

FROM BILL ERNST

Some of my history as a reconnaissance crew dog was in the 24th SRS at Eielson AFB from April 1966 to October 1968. I received my initial check ride with none other than Maj. Regis F A Urschler in the RC-135 D, Rivet Brass aircraft. Upon our return to Eielson from a 14-hour mission, Reg flew a 360 overhead approach and landing. his would be the beginning of a long and professional relationship.

Months later, the SQ Ops Officer, Mort Blaisdale, gave me my Shemya check to make sure I could safely land an RC with maximum cross winds at Shemya. Shortly thereafter my crew and I began flying the RC-135S, Rivet Ball on its very interesting mission.

In the summer of 1968 the RC135E Rivet Amber was finishing its extensive modification at LTV Greenville, Tx. Three crews were selected to check out in the aircraft and fly the phased test flights. My phase was the second phase originating from Greenville, Offutt AFB and the last from Hickam in the Hawaiian Islands.

The final tests were completed and the Aircraft was flown to Eielson and then to Shemya. This aircraft was different from the D and S models in that its operating weight was much heavier and it had TF-33 fan engines with thrust reversers. Because of its operating weight of 185000 pounds, it carried less fuel. This demanded careful monitoring of the weather for recovery to ensure fuel reserves were adequate to reach Eielson in the event winds or visibility prevented landing at Shemya. I flew this RC most of the time until the following June. My close friend Maj Chuck Michaud was bringing the aircraft back to Eielson for maintenance to include a TCTO which required inspection and possibly replacement of worn bolts that fasten the vertical stabilizer and rudder to the empennage. Shortly after level off on the way back, aircraft and crew were lost somewhere over the Bering Sea. We flew search missions for over a week. No wreckage or any part of the aircraft was ever found.

I flew a few more missions in the D and S models before my tour was over in October when I was reassigned to Oscan AB Korea.

After a tour at 15th AF Directorate of Reconnaissance as the RC-135 operations specialist I was assigned to the 55th Strat. Recon. Wing In July 1973, at Offutt AFB as the 343rd Recon Squadron Commander. We were flying several versions of the -135 but primarily the "C" and "U" models around the world while keeping a close eye on Cuba. Soon after I took command, we underwent the largest change in mission and mission aircraft we had ever undertaken. The 82nd Recon Squadron stood down and all aircraft came to the 55th. Meanwhile my crew force went from 19 crews to nine then back up to 22 as we absorbed some of the 82nd crews and got a raft of new folks in that needed to be trained. Oh, did I mention that we had no training aircraft or ground school to train the new folks? At the same time, we retained the missions we had been assigned plus opening a new operating location in Athens Greece and their associated missions. In February 1976, I was assigned as Assistant Director of Operations for the WING and in July I received orders to be the Commander of the 6950 Security Group at RAF Chicksands, England for further broadening of my reconnaissance capabilities. There was no runway or airplanes to fly, just an antenna farm which provided a window behind the iron curtain into the Soviet Union

communications world. SigINT was the new acronym. I also had five operating locations in Germany and one in Spain to keep me busy.

In July 1998 I was reassigned to Offutt AFB at SAC HQ Directorate of Reconnaissance in charge of RC-135 operations around the world. During my assignment we began and completed the first 14 aircraft modification to the Rivet Joint RC-135V and W configurations. We finally got a motion simulator and designated training aircraft as well as initiating an RC school house to facilitate the enormous training problem that had been overlooked for so long.

I retired from the AF in August 1984 after over 6000 flying hours and 30 years of a priceless AF career.