

A Challenge to all RC-135 Crew members

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After attending two great 55 SRW reunions (Dayton and Omaha) and talking to fellow old recon troops, it appears that I have flown (as a navigator) in more different models of RC's operationally than any other RC crewmember. My challenge is "Has any one else flown operationally in eight or more different models the RC-135?" My sorties were in the RC-135C,D,E,M,S,T,U and V. Remember, OPERATIONALLY, is the key word.

Just as a memory jogger, the primary missions of the C,D,M and V was communications intelligence (COMINT). The "E" was radar intelligence (RADINT). The "S" was photo intelligence (FODINT). The "U" electric intelligence (ELINT) and the "T" was nuclear intelligence (NUDINT).

On July 1st, 1966, I reported in to Lt Col Mike Bowen, commander of project "Office Boy" at Eielson AFB, Alaska. Confusion was rampant as that was the day of the "Falling Leaf" party. Eighteen out of thirty six crew members lost their spot promotions! The primary aircraft of the project was the RC-135D, a "Water Wagon" tanker that was hurriedly modified for strategic reconnaissance and put into service while waiting for the RC-135C's to be modified at the Martin plant in Baltimore, Maryland. The project also had another mission, flying the RC-135S (Wanda Bell) out of the garden spot of the Aleutian Islands, Shemya AFS. Also, a C-135 was assigned to the unit for a short time flying out of Shemya evaluating a mission to be a sister ship to the "S" as a RADINT platform. After the test program, the airplane was returned to "E Systems" to complete its modifications returning to Eielson a year later as the RC-135E (Lisa Ann).

There were six front end crews flying the "D" and the "S". I flew mostly polar "D" missions and a few "S" missions out of Shemya. My crew was selected to go to E- systems and do the acceptance testing of the newly modified "E" platform. Upon return to Eielson with the "E", the unit was upgraded to a squadron (24th SRS, under the 6th Strat Wing) and two more crews were added to cover the extra workload of the "E". The mission name for the "S" was changed from "Wanda Bell" to "Rivet Ball" and the "E" was changed from "Lisa Ann" to "Rivet Amber". For the last six months that I was at Eielson, every two weeks we rotated to Shemya flying the "E" with "D" polar sorties flown during the odd week. In November of 1968, my crew was recovering from a joint "Ball-Amber" mission and was overhead Shemya when the "Ball" didn't bounce! It landed on an icy runway and slid off the end totaling the aircraft. Fortunately, no crew members were seriously hurt.

A very unique feature of the RC-135E was that it apparently had two extra engines inboard of number two and three engines. These were identical pods with the left one housing an air-conditioning system to cool the sensor and the right one housing a small jet engine to provide power for the system. The Nav 2 ran the jet engine from a panel to the right of his station. The engine nomenclature was "SEPP" which stood for Supplemental External Power Pod. The sensor was a phase array radar cut into the right side of the fuselage forward of the wing opposite of the cargo door. There were externally mounted stiffing plates on the top and bottom of the fuselage to strengthen the area between the cargo door and the sensor.

My next assignment was to Offutt. The "C" model was now operational, and, since I had "Polar Navigator" stamped on my forehead, the first few months were over the top reconnaissance sorties. Some time during that spring, the 38th NUDINT mission was transferred to the 343SRS and two crews (mine included) were selected to go TDY to Hickam AFB, Hawaii, to observe French nuclear testing while flying the RC-135T. This was a six week on, two week off project that lasted for three rotations in the summer of 1969. The French had 17 events that summer and we got them all! Prior to the deployment, I was notified that the "E" was lost along with 19 good friends. It was a low point in my career. It is believed that the sensor failed (blew out) causing the aircraft to come apart in mid air. The following summer, Col Billy Skipworth was lost at sea flying enroute to observe the French nuclear project in a prototype NUDENT C-135 aircraft assigned to Wright Patterson AFB.

In 1970, the first "U" model arrived. At that time I was on Dick Hedges' crew and we did most of the acceptance tests out of Offutt flying along the Canadian/US border against known emitters. Later that year we deployed to Mildenhall AFB, U.K. flying the first operational "U" missions.

After Offutt, it was off to Barksdale AFB, to be a member of the 1st Combat Evaluation group for the next five years. At Barksdale, we evaluated the RC-135 units at Eielson, Kadena, and Offutt. Also, we were assigned to oversee the flight crew standardization of the U-2, DC-130 reconnaissance drone program, CH-3 helicopter drone recovery program, all at Davis-Monthan AFB, and the SR-71 program at Beale AFB. A very interesting job...but that another story.

In 1976, the 82 SRS at Kadena was disbanded. I was assigned to be the Chief of Reconnaissance Operations, 376 SW. This was a TDY OL with three crews deployed from Offutt for six weeks at a time, rotating a crew and aircraft every two weeks. The "M" was, at first, the most deployed aircraft because the back enders were comfortable with the airplane as it was their platform when the squadron was operational. Eventually, the "V" started to show up on a regular basis as the "M", a very high time airframe, went into modification to become a "V". I flew as "Mission Commander" for many joint SR- 71/RC-135/EP3 Orion (Beggar Hound) missions on both the RC-135M and V models. The most notable joint missions occurred during and after the infamous Korean "Tree Chopping" incident.

I started out my career navigating KC-97 tankers (Malmstrom AFB, Montana), then KC- 135 tankers (Barksdale AFB Louisiana), then off to Reconnaissance (Eielson, Offutt, Barksdale and Kadena), and ended up back in KC-135 tankers (Barksdale AFB). While at Offutt, I Flew one "looking Glass" sortie and while in CEVG, I flew on the KC- 135Q tanker during several SR-71 refueling missions. I had one "Hell of a Career", but my 13 years in Strategic Reconnaissance was most cherished.