

ML.84.Burning Light

I was assigned to 15th AF/DOR as POC for all French Nuclear Test Operations in the Pacific while at 15th AF, from Jan 1971 until July 1973 when I PCS'd to Offutt. As such, I was the 135 guy during Burning Light, a NUDINT mission covering the tests on Muramura Atoll, in 1972. Systems Command had an NC-135A (I don't recall the tail number) that was to take part in the Burning Light operation and I got involved at the direction of the 15th DO.

E-Systems at Greenville, TX, was to put a Canoe shaped radome on top of the aircraft inside of which were various sensors. The entire project got behind schedule so that the Det at Greenville didn't have a chance to properly test the aircraft after the antenna was installed, and Systems Command needed to deploy the aircraft. It was flown into Norton AFB where some systems people installed more equipment. A few days later it was flown to Hawaii and joined the rest of the deployed operation.



Sometime later the fleet of aircraft took off from Hickam and flew to the test area. The mission consisted of two recon aircraft plus two refuelable tankers, and four or five tankers took off from Hickam. The first air refueling consisted of the tankers filling up the mission acft and the two tankers and then returning to Hickam. The second refueling had the two refuelable tankers offload to the mission acft and RTB. The mission aircraft, after the second refueling, were supposed to have enough gas to complete the mission. The test was successful and the aircraft all collected the data for which they were sent. All aircraft then headed back to Hickam except the Systems Command aircraft, which diverted to Guam. Apparently, the Systems aircraft crew miscalculated their fuel consumption and didn't have enough fuel to make it back to Hickam after the event. Enroute to Guam, the aircraft and crew were lost, cause unknown.

Prior to its deployment, I found out from the Det people at Greenville that the aircraft had not been properly tested for airworthiness after the Mod and they were concerned about the aircraft and the safety of the crews that were to fly it. I briefed Gen Carlton, the 15th AF Commander, on the situation, and recommended that he send a message to SAC and the 55th SRW Commander directing that no SAC crew members were to fly on that aircraft. I wrote and coordinated the message, Gen. Carlton signed it, and I then sent it.

We later learned that LtCol Billy Skipworth, 2ACCS CC and Det CC, was on the aircraft when it went down in the South Pacific with no survivors. We had no actual knowledge of what caused the loss of the aircraft, but the lack of proper testing for airworthiness after the modification and

prior to deployment leads one to surmise that the canoe antenna came off damaging the stabilizer, causing loss of control and subsequent loss of the aircraft.

Some years later the 55th named the 2nd ACCS building the 'Billy Skipworth Operations Building' and it the name remained until the 2019 flood caused the building to be razed.

On another occasion, one of our aircraft lost an engine and landed at Christmas Island, a little out of the way...

And that is the rest of the TRUE story.

- *Bill Ernst*

As I recall, this mission ran at least three years starting in 1971 as Dial Flower (I think). Burning Light was the title in 1972 when I got there, with seven tankers and eight crews from all over SAC, three 55th crews.

My memories are what they are but solid on the split tour I spent there. The crew I was on was married to #514. We went to Carswell in May to get edumacated about the plane and flew a couple of test hops. We went from there to Hickam without a touch and go at home, and were there for six weeks Jun-July, back to Offutt and then aloha again for another two weeks to the end of July.

My log book indicates #121 was an RC-135T, #126 a KC-135R as was our aircraft #514, all refuelable. I flew all of them at Offutt on Cuban sorties and trainers.

On Burning Light, I flew three ops missions but saw just one event, a mere trigger devise that blew up a bunch of dirt, no mushroom cloud. We sat alert, jumped off at midnight to get there at sun up for the event. There were three tankers on the way down, and the last one got back to Hickam on fumes.

Jimmy Jet Morrow and crew flew the Systems Command aircraft. George Miller was Det CC and Danny Curzon ops officer. I think Hank Schuring had #126 and crew.

All this was during the Viet Nam era, so those tanker crews were not happy beach guys, even in Hawaii, because they were TDY so much.

- *Max Moore*