

## WAKE ISLAND – NO NAV AIDS SORTIE

PREEMBLE: Wake Island is speck in the Pacific. A coral atoll three miles long, one mile wide, with a lagoon in the middle, nine miles from tip to tip. It is not part of an island chain and not populated before Pan Am made a refueling station out of it in 1935 for their China Clipper flying boats on their routes to Hong Kong, Philippines, et al., 19 degrees north of the equator.



The EB-47 Tell Two aircraft nav system was a bomb nav radar (250 mile range) with tracking handle and a sextant. No Doppler.



The 55<sup>th</sup> SRW had a detachment (#39) on Wake in the summer of 1966. The mission was to monitor Soviet reentry, recovery and splash down of test ICBMs in an area of the Pacific approximately 1300 miles north of Wake. (*The story of way this came about is tale unto itself.*)

The Det CC was LtCol Bob Bruss, who I think was the ADO back home. Two aircraft and three crews, as I recall. Have no memory of the other crews, staff or maintainers. We were billeted in a MAC 'hotel' with a day room as the ops HQ on the third floor down the hall from our rooms.

Our crew was AC Vic Prislusky, CP Dave Frutchey, **Maxigator**, R-1 Roy Fair and R-2 Leo McDermott (captains all) (*L-R in photo below*). We deployed an EB-47TT, tail #2316, from Forbes AFB, KS, to Hickam AFB, Hawaii on 15 May, 1966.

We tried to see as many sights as we could in our less than 24 hour layover in a rent-a-wreck convertible (the hood did not work when we got caught in a rain shower) with Leo, our kamikaze driver. On to Wake the next day.



Everyone spent the rest of May and the first week of June pretending we had a mission. Daily ops briefing at 1000 hours. Whichever crews were on 'alert' went to the aircraft, etc.

LtCol Bruss referenced the det as 'Camp Swampy' ala Beetle Bailey since communications with SAC HQ recon center was next to nil. We thought they forgot we were there. Bruss once got so frustrated he sent a ziffer saying: "Hello SAC! Are you there? WE are here!! Camp Swampy." I saw the message but do not recall if/what the answer was.

We spent time playing basketball, working on tans next to the lagoon, touring the island, whatever to kill time. But we had to be indoors in the air conditioned 'hotel' by early afternoon to avoid getting heat stroke. Then it was card playing, reading, naps, bull sessions, etc.

There was a bar of sorts and a roofed open air movie theater nearby, and we went to see the flick every night no matter how often we had seen it.

Now and then some Pan Am stewardess would be on layover and there were 15 crew dogs (at least) panting in their wake if for no other reason than to smell something other than sweaty male bodies.

There were lots of WWII relics, bunkers, rusty guns, etc., to see, and warning signs about live ammo. A monument to the Marines and Sea Bees who perished during the WWII battle. We could walk to most of them and the beaches were rust colored from the wreckage left in the ocean from the battle.

*Interesting history: Wake was invaded at the same day as Pearl Harbor but it was 8 Dec on that side of the dateline. The vastly out-numbered US personnel there held off an overwhelming Japanese invading force for about two weeks until they were overrun. However, the Japanese never used the island after that for any missions, and the US did not try to take it back. Just a waste of human lives on both sides.*

But I digress.

Sometimes we would ride our 'horses' (bicycles) to the further reaches of the island.

On one occasion we were at the far end of the nine mile horse-shoe island and Roy got a flat tire on his bike. We all said, "Tough luck, see ya," as there was no way to ride double and carry the dead 'horse'. Roy got the last laugh though, as some swabbies in a pick-up truck loaded him and the bike up, and he waved at us as they blew by us on the way back to the det. while we peddled and sweated away.

While we were there, a tornado hit Topeka pretty badly, and we did not know about it or that our families were safe for at least three days after it hit.

How we got intel that the Soviets were about to launch a test missile was primitive and not efficient. There were a lot of nothing messages and a few false alarms.

But 10 June was a fateful (and only) day when the real thing happened. We got the launch order and our crew was primary. So off we went at high noon heading due north.

The intel guy briefed us that when we got to the splash down area, to look for three Soviet ships deployed in a 15 mile-sided, perfect triangle. He gave us (me) a set of coordinates for the center of the triangle (as I recall).

As soon as we leveled off at cruise altitude, the auto pilot declined to engage. Thus, no sun lines from an unsteady plane, no pressure pattern, and certainly no radar fixes or radio aids for hundreds of miles. And here we are with three hours of open ocean below and ahead of us, the two pilots taking turns at hand flying the beast.

As the navigator, my initial calm and rationale reaction was, "Ace, I don't like this!!!"

Vic's response was "What do you want to do, nav?"

"Well. I don't like this."

That same conversation was repeated verbatim for about an hour as we drove on.

Any sane crew would have aborted and turned back to Wake.

But, 55<sup>th</sup> navs were indoctrinated not to quit.

My sole nav aid was a blue weather chart covering the entire Pacific from Japan to Hawaii. I did what any highly trained nav would do and used a wind of 270 degrees at 50 knots. Why not? For the entire flight.

About three hours after take-off and with my radar at its max range of 250 miles, there came the three blips in a precise triangle, as briefed. One relieved and pleased navigator ran the crosshairs to the center of the triangle and set the intel-given coordinates, **my first fix in three hours.**

**As we flew past the ships, here came the blivet, perfect timing. The copilot saw the contrail (and maybe the missile) and the ravens got maybe 20 seconds of telemetry.**

**Whoopie-shit!! Mission accomplished,..... up 'til now.**

We make a 180 turn and head back down track, due south for Wake.

I kept the crosshairs on target as long as I could, resetting the coordinates one more time before we drove on. Keep in mind the pilots are hand flying this whole time.

Another long siege of pucker-time hoping to find that speck in the ocean, as by the way, we had no fuel for any plausible alternate, and no tankers in reach.

Press on...as if we had a choice.

Fortunately, Wake had a powerful TACAN and before I could see the return on radar, Vic says, "I've got the birddog dead ahead!!"

I allowed as how that was a great place for it to be.

About 30 minutes or so of held-breath anticipation, Wake Island came in on the radar exactly under the heading maker, not a degree either side.

Call it blind luck, compensating winds, precise navigation skill, then and now, I'll take any of them.

Uneventful approach and smooth landing, we were greeted by staff, maintainers and other crews who had no clue what we had done until the debriefing.

We were awarded the AF Commendation Medal eventually. Whoopie-shit with OLC.

As far as I know, it was the only operational mission flown out of Wake, but perhaps the Wing histories tell otherwise.

Another crew arrived to relieve us after five weeks, and we had to hitch-hike back to Forbes any way we could. From Wake?

That is another tale.

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