

ML.106.Hedge's Animals

'Hedge's Animals' was a crew not unlike the 'Leper Colony' in the film 'Twelve O'clock High,' all extremely capable but simply lacking leadership. In both cases, with great leaders, they succeeded in producing enviable mission results.

Every unit – fighter, bomber or transport – has its own composition of unique individuals, more so in fighter units, where individuals are responsible for only their aircraft, than in bomber or transport groups that are taught to operate as an integral crew. A reconnaissance unit, rather than being a 'vanilla' outfit, to replicate the spirit, imagination and individualism of the fighters, faces the challenge: 'how to lead a herd of cats.'

Richard 'Dick' Hedge joined the 55th at Offutt in early '67 with nearly 5,000 hours in -135's, mostly in the RC-135D at Eielson where he transitioned from copilot to Aircraft Commander, responsible for a crew of six SAC Crew members plus some twenty or so USAFSS members consisting of linguists, analysts, code copying crew member flying over the entire expanse of the Arctic, Sea of Japan, Sea of Okhotsk and along the Aleutian chain plus operating the RC-135S 'Wanda Belle,' PHOT-INT aircraft from Shemya in the Aleutians, the point being he joined his new outfit with thousands of hours not only in the RC-135 airframe but in the area of interest. This was when the 55th was not only changing duty stations from Forbes to Offutt but also transitioning into a completely new aircraft, from RB-47s to the RC-135C.

Competition for Aircraft Commander slots was extremely keen, as it was when RB-50 crews joined the 55th and were welcomed(?) in a similar manner. Some of us rejoining the 55th, previously part of the 55th 'Mafia,' were welcomed without question and assigned as Aircraft Commanders.

The missions then were 'Round-Robins,' Offutt to Offutt, 26 to 28 hours in duration. The pilot segment of the crews included a third pilot to augment the AC and copilot, titled 'AC 2,' not in command but considered Aircraft Commander qualified. This position was given to 135 qualified aircraft commanders not sufficiently qualified to command a crew according to those making crew assignments. Dick, in his own inimitable, quiet, non-protesting and unassuming way accepted the decision and went on to serve in that capacity until it was determined he now had achieved the level of knowledge and experience to assume command of a crew. Of course, he had come into the unit with extensive familiarity and experience not only in the airframe, air refueling in the air-frame, and the mission. As cadets, we understood that ours was 'to do or die.' As experienced aviators, the decisions were questionable. A lesson for your leadership bag. The 55th had more than the 'normal' collection of unique individuals, not only experts in their specialties but also very, very unique personalities. This herd of cats, whose accomplishments both in-flight and otherwise, were well documented, were given to Captain Richard Hedge, constituting what was identified as 'Hedge's Animals:' Sam Abedin, Paul (aka 'Crowbar') Kempf, and other unique individuals, many of whom are remembered fondly today by those few then-serving still remaining.

Dick Hedge grew up in Indiana as a farm boy and learned the lessons of life and responsibility at a very early age guided by a wonderful father and mother who recognized his early (very) wayward ways as a child. He then wasn't the quiet, laid back, individual he became at a later age. As a child (four or five) he painted the neighbors brand new car along with anything that didn't move. Eventually, his parents restrained him with a harness attached to his back, from which he had no escape. In later years, as he attended college, he owned and drove his car at speeds well beyond the posted limit. His father, realizing he could not stop him, counseled him to drive on county back roads so that, if ever having an accident, it would include only himself.

These early tendencies were ameliorated by his time in service first as a KC-135 copilot on Lt Gen J.P. McConnell's (2nd Air Force Commander) crew at Barksdale observing decisions made at the highest levels. He then served at Eielson as an RC-135D CP and AC followed by his assignment to the 55th at Offutt, thence to SAC's CEVG (Combat Evaluation Group) at Barksdale chosen to serve as commander of the 8th TDS (Tactical Control Squadron) and personal pilot to TAC's Commander, Gen Robert (S.O.B....NOT sweet old Bob) Dickson, a former navigator. This was followed by assignment to Air War College and then as DCM at Tinker to bring aboard the new AWACS aircraft prior to his assignment as DO and Vice Commander of the 55th at Offutt with a subsequent Command of the 306th Strategic Wing at Mildenhall, UK, supporting deployed 55th flight crews. Dick's leadership saved the Wing. The 55th troops deploying there reported they would 'walk-on-hot-coals' for what he accomplished. His final assignment was as Deputy Chief of SAC Command and Control at HQ SAC.

- B/G Reg Urschler

