

# A Tribute to a hero

*by Armand J. Stolte*

After reading the Rumsfeld letter many old, though not forgotten, memories were rekindled, refreshed and brought back to mind as if they happened yesterday. Names like Shemya, Komandorskis, Kamchatka and Ladd Field, Fairbanks, Alaska were seen through an imaginary window that's now almost 58 years old. Of all these memories the strongest and most vivid is of Keith Chance Hanna, Aircraft Commander of the RB-50, tail number 47131, with its red tail, "Hanna's Hellions" painted on its nose, and sitting on a tarmac in the Alaskan snow.

Hanna, at that time a Captain, was the Commander of a two ship detachment assigned to study the weather off the coast of certain "Denied Territories". This study was to be conducted using a camera, mounted in the forward bomb bay that had a lens the size of a trash can lid. The companion ship, 47128, "Laborin Lady", was commanded by Captain Walter E. Ward whose Obituary, sadly, has just appeared, May 2008, in Taps.

On 23 Sept. 1950, two RB-50s departed Barksdale AFB Shreveport, LA and 14hrs and 20min. later touched down at Ladd AFB Fairbanks, Alaska. It took a little over a week to repair fuel leaks which occurred when these older aircraft were moved from the warm southern climes to the near frigid zone just slightly below the Arctic Circle. On 2 October 47131 took off from Ladd bound for Shemya. Not long after passing the point of no return, severe icing occurred on all the leading edges. The anti-icing devices caused these formations to melt, but as the water trickled aft it refroze forming an ice buildup 2-3 inches thick in some places. The accumulation of so much ice caused the surface speed to drop to near zero. Needless to say, even a tail gunner knew this flight was in trouble. However, the calmness of Captain Hanna when explaining the actions to be taken to overcome this condition gave such confidence to the crew that the whole matter appeared almost routine. After searching out various altitudes for better conditions a loud burst of "It's breaking up" was heard over the intercom, and slowly the ice broke away, and normal ground speed was resumed. Twelve hours and fifty five minutes after the take off 47131 touched down on Shemya. This flight took 3 hours and 40 minutes longer than subsequent, similar flights. Subsequent inspection of the entire aircraft revealed no damage and so the ship was refueled and completed its first mission to study the weather off the Russian coast with a safe landing back at Ladd.

The next flight to Shemya on 17 October 1950 was a routine 9 hour flight. Again the ship was refueled and readied for the next day. On takeoff, as it roared down the runway the engineer, 1st Lt. Willis Cox, reported that #3 engine showed 60 pounds manifold pressure caused by the wastegate which had jammed closed. As soon as we left ground, Hanna turned the ship

around and began emergency landing procedures. Landing this ship with approximately 11-12000 lbs. of fuel, on a rock in the Pacific Ocean was not for the faint hearted. As the ship slammed into the runway, my seat collapsed, held up only by springs in order to allow access to the tail, and all I saw from the floor was the compartment ceiling. I was later told by our weather gunner, then S/Sgt. Robert L Brammer, that the ship veered to the left and headed for the ocean but was righted by Hanna and eventually brought to a stop near the end of the runway. Once again the ability of our A/C had saved the day. Repairs were made and the mission flown as briefed.

In all 9 missions were flown, totaling 68 hours in the air. On all but one of these, the results were the same, namely 10/10th's cloud coverage with an occasional mountain peak sticking up out of the clouds. However, on 14 November 1950, as we approached the Russian Coast, not a cloud was to be found in the sky that day. Taking advantage of the fortuitous luck, every camera on board, used its entire supply of film, to accomplish more that day than any intelligence organization could have possibly expected. Sitting in the tail, I never saw where we were going, only where we had been. Our compass must have malfunctioned that day because I swear at times it appeared that I was looking inland, with no Ocean or Sea in sight. While on that course, with all throttles wide open, and a descent of 2-3 degrees down, we were heading for home. After the results of this mission were received, both 47131 and 47128 returned to Barksdale on 29 November 1950. Not too long after this Hanna was promoted to Major and was given a commission in the regular Air Force, whereas prior to that he was a reserve officer. A picture of Hanna's crew and both aircraft taken at Ladd Field appear in the Gallery Section of the 55th SRWA website.

Another incident, on a mission designed to test the radar shield in and around the Miami area, flying out of Ramey AFB, PR, in an area near the Bermuda Triangle, and just before descent to 1000 ft. the ship turned abruptly on its side, dropped about 4000 ft. and had flames from the number 3 engine trailing back to the tail. To further complicate matters there was a student engineer in the seat at the time and he prematurely released all the Co2 before preliminary steps like closing the nacelles, etc were taken. Hanna was able to right the ship, the fire was out and the crew began to breathe again. This problem was attributed to a short in the anti-icing system of the propeller which caused the pitch of the blade to change creating a runaway prop. This condition was compared to car suddenly having its right wheel go backwards while cruising down a highway at 50 MPH. There is no fear at a time like this, unlike the icing on the way to Shemya. The fear came after an emergency landing at Hunter AFB, GA when the tub under the engine was dropped and large pieces of the engine fell to ground.

It is because of these incidents that I write this tribute to Keith Chance Hanna, Col. USAF. When I started to write, I felt that the word "Hero" was a little

unrealistic for what I wanted to convey. However, after reviewing these incidents regarding his flying ability and his coolness under pressure, I realize that is exactly what I now feel. It has been said on many occasions that a lesser man could not have been able to accomplish these feats. My only regret is that I did not do this before he passed.

I attest that the writing of this story is non-fiction, and historically accurate to the best of my memory. It has been verified by another 55th SRWA member, and a fellow crew member who was on every one of the flights referred to in this story, namely Robert L. Brammer, Col., USAF, Ret.

Videmus Omnia, Armand J. Stolte

*The RB-50B flight crew of 47131, "Hanna's Hellions"; after flight to study "Weather", off the Russian coast in 1950 with special camera in forward bomb bay, Sept – Dec 1950. Left to right, back row: Capt Keith C. Hanna, A/C, 1st Lt Donald K. Rise, Co-pilot, Major Vincent S. Dilly, Nav, 1st Lt Robert D. Newcomb, ECM, Capt Harold E. Bonney, Nav, S/Sgt William Allen, CFC Bottom Row S/Sgt Fred Buss, Photo Gunner, M/Sgt (?) Christensen, Spec. Camera Operator, S/Sgt Robert Brammer, Weather Gunner, 1st Lt Willis S. Cox, Flt Engineer, S/Sgt Armand Stolte, Tail Gunner*



\*\*\*\*\*