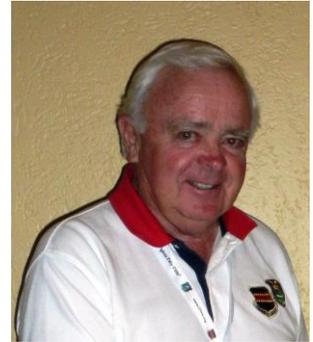


# **A hot day in a Cold War. An RB-47 vs. Mig-17s, April 28, 1965.**

Author: Marion, Forrest L. Sep 22, 2006 - Air Power History ISSN: 1044-016X



.... Print (at left) by EWO George V. Back depicts the North Korean MiG attack on a 55<sup>th</sup> SRW RB-47 in April 1965. The battle-damaged RB-47 landed safely back at Yokota due to the superb piloting of A/C Matt Mattison and the gunnery skills of copilot Hank Dubuy (at right)



Early in the Cold War, in 1946, the United States had begun conducting military reconnaissance flights near the borders of the Soviet Union and its satellites. These missions, known as "PARPRO"--for Peacetime Airborne Reconnaissance Program--were intended to obtain information on Soviet strategic military capabilities as well as to prevent the possibility of a surprise attack on the U.S. or its Western allies. Unlike the overflights of denied territory that U.S. aircraft conducted in later years, PARPRO sorties were entirely legal as they were not intended to penetrate Soviet or other potential belligerents' airspace. Whereas the overflights required Presidential approval, U.S. military theater commanders approved the more common PARPRO missions.

In 1960, the shoot-down of Francis Gary Powers led the Eisenhower Administration to suspend the practice of penetrating Soviet or other potential belligerents' airspace. But PARPRO missions continued as they had since the 1940s. Regardless of intent, however, many PARPRO aircraft were attacked: some were downed; others, like the RB-47 in the following account, survived. Most PARPRO routes were used repeatedly and were known in the Strategic Air Command (SAC) as "library routes," a practice that tacitly communicated to potential belligerents that the mission was not of hostile intent. (1)

On April 28, 1965, the RB-47 crew designated "E-96" of the 343rd Strategic Squadron, 55th SRW, serving on temporary duty at Yokota Air Base (AB), Japan, was conducting a typical PARPRO mission over the Sea of Japan. The RB-47H, called the "Silver King" aircraft, was a modified B-47 bomber. The Silver King modification included an integrated capsule to the aircraft bomb bay that provided crew stations for the three Electronic Warfare Officers (EWO), affectionately known as "Ravens" or "Crows." Electronic receivers and direction finding equipment and associated antennae were added, along with signal analysis and recording equipment to receive, locate, and analyze the emissions of potential adversaries' early warning and surface-to-air-missile and anti-aircraft-artillery acquisition and tracking radars. (2)

The six-man crew on that day, led by aircraft commander Lt. Col. Hobart D. "Matt" Mattison, had departed from Yokota on a scheduled 7-1/2-hour sortie. After takeoff and prior to entering what was known as the "Sensitive Area," the copilot, Lt. Henry E. "Hank" Dubuy, Jr., switched the RB-47's two rearward-firing 20-millimeter guns from the standby position and fired a few bursts to ensure they were operational. Satisfied, he placed them back into the standby position. The "Sensitive Area" was normally defined as that point along the route where the aircraft could be initially located and tracked by potentially hostile radar systems. About six hours into the flight, Mattison's crew began a leg that took them north-northwest toward Wonsan Harbor, North Korea. Their aircraft was then about 80 miles off the coast, clearly in international airspace, and had just started to turn back toward Yokota. Suddenly, the crew received a high-frequency radio transmission from an American monitoring station somewhere in Japan or South Korea that warned of "bogies"--unidentified aircraft--in the area. At about the same time, Capt. Robert C. "Red" Winters, one of the three EWOs and designated as "Raven-I" on the crew, detected an airborne intercept radar signal that he guessed was coming from behind

the RB-47. Although some accounts were unclear on this point, the copilot-gunner, Hank Dubuy, recalled that he observed a flight of two fighters in addition to a flight of two other aircraft at a higher altitude and farther away. Upon receiving the radar warning, he looked over his right shoulder, observed the two approaching fighters, and reported, "Bogies closing fast." Quickly, Dubuy rotated his copilot seat to the rear, took out the hand-held camera that was standard equipment, and sought to identify the approaching fighters. "Raven-2" was George V. Back, also a lieutenant at the time. Retired since 1981 as an Air Force major, he later recalled, "No matter how much preparation I had, how much intelligence on the bad guys I knew, I never thought that some North Korean would try to kill me on my first operational temporary duty. But the North Koreans were deemed unpredictable and their actions frequently irrational. After that mission, I knew this for a fact." (3)

Suddenly, the RB-47 shuddered violently from the impact of 23-millimeter rounds fired by the lead North Korean Air Force MiG-17. There had been no warning shot or radio call of any kind. "Raven-2," George Back, "felt the aircraft shudder, pitch nose down, and begin losing altitude." Moments later, Lieutenant Colonel Mattison announced to his crew, "They are shooting at us. We are hit. I'm going down!" Fortunately, what Mattison meant was not that the aircraft was "really going down"--as at least Lieutenant Back thought momentarily--but that he was descending to a lower altitude and taking evasive action. At about the same time, Mattison called for the navigator to give him a heading. Capt. Robert J. "Bob" Rogers, the radar navigator, replied crisply, "Take a 180 and I'll refine it in a second." (4)

E-96 was youthful compared with other RB-47 crews in the 55th wing. Three of the six crew members, copilot Dubuy and Ravens George Back and Joel J. Lutkenhouse, were all "new guys." Although first lieutenants by April 1965, all three had entered the wing as second lieutenants a year earlier. Many years later, George Back wrote that the experience and professionalism of their aircraft commander, Mattison, as well as the Raven-I, Winters, and the radar navigator, Rogers, was probably the reason "why Hank, Joel, and I were put on the crew. Normally, three new crew members would not be put on the same crew." In fact, Back and Lutkenhouse had graduated from the same Undergraduate Navigator Training class at Harlingen AFB, Texas, and served together at Lockbourne AFB, Ohio, prior to reporting to the 55th wing in 1964. On April 28, 1965, Lieutenant Colonel Mattison's crew was about to exhibit the flight discipline and crew coordination worthy of its nickname, "Mattison's Drill Team." As a young pilot twenty years earlier, Hobart Mattison had flown B-17s during World War II. He had been shot down over France and returned to Allied lines by the French Underground. Years later, George Back wrote:

'Matt' was no-nonsense when it came to flying and demanded the highest standards of professionalism .... Before every mission, we lined up under the wing for inspection with our parachutes on the ground in front of us, our helmets on top of the 'chutes.' Matt would conduct a pre-mission crew brief to make sure we all were aware of any particular operations which pertained to that specific mission. We would do a 'left face,' march forward till clear of the parachutes and begin our individual pre-flights. When talking on the interphone, we addressed each other by aircraft position, said what needed to be said and then shut up. First names [and] jokes were for outside the aircraft, the 'O club,' or 'Mama Kay's" restaurant.... I ... firmly believe that I am here today only due to the grace of God, crew integrity, and the ability of Matt to fly and plant firmly on the runway at Yokota an otherwise unflyable pile of smoking aluminum scrap. (5)

The pair of MiG-17s had attacked in sequence from behind and below the RB-47, from which position they had expected to remain hidden from the Americans. Furthermore, they were too close for the RB's fire control radar to lock-on. From that position, they attacked at a high angle, nearly stalling their jets, before breaking off each pass and falling off on one wing to regain airspeed. The several accounts varied, but Dubuy and Back recalled the MiGs made a total of three firing passes. Each resulted in damage to the RB. On the first pass, the lead MiG produced most of the damage, hitting at least the engines and tail gun section. In the midst of a stream of chaff that Captain Winters was dumping by then, the MiG's wingman made the second pass and also hit the RB-47, possibly in the fuel tank area [this damage may have been sustained on the third pass], starting a fire but, fortunately, not producing an explosion. The lead MiG returned for another pass and added to the damage, but must have been

hit in the process. Although one of the RB's two tail guns had been taken out of action on the first pass, the other gun was still operational. Receiving Mattison's permission to fire, Dubuy managed to fire roughly 300 rounds--in manual mode and without the benefit of tracers--and scored hits on the lead MiG during its second pass. The lieutenant observed the MiG to "pull up his nose slightly over the horizon, then proceed into a steep dive." Moments later, the wingman broke off his second pass without firing and departed. The copilot watched the stricken MiG disappear straight down into a cloud deck between 12,000 and 10,000 feet above the water. Unfortunately, if the MiG was, in fact, shot down it has never been confirmed officially. But at the time, crew E-96 was fighting for its own survival. The unit history understated the case when it noted the RB-47 "was severely damaged and smoke was observed throughout the aircraft." (6)

Lieutenant Colonel Mattison alerted the crew that he had control of the aircraft but to be prepared for bailout. Later, George Back wrote, "That RB took a lot of punishment. We leveled off at about 14,000 feet and began to determine how much of an airplane we had left. The copilot remarked that we were still trailing smoke and vapor and that the aft main tank still appeared to be burning.... All systems were on emergency power." Fortunately, there were no injuries among the crew. Rejecting a suggestion that he try for a landing in South Korea, Mattison headed for Yokota. At the same time, he directed Lieutenant Dubuy to get out the aircraft flight manual known as the "Dash-I" and turn to the "Emergency Procedures" section. When Dubuy asked which page he wanted, Mattison growled, "Just about any page will do." Enroute to Japan, Captain Winters used the Emergency Landing Gear Extension system to lower the gear in order to avoid the danger of electrical arcing. Upon arrival over Yokota, "Matt" briefed the crew that the landing would be rough and asked if anyone wanted to bail out over the runway. The reply was unanimous: "No, sir." Mattison instructed his copilot to deploy the parachute on the aircraft's second landing bounce and to stand on the brakes while he kept the wings level and tried to keep the airplane on the runway. As expected, the initial, nose-down touchdown was rough--so hard, in fact, that the RB porpoised 80 feet into the air and almost struck the on-scene rescue helicopter. George Back remembered, "Matt brought the aircraft to a stop on the runway and we exited, dodging emergency equipment as we headed for the edge of the runway." (7)

Although the details of the mission were omitted because of its classification, all six members of crew E-96 received the Distinguished Flying Cross for "extraordinary achievement." The aircraft itself, however, was scrapped. A portion of the RB-47 fleet was undergoing phase-out, and the damage was so severe that tail number 34290 "was dropped from the 55th's inventory." Today, four of the six E-96 crewmembers survive, Hank Dubuy, Bob Rogers, George Back, and Joel Lutkenhouse. They remain in contact with one another, brought closer by the events of that spring day in 1965. Dubuy is retired as a captain with Continental Airlines and resides in Texas, Rogers lives in Massachusetts, Back is retired in Florida and paints, and Lutkenhouse works as a realtor in Virginia. Following his death in the 1990s, Hobart Mattison was inducted into the 55 SRW Hall of Fame for his heroism in getting his aircraft and crew safely home on that memorable day in 1965. (8)

George Back's assessment of the North Koreans was that they were unpredictable and "frequently irrational." While greatly appreciative of Major Back's military service as well as his assistance with this project, I must differ with him on the question of the North Koreans' perceived "irrationality." Although North Korea's attempted shoot-down of the RB-47 was unsuccessful, the incident probably possessed a greater and previously unrecognized significance. The inaccessibility of North Korea's archives makes anything more than an educated guess problematic, but there is reason to believe that this seemingly isolated incident represented an attempt by the North to facilitate certain political objectives. In a 1999 book, *Over the Line: North Korea's Negotiating Strategy*, East Asian security specialist Chuck Downs argued persuasively that with the increasing American military involvement in the Southeast Asia conflict in the mid-1960s, North Korea attempted simultaneously to accomplish three objectives. First, the North sought to regain the attention of the United States; in other words, to continue to appear relevant as an American adversary. Second, Pyongyang likely wanted to reinvigorate its Marxist-Leninist cause, as their comrades in Vietnam were doing at that very time. Third, the regime appeared intent to exploit, as Downs wrote, the "greater space in which to operate without provoking American military retaliation." Furthermore, the presence of South Korean troops fighting on the American side in Southeast Asia must have strengthened the view from Pyongyang that

American military operations in Southeast Asia were linked with the situation on the Korean Peninsula. In short, the North's attack on April 28 may have been no less rational than it was diabolical. (9)

Among the North's major attacks on American and South Korean assets and personnel, Downs listed the sinking of a South Korean Navy patrol craft in the Sea of Japan (January 1967); the attempted assassination of South Korean President Park Chung Hee in Seoul and the seizure of the USS Pueblo in international waters (January 1968); the downing of a U.S. Navy EC-121 reconnaissance aircraft 90 miles off the Korean coast over the Sea of Japan (April 1969); and the shoot-down of an unarmed U.S. Army OH-23 helicopter that had inadvertently entered North Korean airspace (August 1969). (10)

The North's failed shoot-down attempt in the spring of 1965 deserves to be included in the list above. The first sustained American bombing campaign of North Vietnam, known as Operation ROLLING THUNDER, had begun in early March 1965. By late April, one may expect that the North Koreans felt at liberty to engage in a "pinprick" attack against an American reconnaissance aircraft operating near their airspace. It appears likely that the North's failed attempt to down the RB-47 represented--in addition to an egregious act of aggression--perhaps the earliest of its several attempts in the late 1960s to accomplish just what Downs argued in his book. (11)

Moreover, the RB-47 incident appeared to have been the first time that North Korea falsely claimed to have downed an American aircraft, beginning a pattern that has become more familiar in recent decades. Two days after the incident, Japanese newspapers reported that North Korean spokesmen claimed the American jet had crossed the fortieth parallel and that MiGs had "shot it down." One week after the failed shoot-down, the Soviets' publication Izvestia reported that, two days earlier, the head of the [North] Korean-Chinese delegation had stated that on April 28 an American RB-47 had intruded into the North's airspace and was subsequently shot down. (12)

Before April 1965, North Korea's previous recorded attempt to shoot down an American aircraft over international airspace had taken place on June 16, 1959. On that date, unidentified MiGs attacked a U.S. Navy P4M "Mercator" as it conducted a reconnaissance mission well east of Wonsan, North Korea, over the Sea of Japan. One crewmember was wounded in the attack, but the Mercator managed to return to Japan and land safely. The jets had borne the red stars common to Soviet, Communist Chinese, and North Korean aircraft. Although the Americans could not positively identify the attackers, within days the U.S. Government concluded that the jets most likely had been North Korean. Contributing to the uncertainty was that the North though not denying the shoot-down attempt--made no claim to have attacked the American plane--much less falsely claiming to have downed it--as did the regime following the incident six years later. (13)

In conclusion, the failed shoot-down attempt in April 1965--in which a U.S. Air Force RB-47 may have actually downed one of its attackers--represented more than simply a dramatic Cold War story in which the "good guys" came out on top. From a broader perspective, the incident in which "Mattison's Drill Team" was an unwilling--but not unprepared--participant represented the North Korean regime's earliest known attempt to take advantage of the U.S. commitment to a sustained bombing campaign in Southeast Asia while simultaneously advancing other political objectives as well. Ironically, just two days after the incident, Mattison's crew was in the air again, flying what George Back referred to as its first "Southeast Asia mission" near Hainan Island, China. And on that day, the RB had an escort consisting of two Navy fighters. In the long run, Pyongyang's occasional practice of making wild and false shoot-down claims may, in fact, date from April 28, 1965, which was, indeed--and as George Back entitled his own 1996 painting of the incident--"A Hot Day in a Cold War. (14)

## NOTES

(1.) Walter J. Boyne, "The Early Overflights," Air Force Magazine, vol. 84, no. 6 (Jun. 2001), 60-62; telephone discussion, Lt. Gen. E. G. "Buck" Shuler, Jr., USAF (Ret), with author, May 8, 2006. On Jul. 1, 1960, the Soviets downed a 55th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing RB-47H in international airspace over the Barents Sea, while it conducted a PARPRO sortie. One crewmember was known to have died, two survivors were later returned to U.S. control, and the remaining three crewmembers were unaccounted

for. See History, 55th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing (Medium) [55 SRW (M) hereinafter], Jul.-Aug. 1960, pp. 15-18, Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA hereinafter), Maxwell AFB, Ala., call no. K-WG-55-HI; History, 55 SRW (M), Jan. 1961, pp. 14-15, AFHRA; History, 55 SRW (M), Mar. 1961, pp. 16-18, AFHRA.

(2.) Interview, Maj. George V. Back, USAF Retired, with author, Apr. 9, 2005, Hurlburt Field, Fla.; Back mission summary, ca. 2000, emailed to author, Dec. 8, 2004; History, 55 SRW (M), Apr.-Jun. 1965, vol. I, pp. 22-25, AFHRA; Wolfgang W. E. Samuel, *I Always Wanted to Fly: America's Cold War Airmen* (Jackson, Miss., 2001), pp. 235-36. The 55 SRW's home station was Forbes AFB, Kansas.

(3.) Back interview; Back mission summary; Samuel, *I Always Wanted to Fly*, pp. 240-42.

(4.) Back interview; Back mission summary; Samuel, *I Always Wanted to Fly*, pp. 242-45. Note that Samuel refers to the same quote from Rogers but states he asked for a 90-degree turn; see page 245. Copilot Hank Dubuy mentioned another possibility: "Take [a heading of] 180, and I'll refine it in a second" (personal discussion, Dubuy with author, Randolph AFB, Texas, Oct. 14, 2005). In yet a third possibility, the 3rd Air Division message detailing the incident stated the RB-47 took a heading of 140 degrees after the attack began. (See Msg, 3rd Air Division, Det L, DO 00128 May [erroneous, should read "April"] 65 Section I of IV, DTG 01/1526Z, located in Hist, 55 SRW (M), Apr.-Jun. 1965, vol. II, Supporting Doc. 40, AFHRA.

(5.) Back interview; Back mission summary; Samuel, *I Always Wanted to Fly*, pp. 232-33; quotes from mission summary.

(6.) Back interview; Back mission summary; History, 55 SRW (M), Apr.-Jun. 1965, vol. I, pp. 22-25, AFHRA; quotes from page 24. In his interview, Back stated there are errors in the unit history's account of the incident, which disagrees with his account of the number of passes flown by the MiGs and the extent of the damage. Samuel's account states, "The two MiGs made three passes each"; see pg. 246. Although the account is unclear, the 55th wing history seems to mention five attack passes, three by the lead MiG, and two by the wingman; see pp. 23-24. The author contacted the historical offices of both the National Security Agency and Air Intelligence Agency in an unsuccessful attempt to determine the disposition of the MiG-17 last seen descending vertically through the clouds. If such data exists, it has not been declassified.

(7.) Back interview; Back mission summary; History, 55 SRW (M), Apr.-Jun. 1965, vol. I, pp. 22-25, AFHRA; Samuel, *I Always Wanted to Fly*, pp. 246-49.

(8.) Back interview; Back mission summary; Dept of the Air Force Special Order GB-251, Sep. 10, 1965, copy in possession of author; History, 55 SRW (M), Apr.-Jun. 1965, vol. I, p. 25, AFHRA; personal discussions between the author and surviving crewmembers, Apr.-Oct. 2005. Capt. Robert C. "Red" Winters passed away in January 1993.

(9.) Chuck Downs, *Over the Line: North Korea's Negotiating Strategy* (Washington, 1999), pp. 117-119. At the time, at least one newspaper suggested a link between the attack and the conflict in Southeast Asia; see Jack Raymond, "North Korea Jets Attack U.S. Plane," *Japan Times*, May 2, 1965, pp. 1, 8.

(10.) Downs, *Over the Line*, pp. 118-151; Luman H. Long, ed., *The 1970 World Almanac and Book of Facts* (New York and Cleveland, 1970), pg. 915.

(11.) Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York, London, 1989), pp. 61-64; Downs, *Over the Line*, pp. 117-119.

(12.) Rpt, Hist of Fifth Air Force, Jan.-Dec. 1965, vol. I, AFHRA, call no. K730.01 (information used is unclassified); the unit history cites two Japanese newspapers, the *Mainichi Shimbun* and *The Yomiuri*, both dated Apr. 30, 1965; *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XVII, no. 18 (May 26, 1965), p. 26.

(13.) Raymond, "North Korea Jets Attack..."; "Two Migs Jump Forbes Plane Off Korea Coast," Topeka Journal, Apr. 28, 1965, pg. 1; Fred S. Hoffman, "MIGs Attack Navy Plane Near Korea, Wound One," Washington Post, Jun. 17, 1959; Jack Raymond, "McElroy Hints North Koreans Made the Attack on U.S. Plane," New York Times, Jun. 19, 1959; "Red Korea Rejects U.S. Protest Over Attack on Plane," Chicago Tribune, Jul. 30?, 1959; Harry Hansen, ed., World Almanac 1960 and Book of Facts (New York, 1960), pp. 107-108. Apparently, there had been no similar incidents over the Sea of Japan for two years; see "Navy Denies Sending Missile-Armed Escorts," Washington Star, Jun. 18, 1959.

(14.) Back interview. The original painting is housed at a public museum, known informally as the "SAC Museum," near Omaha, Neb.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the meeting of the Conference of Historic Aviation Writers (CHAW) held in Herndon, Virginia, on October 22, 2005. Retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Joel J. Lutkenhouse, one of the RB-47 crew members involved in the incident in 1965, attended the presentation.

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The **first** print (20" x 15") depicts the North Korean MiG attack on a 55<sup>th</sup> SRW RB-47 in April 1965. As most members know, George was an electronic warfare officer on that historic Cold War sortie. The battle-damaged RB-47 landed safely back at Yokota due to the superb piloting of A/C Matt Mattison and the gunnery skills of copilot Hank Dubuy