

ML.56.The Final Flight of Lisa Ann
Various Sources – Compiled January 28, 2023

From Wikipedia.com:

Originally designated C-135B-II, project name Lisa Ann, the RC-135E Rivet Amber was a one-of-a-kind aircraft equipped with a large 7 MW Hughes Aircraft phased-array radar system. Originally delivered as a C-135B, 62-4137 operated from Shemya Air Force Station, Alaska from 1966 to 1969. Its operations were performed in concert with the RC-135S Rivet Ball aircraft. The radar system alone weighed over 35,000 pounds and cost over US\$35 million (1960 dollars), making Rivet Amber both the heaviest C-135-derivative aircraft flying and the most expensive Air Force aircraft for its time.

The system could track an object the size of a soccer ball from a distance of 300 miles (480 km), and its mission was to monitor Soviet ballistic missile testing in the reentry phase. The power requirement for the phased array radar was enormous, necessitating an additional power supply. This took the form of a podded Lycoming T55-L5 turboshaft engine in a pod under the left inboard wing section, driving a 350kVA generator dedicated to powering mission equipment. On the opposite wing in the same location was a podded heat exchanger to permit cooling of the massive electronic components on board the aircraft. This configuration has led to the mistaken impression that the aircraft had six engines. On June 5, 1969, Rivet Amber was lost at sea on a ferry flight from Shemya to Eielson AFB for maintenance, and no trace of the aircraft or its crew was ever found.



Lost with Lisa Ann were:

Charles B. Michaud	Peter S. Carpenter
Richard N. Martel	Michael E. Mills
Horace G. Beasley	Rudolph J. Meissner, Jr.
James F. Ray	Herbert C. Gregory
Lester J. Schatz	Donald F. Wonders
Hervey Hebert	Charles F. Dreher
Robert W. Fox	Eugene L. Benevides
Roy L. Lindsey	Richard J. Steen, Jr.
Douglas Arcano	Sherman E. Consolver, Jr.
Lucian A. Rominiecki	

A number of current members of the 55th flew the aircraft and knew its ill-fated crew during its three-year life.

From Kingdon Hawes:

Regarding Shemya, the very first thing that comes to mind is the loss of Rivet Amber (RC-135E, No. 62-4137) and her crew on 5 June 1969. I was the acting squadron commander of the 24th SRS on that fateful day. Seven of the 19 souls aboard were officers assigned to the 24th SRS. Breaking the news to each family member in person was the most difficult assignment of my 22+ years of service in the Air Force.

The other twelve crew members were divided between the 55th SRW (6-TDY Maintenance Troops) and the USAF Security Service aka "Spooks / Secret Squirrels". The names of the six maintenance troops on TDY to Shemya from the 55th SRW were added to the 55th WA Memorial on 8 Sept. 2005.

On 13 Sept. 2007 I was invited by the 45th RS / 55th SRWA to dedicate a 1/72 scale model of Rivet Amber donated by Col. Ray "Jumbo" O'Neal. It is currently located in the 45th RS at Offutt. Every year since that dedication Col. Jim Thomas (Ret.) invited me to participate in the annual 55th WA, "Tales of the 55th". I felt honored.

My most recent involvement with Rivet Amber is a monument installed (2022) alongside the Cobra Ball II (664) monument at the 45th RS on Offutt. I worked closely over the years with Maj. Glen 'CW' Roberts in creating this monument. CW is the one I give full credit for this accomplishment.

From Reg Urschler:

Lisa Ann was commanded by a close friend of Frank Hicks and myself as we three arrived at the same time at Forbes in 1955. Charles 'Mitch' Michaud was the aircraft Commander on the 'Amber.' He was quiet, unassuming and a superb pilot. We both had been at Vance just prior, he already commissioned and in 'Advanced' training in A-26's after having completed USAF undergraduate pilot training, I as an Aviation Cadet about to be winged and commissioned in B-25's (we didn't know each other there), then both direct to Forbes and the new RB-47H recce program. Mitch married a gal from Enid, but I have no clue where she might be today.

I flew the aircraft from its first arrival at Eielson in the Fall of 1966 (only four of ten crews qualified) and then Shemya from September 1966 until PCS to the 55th at Offutt in April

1967.

I recall walking from my position as the AC to the rear station in flight where the TC Capt Charlie Levis demonstrated how the radar operated by moving the round reticle on the radar screen out to the three-hundred-mile mark where it would lock onto the actual incoming re-entry vehicle(s). According to Ron Strong, who flew with us when capturing the first SS-11 MRV launched by the USSR on 26 September 1966, the radar was not shielded, which may explain why I never had any children.



From Ron Strong:

This airplane had originally been destined to be a Military Air Transport Service (MATS) C-135B cargo transport and had been specially converted for the reconnaissance task. Only 30 of the B models were made, including Lisa Ann.

The initial cost, even adjusted to reflect earlier and later costs of the many different models, may well have been the single most expensive RC-135 ever. It was also the heaviest for a number of years and may be the heaviest ever. The modification was started about April of 1963, cost \$35 million, and took 37 months to complete. By comparison, 10 C-135Bs were converted to RC-135Cs at the Martin factory in Baltimore, Maryland in about the same length of time, the last C being delivered in November of 1967. One source says the cost for Lisa Ann was \$100 million. The total cost, including the initial acquisition, was about \$1000 per pound. Not only was it expensive, but also it had a very high Precedence Rating in the intelligence community. Lisa Ann had a rating of I-17, indicating that only 16 other Air Force intelligence projects were more important. The other RC-135 at Shemya had a Precedence Rating of I-18. The airplane's special radar was to track Soviet Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) re-entry vehicles, the warheads, as they were being tested. The target test area was on the east side on the Kamchatka Peninsula near Uka airbase in the far eastern part of the Soviet Union.

We were told that we had been hand-selected for assignment to a truly unique aircraft, with highly classified equipment, to be flown from a forward operating location. Little did we realize at that time that the "forward operating location" was Shemya Air Force Station, Alaska, in our 49th state. Termed "The Black Pearl of the Pacific," for the black sand beaches, or "The Rock," for its volcanic origin, Shemya is the next-to-the-last-inhabited-island and fifth-from-last numerically in the Aleutian Island chain at the western extremity of Alaska. It is closer to Japan (800 miles) than to Anchorage (1500 miles). Shemya is part of the Near Island group, so-named by Russian explorers because of the islands' proximity to Russian territory which was the Komandorsky Islands that are only about 300 miles away.

Shemya could have some of the world's worst weather: low temperatures, high winds, thick overcast, rain, and fog - all at the same time. Inclement weather could last for only a few minutes or weeks on end. During World War II more men were lost to weather than to enemy action. (Actually, not a single person was lost on Shemya to enemy action.)

Lisa Ann, an RC-135E, and another reconnaissance aircraft, Wanda Belle, an RC-135S with a similar mission, flew from Shemya. Lisa Ann was later renamed Rivet Amber and

Wanda Belle, named Rivet Ball, was subsequently changed to Cobra Ball. Wanda Belle was originally named Nancy Rae before having airframe modifications made in the early 1960s that included the characteristic elongated reconnaissance nose.

Seven of us Ravens would ultimately fly the RC-135E, ground and flight test the equipment, and test it in an operational environment. We were Captains Charles A. Levis, George Reagan, Peter M. Hurd, Richard P. Reeves, and Duncan Wilmore, and two 1st Lieutenants, David B. Hubbard and me, Ronald D. Strong. (Charlie was shot down while flying in an EB-66C, Bat 21 of movie fame, over Quang Tri Province in Viet Nam on Easter Morning of 1972.)

– Excerpted from <http://rc135.com/0001/INDEX054.HTM>

From Bill Ernst:

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 185,000 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.

CAUTION!

I would suggest that anyone interested in learning from the 'Horse's Mouth' the actual history of the initial deployment of Lisa Ann to her assigned operating location on 'The Rock' get the factual, hands-on, in-the-arena, sleeping with the aircraft in the hangar on 'hard alert' conditions, standing up a brand new, unique, 'one-of-a-kind' program with no operational guidance in a highly modified aircraft, operating at its maximum capability under the very worst conditions from the last surviving member of the first team who learned OJT the intricacies and nuances and who established procedures for those who would follow-on. Those interested in ensuring an accurate record need to speak now or be prepared for those who may (and I suggest will) speak later with 'forked tongues' as 'experts' with no one remaining to speak the actual facts.

And let us not forget to recognize and give credit to all those who supported the operation, a professional and dedicated group of maintenance men, admin folks and others especially family members who waited and served at home, SAC families and Security Service families, some making the biggest sacrifice of all, their loved ones. They will be remembered.

'At the Going down of the Sun' we simply would not have been successful without all of them serving as key members of the Lisa Anne TEAM!

W/R and concern and in memory of ALL who were there. – Reg



Lisa Ann Prologue:

An interesting prologue to the Lisa Ann / Rivet Amber story was written by Lt. Col. Joseph T. Cleary, USAF (Ret.), the Project Officer at Headquarters SAC in 1963 for Lisa Ann / Rivet Amber and also responsible for Wanda Belle / Rivet Ball.

Read it at <http://rc135.com/0001/INDEX055.HTM>.