

62. One Last Flight

This was my 29th sortie in Rivet Ball, and the last one for the aircraft. It was 13 January 1969, a half hour past midnight — "the we-bitching hour." After an uneventful tactical mission, I took the plane back to Shemya for recovery. The weather was typical, with blowing snow and cross winds. Ceiling was decent.

I was often quoted as saying; "If the good Lord was looking for a place to give the earth an enema, Shemya would be the insertion point." Ground crews sprayed the runway with isopropyl which turned the snow into slush. The runway was swept; at least some of it. Several landing clearances were issued and then revoked. The emphasis was on the crosswinds and the runway condition got short shrift on the information side.

Rivet Amber had already been diverted to Eielson AFB due to the cross winds. They were out of limits for her fan engines. Rivet Ball's J-57's were okay with the winds but it would be sporty. A final landing clearance was issued to me, orbiting at FL 200. Landing information included an RCR that was within limits for landing and again the main effort for information concentrated on the crosswind.

The penetration, approach, and landing were as normal as could be expected with existing conditions. Everything went to hell in a handbasket after landing. The plane hydroplaned the full length of the runway and over a forty-foot cliff destroying the aircraft. The accident board did not assess any crew or pilot error and ALL EIGHTEEN WALKED AWAY.

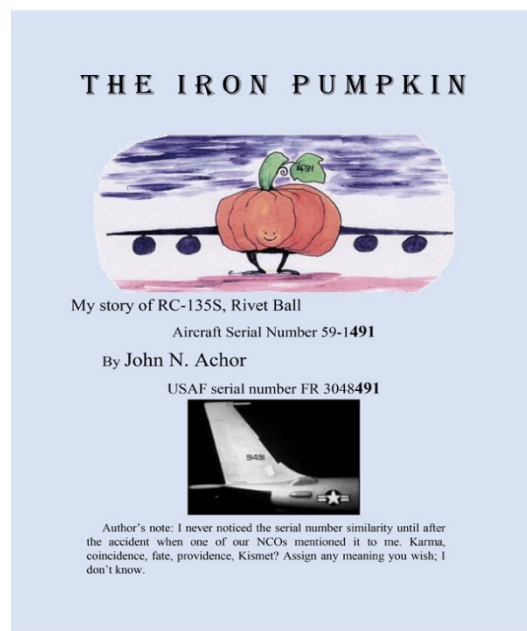
As the crew was being evaluated at the base infirmary, a major from the tower came in asking, "Did anyone tell you the last 2,000 feet of the runway had not been cleared?" I said Stu Williams, my Nav 2 replied, "What difference did that make? By that time, we'd turned into a pumpkin." That comment morphed into The Iron Pumpkin—which became the title of a movie by Captain Bob (Viper) Brown, Team 2 Manual Tracker and as the title of my memoir. The Team 2 EWO's wrote a narrative to accompany an award and submitted me for the Airman's Medal. It got lost somewhere in the bureaucracy and was never heard from.

Finally - The Weather Was on My Side

The accident board would convene on Shemya. They were loaded aboard a KC-135 and flew to the island – three times. Twice they



The pile of dirt even with the base of the vertical stabilizer is the runway



Cover of John's memoir about Rivet Ball

were forced to divert back to Eielson. Weather was too bad for landing. Third time was a charm and the team landed at Shemya.

While milling around Shemya Base Operations, the team watched as the weather went from CAVU down to Zero-Zero with blowing snow and back to CAVU all in thirty minutes.

During my time in the interrogation chair, when I mentioned weather, I got knowing nods.

A couple of quirks that final week. First, we were filling training squares when the entire crew, front end, Ravens, Photogs and Security Service crew dogs sat down to discuss emergency procedures on the ground and evacuation. The Security Service men sat so far back in the plane they were almost in the unpressurized tail cone. One of them asked who could open the hatch in an emergency. I responded with the party line that only a SAC crew member could open it. I added that if I was sitting next to the hatch, and that it was an emergency, I would not sit around with my thumb up somewhere waiting for an authorized crew member to get the hatch out of the way. Years later, one of those guys got in touch with me and he had the green neoprene snap-on-cover that hid the escape rope for that hatch. He sent it to me. I don't know who opened the hatch, I didn't ask, I didn't care as long as the job got done and it was wide open when I got to it to get the hell out of the bird.

One other quirk of fate, karma, whatever. I had never noticed this coincidence until after the accident when it was pointed out by one of the maintenance NCO's. The aircraft serial number was: 59-1491. My Air Force Serial number was: FR3048491.

- John Achor, Lt Col, USAF, Ret

[Postscript: On our first trip into Upper Heyford after the Rivet Ball accident, my Nav 1 came to me after landing. He said "I figured this landing would be the one that tested you." He was referring to the similarity between the runways at Shemya and Upper Heyford. Upper Heyford sported an 8,300-foot swayback runway and it was a night landing. When I asked him how I did, he said, "You passed."]