

FORBES FABLES AND FACES

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Stateside recollections, from the pen of the Ranting Raven, William B. Watkins, Sr.

Five second Lieutenants fresh from ECM School at Keesler AFB, reported to Forbes AFB in Topeka around Christmas time 1957.



They were:

Standing L-R; Horace G. Beasley, Mobile, Alabama; William B. Watkins, Loudon, Tennessee; Paul A. Baumann, Spokane, Washington; Squatting L-R; Ronald J. Roland, Cherry Tree, Pennsylvania; David C. Sjolund, Norwalk, Connecticut.

This was my first taste of SAC, who was to be my boss for the remainder of my 20 year career in 3 different weapons systems. The first being the RB&ERB47s at Topeka until the Summer of 1962.

(Forbes History, written circa 1957) Forbes AFB was first activated as Topeka Army Air Corps Base on August 22, 1942. It was then used for operational training of heavy bombardment crews. The base was closed after the war. In 1948, the base was reopened for use by reconnaissance and geodetic survey wings. During this period it was renamed Forbes, honoring Major Daniel H. Forbes, Jr., a native Topekan killed while testing the YB-49 "Flying Wing" in California.

Forbes was closed for a second time in 1949 and remained out of use until 1951. During the Korean conflict it became a training site for B-29 combat crewmen. The jet era brought a conversion to Forbes. In 1954, RB-29s were phased out and replaced by RB-47 "Stratojets". With the arrival of the jets, Forbes witnessed the beginning of an extensive construction program. New buildings, recently constructed and others in various stages of construction, have become a common sight. Today, Forbes is a two-wing, permanent SAC installation composed of the 55 SRW, the 90 SRW and the 815th Combat Support Group.

Forbes was located about 8 miles South of downtown Topeka. Most of the base, except for some warehouses and family housing was located on the East side of US Highway 75. Most of the buildings on base were of WWII design. The 38th SRS where I was attached was on the North end of the street that paralleled the flight line. We parked in a parking lot adjacent to a guarded gate, and walked thru it showing our security badges, into our squadron building which was on the flight line.

SAC, and thus Forbes, was under the control of General LeMay and all was spit and polish. We wore proper uniforms on base during duty hours. Flying suits were worn while driving to or from work involving a flight. No one in a flying suit was to be seen in town shopping. Salutes were a way of saying hello, and were delivered promptly, with a smile and a cheery word. Sir was a part of each conversation said respectfully, not sarcastically. Everyone halted their car, or walk, and stood at attention, with a proud salute, when the flag was lowered and the National Anthem was played each afternoon. The base was neat and clean. The military force was highly motivated, dedicated, willing to make personal sacrifices, and truly believed

they were a major deterrent to another war. Sad to say, I saw a lot of this changing before I retired from SAC in 1975.

At that time each squadron had it's own assigned aircraft, maintenance, and support personnel. You got to know who your parachute packer and O2 mask caretaker was on a personal basis as they were in the squadron building with you. You also got to know some of the quirks of the airplanes you flew.

Most of the young officers rented apartments/houses in downtown Topeka and drove to base daily.

A second Lieutenant on flying status made monthly: \$220 base pay; \$100 flying pay; \$65.50 Quarters ration; and \$49.90 subsistence. We lived well on this amount, because groceries were \$5 per bag, gas .22cents a gallon, rent \$50 a month, movies .25 cents on base, and car insurance \$50 a year, etc.

The weather at Topeka was interesting to say the least. The wind always blew, off the blast furnaces of hell in the summer and the North Pole in the winter. In the summer mother nature often put on a fireworks display, to the accompaniment of rain, thunderstorms, and the threat of tornados. My second son was born after a night spent in our bathtub by my wife over the fear of a tornado strike.

The main winter snow line was supposed to be north of Topeka. But on more than one occasion I remember some of us car pooling to get to roll call, and one person steering as the rest pushed to get us over the small hills going to the base, because of the snow fall we had.

One very vivid memory I have of a spring snowstorm. I had just returned from TDY and my wife and I went to Kansas City to spend a day or two before I reported back in for duty. When we went to sleep there was a small possibility of snow. When we awoke, it was a blizzard. I had to be back for work tomorrow so we needed to get back to Topeka today.

I tried to get on the expressway, but it was shut down because of the blizzard. So I got on the US highway and fell in behind an 18 wheeler. It was tough going because even he was traveling at less than 20 miles per hour. There was little if any other fools on the road. It was a trip etched in my memory. Hands clinched to the steering wheel, wipers going on the fast speed, eyeballs straining to see, and every muscle in my body tense.

One of my great joys and sadness too, was the NEW cream colored 1958 Ford Fairlane 500 4dr.Hardtop with all the power options and the big Thunderbird V8 engine that I agreed to buy with the aide of a financial institution. Boy was I proud of it. 8 miles to a gallon of gas, 0-60 in 6 seconds. What every young second Lt. needed. The ability to fly without wings or leaving the ground.

It wasn't long before my first adventure. I was on the way from the base to town about dark one evening when I decided to stop at a McDonalds to get some supper to take home. The McD was a small metal looking building, golden arches across the top, with a tiny service area inside where you picked up your food to go, and a sign bragging proudly how many burgers they had sold. It was in the middle of a block and I stopped in the inside lane waiting for oncoming traffic to clear before turning left into McD. I glanced in my rear view mirror and saw an older model pickup bearing down on me. In vain I accelerated, which made my car rear end drop and he hit me. My turn signal was still blinking after the wreck. When I got out I saw crates busted open on the back of his pickup and frogs jumping everywhere. He was a professor from Washburn College doing some kind of research with frogs. I wasn't hurt but the first damage was inflicted to my first NEW car.

To make a long tale shorter my car was hit 3 more times while at Topeka. Twice when people ran stop signs and hit me in the right front fender and the driver's door. The worst insult of all was when I was on a street with pull in parking, stopped at a red light, when someone backed out into the right side of my car. My family or I wasn't hurt by any of these incidents and the dents were all repaired without the help of my insurance company since they were all at fault.

To put a finish on this tale, in 1965 long after leaving Topeka we were driving through Pascagoula, Mississippi on the way to the in-laws. A drunk driver plowed through a red-light and totaled out my first NEW car and I left it setting in a junkyard there. We survived with no real damage to us.

During our checkout days at Forbes we were eager to learn about our job, SAC, and the Air Force in general. One of the young EWOs' sources for such information was our Squadron EWO. He was a Major, who shall remain nameless, who had an office on the second floor of our Squadron building. When we gathered in his office he was ready, willing, and able to keep us entertained with both his wisdom and wit. A lot of his conversations I cannot remember, but here are a few that stayed with me.

For some reason my first OER was either written by, or endorsed by him. I remember being called into his office and him having me read and sign it. It was one of those where the middle blocks were all checked. The descriptive words in it didn't necessarily 'damn me with faint praises', but I sure wasn't 'walking on water either'. He told me I did about all that was expected of a young second Lieutenant. I later found out that those kind of OERs' if continued, could dramatically affect your promotion to the senior ranks.

The Squadron EWO loved to tell funny stories many of which were on himself. One story he told was of having teenage kids who at night when he and his wife tried to become 'friendly' the noise prompted giggles to be heard from the kids bedrooms. So he took to drinking tea at night. This forced him to get up in the middle of the night and relieve himself. He would come back to bed and wake his wife so they could be 'friendly' while the teenagers were sound asleep. He always ended this tale by saying; "He wished he wasn't married to his wife because he would sure recommend her to all of us". I felt it was a high complement to the love he had for his wife. But it sure got our attention when he said it the first time.

We were assigned extra duties while waiting to be crewed up. I remember two that I had which impressed me. The first was that I was assigned to a base Burial squad, which went out in the community and provided military funerals for the families of deceased veterans. It was an impressive ceremony and seemed to be much appreciated by the family members. The folding and presentation of the flag; the Chaplin's words of condolence, the 21 gun volley, and those 2 buglers echoing taps across the graveyard. It always brought a tear to my eye and a big lump of pride in my throat. After I retired and returned to my hometown I joined two local military associations who have been providing this service in our county for over 50 years. It still brings a tear to my eye and puts a lump in my throat even today.

The other extra duty was as a Refueling Officer. This started in the afternoon and continued well into the night. When the maintenance men wanted to put fuel on board of a RB-47 we went out to observe. It was usually dark and we were away from other planes at the refueling pits. There was always an MD-3 power cart belching cinders into the air. A variety of grounding and communication wires ran to the aircraft. As the fuel was being pumped into the aircraft, a technician sat in the cockpit with a control panel in his lap. His job was to control the quantity of fuel that went into each tank. He also was supposed to check the venting system on each tank. I never really understood what my job was, but I had been told half jokingly, that if anything happened it would be taken out of my pay.

This one evening everything was going well and the job was almost done. When out of various vent holes on the aircraft JP4 came venting in a strong stream. My first thought was 'my God its going to explode'. For a brief moment I considered whether to run toward the aircraft and explode with it, or run away and spend the next 1000 years paying for that plane which I assumed was about to explode.

The fuel flow was quickly stopped, fire trucks washed away the spill, and my nerves finally calmed down. It seems the technician was testing the venting system and somehow flipped the wrong switches. This was one extra duty job I was glad to give up.

Once we were declared combat ready and placed on a crew our stateside time became rather routine.

In the beginning we reported each weekday morning to a briefing at 8 a.m. unless we were in crew rest or on leave. We EWOs didn't fly very often stateside and this created both a future career problem as well as extra leisure time for us. When the briefing was over, if we weren't flight planning or attending ground school we would go home.

It wasn't too long until we found ourselves having to be present for a 1 p.m. briefing each day too. So we couldn't go home after the morning briefing unless we wanted to drive back out for the afternoon one. It became necessary to find things to do. Some times we went bowling in the base bowling alley, a one story wooden building with human pin-setters, and a very few lanes.

Far and away the most popular thing to do was to go to the Officers Club and play Bridge or Hearts. I was attracted to Bridge and at first was one of the many who clustered around a table watching 4 people play the game. There were rules of Bridge etiquette to learn. As a bystander you watch the hands being played but spoke not a word. But the moment the last card fell the hand was verbally replayed by both the watchers and the players. The discussions were sometimes very intense, but it was a great way to learn Bridge

On one TDY my crew rode in a C-124 for over 30 hours to get to Turkey. We kept a Bridge game going for all that time. When one player got tired another would take their place. It was fascinating to watch the flow of cards over such a long cycle. Sad to say I haven't played Bridge in the last 25 years.

The career problem I eluded to was getting enough flying time stateside to meet the 7 year 1000 hour requirement. This was no problem for the front end crew (AC, CP, Nav.) as they often flew weather sorties with the 338th SRS stationed on the base. We EWOs would schedule ourselves to fly with the ARS which had KC-97 aircraft on the base. We always tried to pick the long sorties that RTB at Topeka.

One very hot July day Horace G. Beasley and I scheduled ourselves to fly an 8 hour pilot pro with the ARS. It was to have 2 KC crews onboard and one would get off after 4 hours. I was always heavy by Air Force standards and had to keep track of my weight. Therefore I tended to weigh myself each morning. This day we went to the small café at Base Operations and ate a big breakfast, plus picked up flight lunches for the day. Everything went well for the first Pilot Pro, the weather was reasonably cool and we didn't leave sight of the base. In fact we ate our flight lunches. About mid-afternoon during the second KC crew's Pilot Pro, the temperature got hot and the air bumpy.

I still don't remember who started the 'fun', Horace or me, but we were both soon hanging our heads over the large plastic lined trash can on the plane 'up-chucking', and turning greener by the minute. This went on for some time interrupted by us trying to drink some fluid to avoid the 'dry heaves'. This was not a pretty sight or smell either, and the KC crew wisely stayed in the cockpit. I weighed that night after I got home, and even after all I had eaten and drunk, I was 8 pounds lighter. However I don't recommend this as a way to lose weight.

Horace and I vowed never to fly together again, and we didn't. He moved up to SAC headquarters shortly after that. Some time after I left Forbes he came back to the RC-135 to get his flying time. He was on board the RC-135 that disappeared after taking off from Shimeya (sp), Alaska in the late 60s. Horace and I were close during cadets, and after. I still miss him...

Jay Roland got his private license through the base Aero-Club. I went to fly with him on a couple of occasions that I remember. We were in a Piper Apache and went off to practice take-offs and landing at an airstrip a few miles east of Topeka. It was unmanned so you had to be alert to other traffic. We made a couple of landing and take-offs without incident. The last one we made after we touched down the aircraft veered sharply to the left and we found ourselves sitting off the runway in the grass. Either one brake had grabbed or the other had failed. We got out and surveyed the damage and finding none, took-off and RTB without incident.

One the other occasion, one afternoon Jay and I loaded up a bunch of small plastic bags with flour. Our destination was about 8 miles south of the base where Fabian G.

Dauzvardis owned or rented a farm. We took off and proceeded to his farm. We flew low over his farm 'revving' the engine. Fabian G. came out shaking his fists, so we dropped the flour bags at will. He disappeared into the farmhouse and emerged shortly thereafter with a shotgun in hand. He fired it in the air a number of times, not really aiming at us. We were so engrossed in this fun that we really weren't looking around as we should. We looked to the South and saw a RB-47 descending toward us on final to land. He was close enough for us to fear the turbulence so we made a hasty retreat from the area.

Fabian was a tall relatively slender man with a balding head and a stiff mustache. He was of Lithuanian descent. My first memories of him was that he helped the adjutant shuffle papers in the squadron.

If invited to your house for a party he might drive his VW bus right across your lawn up to the front door and step directly on your front stoop.

He drove that VW bus up to Alaska to our OL and stayed 6 months and drove it back. This was over the AlCan Highway when little, if any, of it was paved.

While TDY in Europe he decided to see his ancestral homeland which was communist controlled. So during his time off, he got a bike and a knapsack and off he went, unbeknownst to the USAF.

We all heard about this after the fact.

I'm sure any of you who knew him have many more stories to tell. I later heard that he was killed in a C-47 crash at Colorado Springs. He was a great guy to be around because of his droll sense of humor and somewhat unpredictable behavior.

On a recurring basis Forbes put on an air show and Open House for the local community. Various aircraft primarily in SACs' inventory would be flown in and put on static display. Various military units would put on the air show. One year at the Officers' Club I met one of the Army Bell helicopter pilots that was to be part of the air show that year. One thing led to another and we wound up taking a ride in his helicopter. This was my first experience at trying to fly one of them. I found the most difficult task was to hover at one place in the air. If I got my forward progress halted, and my altitude stable, then I was in a slow spin about the horizontal axis. We went to the country side, flew in wide ditches looking up at trees, chasing farmers cows with the landing skid, and buzzing any pretty girls we saw driving down the back roads. Not proper behavior for sure, but a lot of fun. No reports were filed.

In July 1960 the Soviet Union shot down an RB-47H from our outfit in the Barents Sea while it was on a routine reconnaissance mission. Four members of the crew perished. Two crew members were imprisoned in Moscow's Lubyanka prison for 7 months and subsequently released. Their story is eloquently told in a book titled, *The Little Toy Dog*, authored by William L. White, and published by E.F. Dutton and Company in 1962. It is a poignant tale of the two surviving crew members, Cpt. John R. McKone and Cpt. Freeman B. Olmstead. We should always cherish the memory of our 4 fallen fellow airmen; AC Maj. Willard Palm, EWOs Maj. Eugene E. Posa, Cpt. Oscar L. Goforth, and Cpt. Dean B. Phillips.

The reason I mention this story here is because of the direct impact it had on those of us at Forbes. One morning all flying crew members of the two reconnaissance units were told to report to the base theater in flying suits. The morning began as expected with a briefing on the Code of Conduct and how and what we should try to do if captured. Then some surprising things took place. We were individually escorted to an unknown location on the base by 'outsiders' who placed us in an environment designed to test our moral and emotional fiber. Unbeknownst to us, our families were called and told we wouldn't be home for a couple of days. Meanwhile we were 'entertained' with various environmental, emotional, and physical stimuli to help us better understand our own value systems.

No record of this training exists in my file today, but I venture to say that it had a lasting impact on the future life and military service of many of those who partook of it.

I'm reminded of a line from a hit country song of a few years back. ALL GAVE SOME, BUT SOME GAVE ALL.

Videmus Ominia

Ranting Raven