets.

It was of paramount interest to know what capabilities the Soviets possessed within the Northern Coastline, with regards to defensive as well as offensive Weaponry.

Areas of interest such as naval installations, airfields, radar sites, Atomic Energy Facilities, large industrial complexes, port facilities, missile sites, plus others would be of prime interest to the photo crews whereby our interests was to see what the Soviets had come up with regards to radar capabilities.

Thus, Operation Home Run was born. Some of the cities and points of interest to be over flown were, Dikson, Makarova, Chelyuskin, Ust Olenek, Tiksi, Nordvik, Khorgo Ambarchik, Taltumus, Anadyr, Wrangel Island, Providenya and Novaya Zemlya (Banana Island), and Mys Shmidta.

This was the real deal. No flying 12 miles off of the coastline for purposes of studying Electromagnetic Wave Propagation. This was it.

Accordingly on March 21,1956 the four RB47H aircraft departed for Thule AFB Thule Greenland, and deplaning was greeted by a 35 degrees BELOW freezing temperature. And of course there was total darkness at this time of the year in the Arctic.

All told, twenty RB's and 27 KC 97 Tankers were operating out of a base certainly not designed for this magnitude of operations. For instance none of the RB's had hangers and all maintenance, refueling operations etc, were conducted outdoors in 35 degree below freezing weather conditions which included blowing snow adding to the chill factors.

There is not enough praise that can be given to the dedicated Crew Chiefs, maintenance and ground support personnel who performed yeoman duty under the worst weather conditions imaginable. Line Chief Kitchens and his Crew Chiefs F Filburn, J Rodecap, L Ross and G Grenrke deserve the highest of praise for their efforts. Those efforts certainly added to the success of the mission.

Adding to the woes of just having below freezing weather there was ice on the runway. As fighters would take off on their daily routine air patrols, their jet blasts would melt the snow which would then turn to ice. Made takeoffs and landings most thrilling!

Thule AFB Greenland May 1956

Secrecy was of paramount importance. It is doubtful that 55th Hdqrs or the Squadron staffs had any insight as to what their crews were involved in. Individual crews at Thule were instructed not to discuss any facet of their missions with their counterparts. Each flight element which might be a two or three ship flight (one H accompanying one or two E models) would brief separately, i.e. an element only knew what they would be doing that day.



*"Raven Mad"
after landing at Offutt AFB*

This policy of secrecy remained in effect until 2001 when the missions were declassified.

All flights were conducted in radio silence, with hand signals being used between aircraft in flight. The RB's did monitor single Side Band Radio in case of recall, but absolutely no outgoing calls were permitted and none were ever reported on 156 sorties.

Aircraft formations varied mission to mission. In some instances aircraft were in trail formation, ie the RB H model flew approximately one mile or so behind the RB E model aircraft. At other times they were flying in tight formation, ie, a wing length to the side and the same distance to the rear of the RB E model aircraft. Yet on other occasions the H model aircraft did not see the RB E model aircraft.

Distances involved on these missions required that the mission aircraft have a specific on board fuel load at a given point of the route. If attempting to obtain this amount, usually around 20,000 lbs from a single tanker, it would leave the tanker with insufficient fuel to return to Thule. On some of the longer missions, two separate refuelings were required.

Thus two or three tankers would fly abreast for each aircraft in the element, each to offload an amount less than the total required. The RB's would take on a certain amount of fuel from one tanker then slide over to the next tanker getting the balance of fuel required to go the distance.

Soviet response to Operation Home run from the standpoint of fighter intercepts reflected quite a few attempts, however in all instances they were most ineffective. There were no reports of missile firings.



Basically, with regards to Fighters, it should be noted perhaps that the Soviets, during this time frame, shut down some of their fighter bases in the area due to the harsh winter weather conditions.

As to the results of the mission, we shall probably never know. All data, Photo and Electronic, was sent back to

SAC Headquarters. Crews were never briefed on their accomplishments.

Due to the fact that that there is no official documentation available, sortie and overflight data has been derived from information gathered from various crew members. The average number of sorties flown by each crew is estimated to be between eight (8) and ten (10) with half of those being overflights.

What can be determined however, is the outstanding performance given by the Air Crews of the 343rd and 38th Squadrons and Ground personnel of various Units of the 55th SRW in meeting the goals of this operations, and doing so under the harshest of weather conditions.

Flight crews were awarded DFC'S or AM'S for their efforts.

After the Soviets complained about the overflights, President Eisenhower responded, with tongue in cheek, . . . Must have been Navigational errors.

**Wow ! On ALL those overflights! SAC must have had some really inept Navigators back in those days !
(This, by the Author, also said with tongue in cheek.)**

Aerial View of Thule AFB Circa March-May 1956



Author's Comments...

My thanks to those who provided material and support in the writing of this significant event.

Prior to publication, this article has been reviewed by various participants of the Operation and deemed correct in content.

VO

Sam Pizzo