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Here is a story I wrote about one bad day I had while in the 55th. Readers might think this is a composite of several bad flights, but this really did happen on one flight. And maybe for people who knew me, it might just sound like a typical day. It was written for people unfamiliar with the RB-47. Unfortunately, I don't remember who was on that flight. When flying Common Cause, we often went with mixed crews. For all the crows out there who flew on the H model, most will have some similar bad days. I hope you can use it. (" Common Cause was an ELINT reconnaissance sortie established during the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. The primary purpose was to search for and locate SA-2 missile related radars and other threat radars in Cuba. The 55th continued to fly these missions into the 1970s with the RC-135. ...ed.")

The Flight From Hell

by Tony Villari

Back a number of years ago, I was a crewmember on an RB-47H. The RB-47 was a six-engine SAC bomber converted into an electronic reconnaissance vehicle. The normal crew of three (pilot, co-pilot, and navigator) was augmented by three additional crewmembers, electronic warfare officers (EWOs) nicknamed "crows." The front compartment of the B-47 was designed for three crewmembers with three seats and a very narrow aisle between the Navigator and the pilots. We had a compartment built into the bomb bay of the B-47 that housed the three of us and our equipment. The compartment was unusual in that it had three ejection seats that fired downward when activated. Because of this we had to sit in the aisle up front for takeoffs and landings and then transfer through a crawlway to our compartment after takeoff and back to the front just before landing. Needless to say, the accommodations were extremely cramped. We had to wear parachutes in case of a problem during takeoff or landing so this further restricted our movements. We had an arrangement of webbed slings up front that we needed to setup prior to takeoff and landing. We rode with our backs to the direction of travel. Because I had short legs, I usually rode in the sling over the pressure door. As such I was the first one down the crawlway after takeoff and the last one forward before landing. When opening the pressure door, after takeoff, you would have to step down and across to the crawlway avoiding putting your feet on the outside entrance door which was a thin piece of aluminum that wasn't capable of supporting the weight of a man. The crawlway was about 15 feet long. At the end was another pressure door for the bomb bay capsule. After entering the compartment, we closed and sealed the pressure door, took our seats and fired up our equipment. We repeated the reverse process just before landing.

This flight started early one morning from our home base of Forbes AFB, Topeka, KS. We had a regular ten-hour mission that we flew about twice a month that always had takeoff times between two and three in the morning. As such we needed to be at the Base two hours before takeoff to perform a preflight of the airplane and our equipment. Combined with the time for preflight and post flight debriefing this

mission made for a very long day. It was always difficult getting enough rest before the flight and we would usually arrive at the base pretty sleepy eyed. This particular morning we completed our preflight and went to the base operations cafeteria for some breakfast. I ordered pancakes. While at the condiment station to get some syrup, I inadvertently overfilled my plate with syrup. While trying to negotiate the distance back to where my crew was eating, I tipped my plate and dumped the syrup down the front of my flying suit. This was the start of a day I will never forget. It was too late to go home and change my clothes so I was forced to go on the flight with a sticky flying suit.

Takeoff was uneventful and we settled into our seats in the rear compartment. A couple of hours into the flight, I decided to drink the milk out of my box lunch. I picked up the paper carton and proceeded to open it in the conventional manner with my thumbs inserted into the folded over top. I must have been superman that day because the carton split in half dumping the milk in my lap. Things were starting to roll.

Not long after that, I got out of my seat to move to the front of the compartment to use the relief tube. The compartment was only about four feet high so it was difficult to squeeze between the narrow opening between the aft ejection seats in a crouched over position and get to the relief tube. Even though I had been flying in the RB-47 for about three years at this point, I somehow had never flown on this particular airplane. This airplane had the conventional funnel shaped relief tube but also had a release switch unlike every other plane in the fleet. Not knowing this, I knew something was wrong when I first began to feel the warm liquid running down my leg. I was talking to myself by this time.

On the way back to my seat, I needed to negotiate the narrow space between the aft ejection seats. There was an I-beam extending across the span of the compartment behind the two rear seats that was about 16 inches high. Mounted on it was a fire extinguisher. As I raised my leg to get over the beam, I kicked the top of the fire extinguisher breaking off the valve and releasing the contents into the compartment. The chemical in the fire extinguisher (chloro-bromo-methane) was for electrical fires and very potent. For the remainder of the flight, we had to wear our oxygen masks and use oxygen. The chemical burned our eyes and we were very uncomfortable.

Finally, it was time to move to the front compartment for landing. I was the last one out of the bomb bay. Once in the crawlway, I had to turn around to close the pressure door to the rear compartment. I made the mistake of not putting on my gloves before going forward. As I turned to proceed forward, I touched a hot pipe from the air conditioning system with my bare hand. I jerked my hand back instinctively, and proceeded to yank my parachute D-ring popping my chute in the crawlway. I then had to proceed forward with my arms full of parachute to my position up front.

I managed to skip the post flight debriefing with the blessing of the aircraft commander and sneak off of the base and head for home without any further incidents.
