

# Getting to know the RB-47

by *Ben White*

## THE 55<sup>th</sup> GETTING TO KNOW THE RB-47H

When I checked into my new assignment to the 343rd SRS, 55th SRW at Forbes AFB, KS, in the fall of 1955, I was excited and enthusiastic about crewing on a new, all-jet aircraft. I was a 33-year old first lieutenant, married, who had just spent three years as a crow on RB-36s based at Ellsworth AFB. Approximately half of that time was as a raven one.

A number of crows from Rapid City had preceded me to Forbes. Ted Mitchell, a good friend then and now, was one. Ted and his family were living in a rental development called Likens-Foster (known to some as "Leaky Faucets)". Immediately upon our arrival, Ted showed my wife and I around, and within 24 hours we had bought a new house on Burlingame Road just a few miles west of the base.

After several weeks of paper shuffling and equipment orientation, I was assigned to a crew. During the equipment orientation I discovered that the ECM equipment I would be using was not very different from that in the RB-36.

Eugenius Zeisjof Dziejowski was my AC, a diminutive 5-foot, jovial captain from Atlanta. With this apparently unpronounceable name, he explained that he was known simply as "Gene Jowski". Our co-pilot changed by the hour. Steve Truhan and Guido Tesi are two that I recall.

Bachelor Huey Waple, a first lieutenant from Fairfax, VA, was our navigator. I was the raven one and Chuck Melahn from New York City, a bachelor second lieutenant, was raven two. Raven three was another shave tail, Bob Harward from Denver. Bob was married to a drop-dead gorgeous beauty who had recently been Miss Colorado.

Gene and I had seen combat service with the Army Air Forces during World War II. The other crewmembers had not. Gene, I think, had flown in the Berlin Air Lift. The ACs, navigators and co-pilots in the 343rd as well as the 38th and 338th all had several hundred hours in other than reconnaissance models of the B-47, much of it at bases such as Ben Guerir, Nouassur and Sidi Slimane in Libya. (That was before Muammar Khadafi came to power and selected the United States as his personal foe).

A primary objective of my first mission in the RB-47H was an orientation for me and another raven one, my buddy Ted Mitchell.

The ECM instructor for our initial flight was Captain John McCaffrey. To say that John McCaffrey was a colorful character is like saying that Curtis Lemay was a

pilot. He had the black hair, brows and mustache of a riverboat gambler. His visored cap didn't have a 50-mission crush, it had a 500-mission crush. The sharp edge of his New York accent enhanced the swashbuckler image. Having been flying with the 55th since the RB-29 days, John had spent so many deployments at Yokota that his conversation was heavily laced with Japanese phrases: "*dozo*," please; "*sukoshi*," little bit; "*takusan* ," whole lot," and many, many others.

On non-flying days, at noon John and his buddies could be found in the officers' club bar in a noisy game of hearts, the Japanese phrases bouncing off the wall.

At the aircraft John introduced us to the RB-47H. He showed us the hinged hatch on the plane's forward left side through which all crew members entered and exited. When opened, a telescoping ladder was revealed. You climbed this ladder to reach an aisle which accessed the navigator's position in the nose and the two pilot's positions some four feet above.

He pointed out a steel spoiler door on the forward side of the hatch opening. If the crew were to bail out, rather than eject, the AC would activate the spoiler door. Compressed air would thrust this spoiler door downward into the air stream so that air pressure would not prevent the crew from exiting the hatch. The pilots had upward ejection seats. The navigator and ravens had downward ejecting seats.

Three positions in the aisle, where the ravens would sit during takeoffs and landings, were equipped with slings of webbing. The ravens sat on the floor leaning back into these slings. John pointed out that each raven would be plugged into the intercom but only the raven one would have a mike.

John explained that, shortly after takeoff, the AC would depressurize the plane and put it in level flight for a few minutes during which time the ravens would open a roll-type hatch above the telescoped ladder, take a giant step across the empty space above the hinged hatch, open a small door and enter a cramped tunnel leading aft to the ECM compartment. In the ECM compartment (which in a bomber version of the aircraft was the bomb bay) the ravens would close the compartment door, buckle into their seats and notify the AC that they were in position. Forward and ECM compartments had separate pressurization systems. The raven one controlled ECM compartment pressurizing.

In our hard hats, oxygen masks, bulky flight suits, jackets and parachutes with bailout bottles (cylinders of compressed oxygen needed during high altitude bailout), we were a tight fit as we positioned ourselves for this muggy, summer night takeoff (SAC never began a training mission during business hours.)

As I settled into my sling, sitting on the floor in the aisle, with Ted in front of me and John behind, centered in the cacophonous vortex of six screaming jet engines, deafening even inside the plane and with earphones in my hard plastic helmet padded with sponge rubber, it is not an exaggeration to say that my sensory equipment was experiencing overload. I had some apprehensions about the

complete safety of my person. I had certain anxieties. You could truthfully say I was afraid of this airplane. Subsequent events illustrated that I was not alone in my trepidation.

Takeoff was uneventful. At an altitude of a few hundred feet, the aircraft leveled off and the AC told us over the intercom to proceed to the ECM compartment. John opened the hatch and crawled through the door into the tunnel leading aft. I followed taking great care to secure a tight grip on handholds while crossing the ladder well. I feared that if I should fall upon the hatch, it might open and drop me out into the black Kansas night.

Halfway through the tunnel, I felt my chute snag onto something and suddenly I was surrounded by billows of white silk (maybe nylon). During my training I had fully accepted the maxim that a parachute should not be deployed inside an aircraft. Yet I had inadvertently done so. My chute had opened. Ted, following me, was shrouded in my parachute. I struggled to gather armloads of parachute cloth and stuff it ahead of me into the ECM compartment. Inside the compartment, I got out of my parachute harness and managed to wind shroud lines about the material and to form it into a sloppy bundle that I stowed out of the way.

Ted closed and latched the door and John explained to the AC how things were going with the three stooges in our end of the airplane.

The AC told John to pressurize, which he did. The moment he flipped the pressurization control white vapor poured from the air vents engulfing the cabin. The three of us instantly concluded that smoke was issuing from the vents. Because the ECM cabin was surrounded by fuel tanks, this idea was panic-loaded. When John reported this to the AC, Gene made the lightning decision to order us to depressurize and move forward. This we did without anything dramatic happening. Twenty minutes after takeoff, the ECM portion of the mission had been scrapped. The mission continued, with us ravens in slings forward.

Over the intercom the pilots were discussing the poor performance of number four engine. After a few minutes number four was shut down. When this information was radioed to the 55th command post, the AC was ordered to abort the mission and return to base. Shortly thereafter, a counter-decision was issued: Proceed to Hunter AFB, SC. This apparently was based upon weather conditions at Forbes and the presumed availability of either repair or replacement of our defective engine, Hunter being a B-47 base.

I was totally unprepared for our descent (or penetration, in jet-speak) to Hunter. John McCaffrey had not told me, nor had anyone else, that in going from 35,000 feet to 5,000 feet a B-47 didn't fly to the lower altitude. It went into a virtual free fall, the wings and stabilizer providing no lift. As we hurtled quietly downward, I was aghast that any flying organization as professional as Curtis Lemay's SAC would even consider such a mindless maneuver. Had I been given the choice at that point of

continuing my flying career or walking safely away from it, I would have give it serious consideration.

We landed at Hunter in Saturday's wee hours, no SAC rarity.

The Hunter officers' club was conveniently located just across the street from our BOQ. Ted and I, sharing a room, arose Sunday morning in time to get some breakfast there. On entering the club, an elderly man clad in suit and tie, dressed for church I thought, was busily arranging a beautiful display of, to me at least, exotic flowering plants. I commented that this was a splendid display to someone else who had paused to admire it. That person whispered that the old gentleman was Major General Somebody who had a command relationship with Hunter's past. I walked over to him and said, "They're beautiful. Did you raise them?" "I didn't steal them," he responded crustily. So much for southern gentility.

We learned that our engine could not be repaired at Hunter and that a replacement would take a few days to deliver. With only flight uniforms and no toilet kits, we were in a poor position to enjoy our unplanned sojourn. This was neither the first nor the last such experience for any of us.

We bought toothbrushes and razors, we read, we went to movies, we ate at the officers' club. We called home and talked to our families. After several days of this we began to go stir crazy. The three crows and the navigator decided to make a foray into Charleston. Sympathetic residents of the BOQ loaned us some clothes; we bought a few polo shirts and underwear items at the exchange, and minimally presentable as Air Force dudes, the four of us went to town.

Someone on base had recommended the food at an antebellum, architecturally impressive hotel in downtown Charleston. So we gave it a shot. The food, served by an ancient black waiter with a thunderous, deep bass voice, was superb.

After a martini or two, John McCaffrey hit his tale-telling stride and regaled us with one war story after another about TDY in the Land of the Rising Sun.

We were relaxing after our tasty meal, our boredom from the monotony of days in the BOQ having evaporated.

"I think I'll have a cigar," John declared. "And I believe I'll have some brandy," I responded as we placed these orders with our deep-voiced waiter.

Minutes later, he approached the table with cigar and brandy snifter on a silver salver. With a flourish, he handed John his cigar and asked imperiously, "Which one gets the COGNACK?"

We waited six days for a replacement engine and its installation. The ECM compartment pressurization system was checked out and deemed safe. The vapor was determined to have been moisture that had condensed under pressure. The

ravens planned a mission for the homeward bound flight and all went well until we reached Kansas and began our penetration. Again I felt severe trepidation. But having survived one, the second wasn't too bad.

When we reached level off, all three ravens transited the tunnel, door and hatch without incident. We got into our landing positions and John closed the hatch. I felt proud as punch that I had mastered my job on the RB-47H. All of my earlier anxieties had been for naught  
KERBLAM! A loud explosive sound. Then a foul odor engulfed me. Like the smell from inside an old automobile tube.

AC: "What the hell was that?"

Co-pilot: "Nothing seems wrong from here."

Raven one: "AC, did you activate the spoiler door?"

AC: "Nope."

A careful check of instruments and crew conditions revealed no unsafe indicators. Approach and landing were normal. Not until we landed and left the aircraft did we discover what had happened. John noticed that the rubber tube leading from my bailout bottle was shredded. And my bailout bottle was empty.

What we deduced was that in my moving to landing position, the tube had somehow been pinched and that the green knob, which I would have pulled to provide oxygen to my mask in case of bailout at altitude, had been pulled. It apparently had hung up on one of a number of control cables running along inside the fuselage next to my takeoff and landing position. When I sat down, I pulled the knob, opening the valve in the bailout bottle. Oxygen under high pressure gushed into the rubber hose that was pinched. It ballooned until it went KERBLAM.

That was my introduction to the finest military aircraft on which I ever flew as a crew member. In time I even slept through the penetration.

.....Ben White , Corolla, NC