

Jim:
From George Penfield. As he says, he's probably the last of the 55th RB-50 crews still alive. This may ...be interesting reading on the web site....

Reg

From: Gfpenfield@aol.com [<mailto:Gfpenfield@aol.com>]

Sent: Saturday, March 26, 2016 3:23 PM

To: thegunfighter@cox.net

Subject: ECM RECON in North Africa 1943 ?

Regis

A year ago in April, Ray Burgess died. He was 96. I got to know him back in 1964 when we were in 2nd Wing Hqs together. He was in a different section but I saw him pretty regularly. I left in 1967 and didn't see him again until I came back to Barksdale in 1970. We were both in the Daedalians so we saw each other at least once a month. Like many of my fellow military friends we never talked much about our past histories so I didn't know his back ground.

It wasn't until after he died and I saw the enclosed photos and talked to Sylvia, his wife that I found out that he had been flying **Recon missions from North Africa in B-17s in 1943**. I asked her then if I could have copies of the photos but for some reason we never got together until last week. She said that they were all night missions and that the airplanes were painted black. As I understood her they were checking for radars. That sure sounded familiar.

I thought that the 55th had started ECM Recon back in 1948 at McGuire with the B-29s but apparently they were doing it in WWII with B-17s and we just started it back up after the war.

I do remember that we had people going out to the war surplus markets buying back the earlier equipment that we put in the B-29s. So, apparently they did have the equipment earlier and that was what they were using in flying the WWII missions. I went through some of his papers and I found a list of the missions that he flew. I didn't count them, but there were 25 or more and most were around eight hours long.

Are you familiar with this earlier "ECM Recon" activity? I know that it was new to me.



Ray is at the far left in the picture of the Archangel. The two on the far right look like they are another nationality. I don't know how many were in a normal B-17 crew but this looks like more than a bomber would have so I guess some of them were ECM operators although I don't think that they were called that.

Sylvia said that the Archangel was the plane that he flew. The other picture has a different insignia on the side. Looks like a Wing or Squadron insignia rather than nose art



I might add that we had a B-17 at McGuire that I flew in as a co-pilot that was involved in the ECM work. That was back when you could fly whatever was on the ramp. My main duty was a co-pilot on an RB-29. They also had a T-6 which I flew. They also had several stripped B-17s that they used for

passenger and cargo work. I also flew Co-pilot on those.

In a message dated 4/19/2016 10:07:58 P.M. Central Daylight Time, thegunfighter@cox.net writes: George:

I recall Jim Riley mentioning flying B-17's at McGuire. I also recall him saying it was with the 55th. It may have been photo missions. Sound familiar to you?

Regis

From: Gfpenfield@aol.com [mailto:Gfpenfield@aol.com]

Sent: Wednesday, April 20, 2016 11:22 AM

To: thegunfighter@cox.net

Subject: Re: ECM RECON in North Africa 1943 ?

Regis

Yes it does. I flew B-17s at McGuire. When I flew it was ECM stuff. I flew as a co-pilot then and I had just come into the outfit. I really didn't know much about what they were doing at first. I believe that what we were doing then was testing some of the equipment. As I've said the ECM capability was just starting up at McGuire. They were buying a lot of the receivers off of the flea markets and installing them in the airplanes. I believe the B-17s were just used as test beds since the B-29s were the ones that were being set up as the Operational aircraft. The B-29s were pretty much regular B-29s and the ECM gear was put in wherever they could fit them in. Both scanners were ECM officers rather than gunners. since that was where some of the equipment was installed. At that time, 1949, they were installing equipment, training the ECM officers and when they got an aircraft ready they deployed. We lost several of the B-29s. Hall crashed at Offutt when returning from Japan. He landed low and hit the bank at the end of the runway. The aircraft slid onto the runway and burned. Most of the crew was killed. The cause was get homeitis. He had flown too long and was tired. Dibbell also lost an aircraft. He had electrical power failure and the electrical props were stuck in low pitch that they were using at altitude and when they descended they had very little power. He crashed at Fort Worth. A lot of the crew was killed on that accident. Those days were pretty hectic. It seems that everything was fairly disorganized. Just getting flight equipment was a problem.

As an example, when I got there I was put on Bob Marshall's crew as the co-pilot. I think I had about two or three flights in a B-29 in which I didn't do any flying. The first one I rode on the door and used a walk around bottle for Oxygen. Apparently they didn't know I was going because nobody paid much attention to me. It was night and raining so I got up under the number three engine with my chute to stay out of the rain. Then I heard them starting the number two engine so I went up to the wheel well and started banging on the wall. The engineer opened the door and I told him I was supposed to go. I think he uttered some expletives but opened the door and put the ladder down for me to crawl up into the airplane. As I said I sat on the hatch for 12 hours using a walk around plugged into the system. I would have starved except the flight engineer took pity on me and gave me one of his lunches. I don't remember who the A/C was or much about the crew. Basically it was to get my flight time for pay. My second flight was with George Doll. It was a long range flight. I forget what they called them. It was fly low for a while and then climb to 25k for a while and then come back down to low altitude. I believe it was supposed to simulate bombing Russia. Fly at a lower altitude for fuel economy and then climb to altitude to do the bombing. We carried a bomb bay tank in the rear bomb bay. If I remember correctly it was 22,500 gallons. On this flight I was the copilot. Since I had never flown as a co-pilot, Doll gave me a briefing. He said this is the gear switch and when I say gear up you switch it. The he said this guarded switch is the switch to drop the rear tank. When we get out on the runway. lift the guard so you can toggle the switch. If we should lose an engine I'll tell you to toggle the switch to drop the tank.. Toggle the switch and hold it on to make sure it goes. If it don't go or it comes out crooked and hangs we will crash. About then I was beginning to doubt whether I wanted to be in the Air Force. Needless to say, we made it. However, we used every foot of the runway. In fact as we were nearing the end of the runway, he said, "It either flies now it don't" and he pulled back the yoke. Back then there was NO figuring T/O using 10% of the length of the runway. I think the flight was around 15 hours. I might have had one more flight and then I was assigned to Marshall's crew which was a starboard crew. I was sent up to what I guess was the starboard office. to take a test on the B-29. I knew very little about it. I'm not even sure that I had read the B-29 handbook. Which by the way was about a 5 x 8

book about 1/2 inch thick. The emergency pages were in red ink. When you read them in the red cockpit lights the pages were blank. As to the test. I'm sure that I failed it miserably. However, somehow it was graded passing and now "I am a standboard co-pilot". It was the best thing that could have happened to me. On a standboard crew, the co-pilot doesn't do much flying. The A/C Nav etc are giving checks but the co-pilot flies about once a month on crew flight. So I went into PJ Hamm who was the ops officer and said I will fly anytime, on any crew that needs a co-pilot.

The pilot training classes had been shut down after the war and weren't started back until 1947 when we became the USAF. The first class in the AF was 48C. I was in the second class of 49A.

I say this because when I got to McGuire, they had no co-pilots. All the guys flying B-29s had been flying them since the war and all were A/C qualified. So a lot of the time they had two A/Cs flying, so they needed co-pilots. So I got to fly with just about all the crews in the Squadron. Not only that I was flying 70 - 80 hours a month. What a learning experience. I learned real quick who I wanted to fly with and who I didn't.

When we went into B-50s, whenever I flew with Marshall, I flew left seat. He liked to fly from the right because that's what he did most of, giving standboards. I think my time in the B-29s as CP and flying in the left seat of the B-50s helped me move up to A/C pretty quick. I'm sure Marshall had recommended me and I had flown so much with PJ Hamm, the Ops Officer, that my check out by him, was with another co-pilot. He flew co-pilot for me and I made one T/O and landing and then I flew Co-pilot for him when he made a T/O and landing. Hamm sat back in the Nav seat. That was it. He said we checked out as A/Cs. After I was checked out, I flew as an A/C from that point on in the 55th. Of course I had gone through the B-50 Mobile ground trainer with all the other pilots so I knew the aircraft.

I know I've written quite a lot. However, I'm pretty sure that I'm probably the only one left, who started with the beginning of the 55th. In fact I may be the only one left of the 55th B-50 A/Cs. If I don't write it out, part of 55th history will be gone.

..... George Penfield
