

A Vacation in The South Pacific

On an early Friday afternoon, sometime in the July—August 1968 time frame, the Detachment 1 Commander got a call from the 6th Strategic Wing at Eielson. The message said the French were planning to resume atomic bomb testing in the South Pacific. The Joint Reconnaissance Center (Pentagon) was tasking Rivet Ball to cover the events and they should launch as soon as possible. Since my crew was on the island flying Ball, the missions fell to us. Inside two hours, we flight planned the leg to Hawaii for briefings, packed our go-bags and called SAC Recon Center to tell them they were ready to launch.

Now we all know that Friday afternoons are a beehive of inactivity, and it was now dark outside in Washington D.C. The word came back: Whoa, Hoss! Hang loose and launch Monday morning.

Hawaii included more than briefings. Most crew dogs deployed to Shemya with a minimal clothing allowance: a spare flight suit, enough underwear for a week and a Dopp kit. As soon as we had a free minute at Hickam Air Base, we all hit the BX and bought out their supply of Aloha shirts and Bermuda shorts.

The next day, with our dedicated KC-135 in tow, we headed for Johnston Island nearly 750 nm away. The tanker was critical since our tasked target, Mururoa Atoll, was a bit over 2,000nm from Johnston. I complimented the tanker pilot saying he provided a smooth refueling platform as he rolled in an easy descent so Ball could get a tanks-full onland in the warm Pacific skies.

Back at the briefings in Hawaii, I asked what our duties would be. They told me to, “Just orbit that atoll until you glow in the dark and then you can come home.” We took standard flash and blast protections, but I don’t recall any captures. Either the French went off schedule or they cancelled some tests.

Back to the island: Johnston was “owned” by the U.S. Navy, but at this time an Army colonel was the island commander. It was originally an accompanied tour for Navy personnel. Once a month, they hauled dependents to Hawaii to keep them from going nutso on a scrap of land about two miles long by a mile wide.

When informed the crew might need to drive at night, the island commander blew his stack. His response to a perceived homosexual problem on the island, was no driving at night. I never did understand that rationale. The commander also went into a sputtering fit when he saw the crew members running everywhere wearing Bermuda shorts and Aloha shirts.

There was a carry over to Burning Light, coverage of the French nuclear tests. Later, when I was assigned to the Strategic Reconnaissance Center (SRC) at SAC Headquarters, Offutt AFB, NE, the word came down; the French have stopped all nuclear testing, destroy all copies of Burning Light ops orders. I complied; except for a single copy stashed away in the back of a file cabinet. My premonition proved correct. In a few months, the game was on again, the French changed their minds. While other staff members were moaning that they would have to rewrite the entire ops order, I told them I could provide a finished product in a couple of days.

How so fast? I met Major Jack Donovan, in Korea. Jack was widely known as a Wild Weasel Bear (back seater, from the initial stages of the Wild Weasel program. Check out the acronym – YGBSM – which to this day is part of the Wild Weasel patch). Donovan taught me there are three vital tools every Ops Officer must have and use: scissors, Scotch tape, and a stapler. Remember, these were the days before computers and even copy machines were a scarce commodity.

- John Achor, Lt Col, Ret