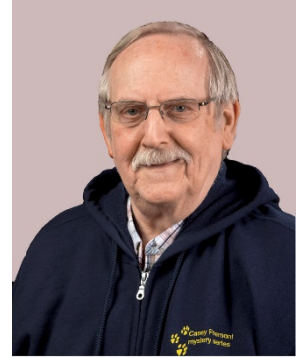


ML.64.Introduction to SAC Reconnaissance

In the spring of 1967, I received orders to head to Castle AFB, CA for air refueling training, and then a PCS to Alaska. I, with wife Pat and our three children, landed up north looking forward to a new and different adventure. Base housing was not available, so we moved into a daylight basement apartment in Fairbanks. A-67 was in full swing celebrating Alaska's One Hundredth anniversary of "Seward's Folly."



And then, Mother Nature came a visiting. It was Oh-dark-early on 21 June, 1967 when a Seven-point-oh earthquake hit a few miles south of Fairbanks. We had borrowed furniture from the base and the three-foot mirror standing on a chest did a half-gainer onto the floor. A short time later, August 12th to be exact, the earlier dire predictions from an old-timer way up the Chena River came to be. The water rose nearly five feet above ground in our neighborhood – and our living quarters were half below ground.

A row boat ride to the spot where my car was parked, a mad dash for the air base and we left the high waters behind. We stayed in the VOQ, the Ops Officer's basement, a three-bedroom unit on base, and a final move in December to a four-bedroom base unit across the street from the O-Club.

Jimmy Jones was my sponsor and loaned me a car to get to the base while my own auto completed its transit to Anchorage by boat and was being winterized. Those who have never been to Alaska may not realize what it takes to start a car in a winter climate that can drop into the 60s below; they need special equipment to survive. A battery plate placed underneath the battery; a block heater that can keep the coolant slushy, not frozen, and an interior heater which might keep the interior around ten below. All this equipment was connected to an electrical plug protruding from the grill. There was a procedure trolling a parking lot looking for an open spot at the hitching posts so the car could be attached to a lifesaving electrical outlet.

Some of you will remember Jimmy Jones, who encountered a MiG over the Arctic. Not totally unusual, but this Russian pilot decided to play cannon tag with Jimmy's RC-135D and fired a shot across the bow. Jimmy played it cool, stayed the course and the MiG pilot called it a day, heading toward the coast looking for feet dry. Pucker time, times ten.

More in-the-cockpit duties – Eielson AFB, AK

During the summer interlude battling Mother Nature, I flew check rides in the D model for familiarization and refueling and also completed "island qualification." Rather than risk a recon bird, they borrowed a tanker from the ETTF and flew the fifteen hundred miles to Shemya Air Station. Qualification requirements included three full-stop landings with a minimum of twenty-five knots crosswind thirty or forty degrees off the nose. With that behind me, I was cleared to fly Rivet Ball on PHOTOINT missions from the island.

Yes, Rivet Ball; not Cobra. The original Ball, RC-135S was 59-1491, and previously was identified as Nancy Rae and Wanda Belle, which I remember so well.

On arrival to the 24th SRS, I inherited crew E-10 from Regis Urschler (then Major, later BGen, USAF, Ret). Being new to SAC recon, I felt fortunate to be assigned a strong, well-coordinated crew.

Another of Mother Nature's challenges

It was a typical tasking out of Eielson with a night takeoff. When I reached the refueling area, the tanker slid out and took the lead. I was closing on the tanker when the aurora borealis decided it was time to make an appearance. This time the northern lights were not the usual

dancing spectacle; it was nearly flat and stable forming what looked like a horizon.

The unsettling thing about this “horizon” – the lights formed were about twenty-degrees off plumb. “That slanted horizon gave me fits.” “Vertigo set in and I had to rely on flight training to concentrate on the tanker aircraft as a frame of reference and ignore the fake horizon.”

[I had no idea of the wide variety of experiences I would encounter during a single two- and a half-year tour with the 24th Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron, 6th Strategic Wing at Eielson AFB, AK.]

- John Achor, Lt. Col., USAF, Ret

[Weather could be exciting in Southeast Asia, too, with plenty of St. Elmo's Fire and the occasional epic lightning storm that would leave the KC-135 cloaked in the blackest black, then suddenly, intermittently, and for perhaps a second or two, the tanker would fill the windscreen, as though someone switched a Broadway spotlight on and off. – ed]