

To Whom It May Concern . . .

Today, Friday, 20 September 2024, marks the 25th anniversary of Air Combat Command's activation of the 338th Combat Training Squadron within the 55th Operations Group of the 55th Wing. I am elated to have had the opportunity to have a front row seat and integral role in this monumental paradigm shift of the 55th Operations Group. As most historical buffs know, the 338th got its first notoriety flying bomber escort out of England across the English Channel into Germany and Poland in P-38s & P-51s as members of the 55th Pursuit Group and later the 55th Fighter Group with sister squadrons the 343rd and 38th. It became obvious to the 55th Operations Group initiated Tiger Team (explained later) that if our justification to establish a formal training unit was approved, the unit needed to have the 338th "colors" resurrected. Here is some background to that decision and a little walk down memory lane.

Background

The timeframe is 1995. The 55th Ops Group Commander, Col Collin Flynn, and his assistant deputy, Lt Col Joe Siniscalchi along with the RC-135 squadron operations officers had several conversations about current training issues and deficiencies during our tenure together in the Ops Group. Col Flynn passed his knowledge, trials and tribulations along from when he was a Major and the 38th RS/DO (circa 1990), he pressed the 55th Wing staff unsuccessfully for a better training regimen for reconnaissance aviators. Roll the clocks forward five years or so and myself, the 38th RS/DO, Wayne Bradshaw, the 45th RS/DO and Randy Timmons, the 343rd RS/DO were given a chance to try again. One winter day in 1996, Col Flynn called my office and asked me to attend a meeting with the 55th Wing Commander, Brig Gen Mike Kudlacz. The reason for the meeting was to discuss training inefficiencies and explain why the operational squadrons were spending a boat load of money sending pilots and navigators TDY for KC-135 training to only return to Offutt to un-learn their tanker knowledge and re-train in reconnaissance methods? During that discussion, I was also asked by Brig Gen Kudlacz to come up with a recommendation on what to do with the 343rd RS. For those unaware of the 55th Wing history, in 1979 Wing Commander Reggie Urschler established the 343rd as a Raven only squadron and the 38th a squadron of front-end aviators plus aircraft maintainers. The 45th, the 24th before moving to Offutt, was a nose to tail reconnaissance unit and that made more sense to Brig Gen Kudlacz, a SAC trained bomber pilot. The assumption / RUMINT that floated around after that meeting was, I had been given marching orders to transition the 343rd into the FTU and eliminate the Raven only squadron as it currently existed. Needless to say, I became a marked man and essentially persona non grata in the Raven world for years to come -- maybe even so today.

Pre-CTS Standup

Before there was an Operations Group Training division (OGT) and the 338th Combat Training Squadron, 55th Wing aircrew training was diverse, self-paced, self-critiqued and inefficient

with questionable standardization across the 55th Wing's operational squadrons. Flight deck crewmembers, for example, during SAC days would go TDY to Castle AFB, CA (later Altus AFB, OK under ACC) for initial KC-135 qualification training, upgrade training and instructor upgrade training. Pilots and navigators would spend six weeks in ground school and six more weeks doing simulators and flights learning tanker procedures before returning to Offutt as a qualified KC-135 aircrew member. With roughly 28 flight deck crews (2 pilots, 1 nav) being trained in tanker procedures each year, this comes to almost 1,000 man-weeks of TDY annually. The fiscal cost of this training expense was staggering, but added to this was the personnel cost of twelve more weeks away from home for the reconnaissance crew force spending on average a third of their time overseas and away from family while waiting on replacement aviators to become qualified.

Pilots and navigators returned to Offutt and were told to forget most of what they learned while training for the KC-135 tanker mission and reorient themselves to learning the RC-135 and reconnaissance procedures and techniques with this mountain study materials and the flight manuals. RC-135 mission objectives were vastly different, as were the crewmember composition and systems of the RC-135 aircraft, and until 2002, throw in different engines and other aircraft systems. As a result, RC-135 pilots and navigators often found themselves ill-prepared for RC-135 training when they returned from Castle / Altus combat crew training.

All crew positions – pilots, navigators, EWOs, AMTs and IMTs (now known collectively as ASEs), and the linguists from Electronic Security Command (later Air Force Intelligence Command and now Air Intelligence Agency) – would receive RC-135-specific training from their respective operational squadron. Each squadron's Training Flight created to their best abilities initial qualification and upgrade training programs, however without oversight from the Operations Group or SAC/ACC-level training experts. I remember hearing repeatedly in the 38th, "Get those training modules done and watch the Flying Schedule to see when you fly. If you have any questions, find and ask an instructor." That was the extent of most everyone's formal training. The training inefficiencies went on for 30 years -- some would argue self-induced based on the classification and secrecy of the RC-135 programs prior to Desert Storm. Regardless of the rationale and how a student was declared ready for his or her evaluation, the squadron instructors took pride in making sure their respective students were ready. So, was the training prior to the 338th CTS bad? I and others would contend it was merely inefficient and there must be a better way.

Tiger Team, OGT, CTS and the "Godfather of 55th Wing Training"

In February 1997, a Tiger Team was commissioned – consisting of Randy Timmons, Wayne Bradshaw, Teena Fowler, Phil Molle, Art Shoal and me plus Col Jay Beard, 55th OG/CD. Our mission, in my humble opinion, can only be described as one of the most-important and paradigm-shifting self-help projects since the post-transition to the RC-135 aircraft and move from Forbes Field to Offutt in 55th Wing history. Our objective was to first develop an

Operations Group Training (OGT) division, and ultimately stand up a Formal Training Unit for RC/OC/WC-135 and E-4 aviators. The Tiger Team began “out-of-the-box” thinking. We were able to convince Col Flynn to assemble a group of aircrew instructors and take over an abandoned and unprepared Building 49 on the historic Fort Crook Parade Grounds. The group of acquired squadron instructors and the Tiger Team members started developing the student training curriculum and syllabi plus became a team of Home Depot “Do-It-Yourself-ers” who cleaned, painted, paneled and carpeted the soon-to-be formal training facility. The group stocked Building 49 with excess furniture and computer equipment acquired from DRMO, STRATCOM Headquarters and the Martin Bomber Building – it was a real-life “Sanford and Son” operation to marshal in such a game-changing venue.

OGT was officially formed in January 1998 by direction of Col Collin Flynn, 55th Operations Group Commander, based on the recommendation and out-brief of ACC’s Action Work Out Manpower and Requirements Study. Under the OGT charter, pilots, navigators and EWOs now would receive wing-standardized academic and ground training -- flightline training would still be an operational squadron requirement but augmented with OGT’s instructors. EWOs received Initial Qualification and Upgrade Training, while pilots and navigators received Difference Training. All of this training was now under the purview of the Operations Group and ACC’s training experts, the Training Support Squadron (TRSS).

Flight deck training in OGT went through several iterations. Initially OGT accomplished wing-standardized ground and simulator Difference Training following KC-135R training at Altus AFB. This was improved in 1998 when OGT received formal approval from ACC for 55th Wing flight deck crewmembers to skip Altus and instead go to the Air National Guard run KC-135E ground and simulator training at McClellan AFB, CA. This shortened the length of the TDYs required of the pilots and navigators, but still required Difference Training when they returned to Offutt. In late 1998, the OGT team were able to fix this inefficiency when the division received formal approval to accomplish all ground and simulator training at Offutt avoiding costly TDY expenditures altogether. Along with this approval came the financial backing to begin researching, requesting proposals, developing statements of work and ultimately the awarding of a Contracted Aircrew Training and Courseware Development (CAT/CWD) contract.

Once the CAT/CWD contract was awarded under the management of Mike Cook, the majority of the positions associated with the CAT/CWD contract were filled with experienced former 55th Wing personnel who were all enthusiastic to continue their service to the mission of the 55th Wing. This contract offered a new opportunity of post-military employment for those individuals who wished to remain a vital member of the greater Offutt and Omaha community – a community with an unmatched relationship among communities with a military presence.

By early-1999, all pilot, navigator and EWO academic, ground and simulator training syllabi were accomplished by the training experts in OGT. In addition, a formal training pipeline called “Programmed Flight Training” (PFT) was established with the AF Personnel Center to

send students at a formalized and steady rate directly to the 55th Wing after Undergraduate Pilot, Undergraduate Navigator and Undergraduate Electronic Warfare Officer training.

The OGT team were able to procure the first ever Cockpit Familiarization and Part Task Trainers. Not only were they the first ever, but they integrated the pilot, copilot and navigator crew positions, something that was eventually replicated years later when OFT 3 was delivered. The cockpit part task trainers were produced and financed for the Wing by ACC/TRSS and were a direct result of the relationships the OGT team forged with the ACC-level training experts (and perhaps a few bottles of Glenlivet Scotch for the TRSS Commander to bump the priority higher on the list) and the unfortunate result of a hard landing on an EC-135.

Students still did their flight training in their assigned operations squadrons after completing academic, ground and simulator portion of the syllabi until mid-1999. It was then that we were granted the approval for our select-instructor cadre to accomplish the flight training as well. We pushed for and got approval to fly with only one qualified instructor pilot, as Castle and Altus did, eliminating the need to have two qualified pilots on every flight. Finally, we received approval for OGT to have its own FAA recognized static call sign – “Topcat,” the 338th call sign that is still in use today I believe. Wayne Bradshaw gets full credit for that call sign accomplishment.

On September 20, 1999, the 338th Combat Training Squadron was activated -- Maj Gen Dave MacGhee, ACC/DO was slated to be the officiate for the ceremony but he called from Atlanta to inform us that his Delta flight had been cancelled due to thunderstorms in the area. Brig Gen Ron Sams, current 55th Wing Commander, was more than happy to step in and pass the squadron guidon for my assumption of command. The next chapter was now ready to begin to improve 55th Wing training. In 2000, civilian contractors took over ground and simulator training, allowing active-duty flight instructors to focus exclusively on flight line training. Also in 2000, with the help of Lt Col Dutch Vandenberg, Lt Col Rick Evans, and Col Buddy Smith, we set out to expand and augment the active-duty instructor force with Nebraska Air National Guard members. For years, the 55th Wing lost talented aircrew members without an option for separating Offutt aviators to join an RC-135 Air National Guard unit. Since 1992, the Nebraska Air National Guard has offered opportunities to 55th Wing aircrew who want to continue serving their country full or part-time after their active duty time is up and stay in Nebraska. Thus, the Nebraska Air National Guard's 170th Group and the 238th CTS eventually became a reality.

In 2001, the 338th CTS took over ASE training, also the 338th CTS opened a Standardization and Evaluation program that accomplished all student flight and simulator evaluations. Offutt AFB had now reached its goal of having a complete Formal Training Unit – from personnel accessions, through training, evaluation & mission certification, to delivery of Combat Mission Ready aircrew members to the operational squadrons.

Legacy

The status of the 338th CTS and its sister squadron the 238th, has prospered since the FTU activation 25 years ago today. The 338 CTS I am told has become the largest, best and most diverse Formal Training Unit in ACC. That is quite an accomplishment by the aviators due their due diligence over the past 25 years. The CTS construct has added additional crew positions, procured more advanced training resources, and became a FTU that is second to none. Bravo!

Several members of the RC-135 community, to include the BIG SAFARI Program Office and its squadron at Greenville, have made an impact on the paradigm shifting accomplishments that has forever made the 55th Wing the best organization to call home. Former 55th aviators that supported the Tiger Team's efforts by accepting the FTU concept and provided instructor personnel from their respective squadrons to make the 338th a reality are numerous and most still involved today like Paul Jeanes, Steve Visco, Bo Marlin, Jim Gapinski, Steve Nachtwey, Buck Arvin, Mike Scacca, Jeff Needham, Kurt Kramer, Bryan Bartels, Bud Erickson, and others too numerous to mention. There were former 55th Wing members on the Air Staff, Air Combat Command and Numbered Air Force staffs like Ralph Ahsam, John Shirley, Dave Heining, Bruce Nelson, Mark Thompson, Joe Federation and the list goes on as well that were able to convince the Congressional Defense committees to appropriate funding for major efforts -- re-engining the RC-135s with the CFM-56s and procuring RJs 15, 16 & 17 as well as TC 3 being the most prominent. Lynn Duncan and his team in association with the MOD & RAF with the successful building of the UK RIVET JOINT "Airseeker" Program. John Hansen as the Operations Group Commander and his guidance and mentorship to put together the 55th Wing's "In the Fight" briefing that for the first time I assert showed the DoD what the RC-135 can do for the warfighting community with its capabilities. Other Ops Group Commanders have kept this awareness alive with continuation with similar "In the Fight" type advocacy briefings. Without the RC-135 advocacy roadshow, the mis-information and misconceptions about what the aviators from Offutt actually did simply flabbergasted most of what I call the unaware . . . "No, General, AWACS is not where that information originated from, an RC-135 collected and disseminated that data". These and other examples and antidotes from former and current members of the 55th Wing and BIG SAFARI are what make this community unique.

To the names mentioned in this article, I hope the active-duty members notice or become aware that each and every one of them have a passion for the RC-135 programs and strive to make them better than when we wore the flight suits in the 55th Wing. Active-duty members hopefully will realize that being a member of an RC-135 unit is truly something special. I challenge each and every active-duty member of the 55th Operations Group to make reconnaissance their way of life with the commitment and passion to make tomorrow better than today -- appreciate the opportunity you've been given and cherish the moments you experience. Continuing to strive for excellence and building on the legacy of those aviators

before will ensure the 55th Wing is known as an exemplary organization. Make your mark on recce folklore and preserve freedom for all of society.

God Bless you all, the 55th Wing and the USA.

Lt Col (ret) R. J. McMahon

The first "TOPCAT 01"

NOTES:

Max Moore: The 338th Strategic Recon Sqd at Forbes was a weather recon unit flying RB-47E/K, three man crews, from June 1952 to mid-1960s. Two missions a day 7/365, one 8 hour non-AR due north, the other 11 hour, long NE round trip.

It is where newly upgraded ACs and new navs got flying time and experience before deemed worth to go to the 38th or 343rd recon sqds.

I spent six months there the last half of 1960.

Flew 17 wx missions dropping radiosons. Never once missed Canada.

Joe Spivey: Did you launch any collection balloons which transited the entirety of North America? If so, would have been ahead of your times.