

Recollections of Colonel (Ret) John E. Drost

My name is **Gary Drost**. I'm a retired Air Force pilot and the son of **Colonel (R) John E. Drost**, who flew EB-47s, RB-47s and ERB-47s in the **55th SRW** from 1954-1968 at Forbes and Offutt. I'm writing to recount a bit of lore most likely not known by any surviving old-timers of the **55th**, much less any of the current crewmembers or staff. Dad will be 97 on May 31st, and this is a story of one memorable deployment in the spring of 1965.



First, a bit of history to set the stage. Like tens of thousands of young men in 1941, Dad answered the call to arms when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. He wanted to be a fighter pilot, so he joined the Army Air Corps. He was an instinctive pilot and did well in pilot training. So well that he was assigned as a test pilot at Alamogordo AAF in New Mexico. His job was to test fly every aircraft that came into the repair depot before and after it was repaired. Since the Army couldn't spare instructors to teach him how to fly every aircraft in the Air Corps, Navy and Marines, they selected a pilot who had the instincts and skill to fly anything with engines and wings. That pilot was my father.

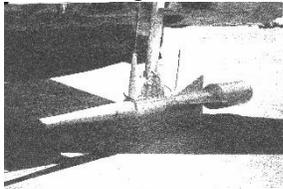
He was disappointed that they didn't give him a fighter, but he found that the "seat of the pants" flying he experienced as a test pilot would prove to be very valuable throughout his career. He checked out in 34 aircraft, most of them he did himself with the flight manual in one hand and the stick or yoke in the other.

One flight at Alamogordo proved a real challenge, as it was in a B-24 "Widow Maker", a name it was given by flight crews for good reason. It was a post-repair flight, and he was configuring the aircraft for landing. When he lowered the flaps, the plane did an **un-commanded barrel roll to inverted flight on final at low altitude**. He was able to recover to level flight by returning the flaps to zero, as he was taught in flight school. After figuring out that he couldn't use any flaps at all, he safely landed at a much higher speed. The barrel roll was caused by a wrench a mechanic had left in the wing that pulled on the aileron cable when the flaps were lowered. Seat of the pants saved him, the crew and the plane, and would again many times in years to come.

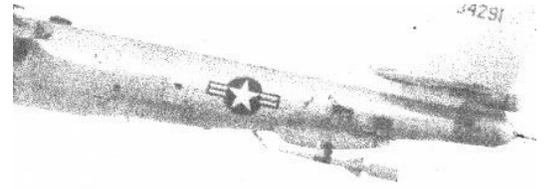


Fast forward to 1963 and Forbes AFB. Dad had always had superior results on his missions and it didn't go unnoticed in Washington. The CIA was aware of his success rate and sent two agents to Forbes to interview him and with a proposal. They wanted him to test a new device that was being developed for the CIA to see if it was feasible. It consisted of a towed sensor that looked like a missile. The theory was the farther the sensor was from all the equipment in the aircraft, the better results it would generate. Dad agreed to their proposal, and he and his crew deployed to Ontario, CA, to work with Lockheed and ITT engineers

to modify tail number 34291 and do the test flights in the Edwards Range. I believe the code name for the project was **IRON LUNG**. The crew for the flight tests consisted of: Pictured right to left: A/C: Major John E. Drost, CP: Capt. James A. "Jimmy" Reinhardt, Nav: Capt. Clyde E. Duncan, R1: Capt. William F. Henderson, R2: 1Lt Russell L. Lewis, R3: Capt. Stanley D. Rock



The tests were fraught with problems, as the sensor's cable often snapped due to the wake turbulence as it was being reeled out. After many failed attempts, the CIA was ready to cancel the program, when Dad came up with an idea. He proposed using a prism he found in a Navy surplus store, making it into a small periscope, and fitting it through the fuselage at the R1 position. The periscope allowed the R1 Bill Henderson to see the sensor as it was reeled out, as it was not visible to the pilots. He could then help the pilots maneuver the aircraft to keep the sensor out of the aircraft's wake. It worked, and the CIA funded the program for another two years, with Dad's crew as the primary operators.



In April of 1965, Dad's crew deployed to Yokota AB, Japan, and flew missions for SAC, but with some special instructions from the CIA. The SAC commanders cautioned him about doing the things the CIA wanted, but Dad was sure he could please both "bosses" and get the intel they each needed.

On one mission, the CIA told him that they needed more and better information from some specific sites in North Korea and asked if there was something he could do to stir them into activity, which the Koreans hadn't responded to in the past. Dad said he was sure he could do something to get them to respond. Without telling his crew, most likely because they would try to talk him out of it, he turned directly toward the site and suddenly went into a dive simulating a bombing run on it.

That shook up the North Koreans and they responded by launching MiG-17s to intercept their airplane. Dad told the crew to buckle up and to be ready for some violent maneuvers, and that they could expect to be attacked. He took up a heading for international waters and pushed the Stratojet to its limits as the MiGs gave chase.

The surprise maneuver produced some great intel, but got the ire of the Det Commander, as a listening post on Hokkaido gave the staff a running account of what the Soviet communications were saying about the encounter. Dad got his butt chewed out, but the CIA agents said the results were successful and thanked him for sticking his neck out. He told them the colonel wasn't through with him, though. The agents said they would "make a call", and Dad never had any more problems with the colonel after that.

On a later mission during that tour, his crew was once again being chased by the North Koreans. As they exited the sensitive area, and unknown to Dad and crew, **Hobart Mattison's** RB-47H was entering the same area on an unrelated SAC mission.

The MiGs broke off their chase of Dad's airplane, as it was heading out to sea faster than the MiGs could give chase. Unfortunately for Mattison, the MiGs were in perfect position to engage his airplane as they entered the operating area. Mattison's plane was shot up badly, but due to superior airmanship and a lot of guts, they recovered safely at Yokota.

When he returned to Forbes, Dad was called in by the Wing Commander and cautioned that, "These guys won't be able to protect you." He was also lectured by his Squadron Commander about SAC rules and the consequences of going outside them for the CIA. Dad told the Commander that he would be very careful, and that, "The CIA has spent a great deal of time and money on this special operation and they expected results. I intend to do whatever it takes to obtain those objectives and bring my crew back safely". Dad had to walk a thin line, as he had two sets of bosses, and each one had different, and sometimes conflicting, expectations.



In total, Dad flew 56 missions for the CIA in the 2½ year special operation. In his 14 years of flying for the **55th**, he was awarded **seven** Distinguished Flying Crosses, three Air Medals and three Commendation Medals. A testament to his dedication to finding a way to accomplish those critical Cold War missions.

As an aside, after two years of petitioning the Air Corps, in 1945 Dad finally got “his” P-51D, and was assigned to the **55th** Fighter Squadron, 20th Fighter Group at RAF Kings Cliffe for the remainder of WWII. His “seat of the pants” experience as a young pilot served him well. Hearing his experiences as a young boy fueled my desire to be an Air Force pilot, so I followed in his footsteps some years later. I’m proud to say that my son, Lt Col (R) Michael John Drost, who flew F-16s, did the same. Thanks, Dad, for being a great father and setting such a great example for us to follow. *Videmus Omnia.*