

A Short History of the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing

Larry Westin - June 7, 1999

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Information about Batcat operations has been declassified (March 1997). All information here has previously been published in unclassified periodicals and is available to the general public.

I purchased copies of all the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing official history information on microfilm, 3 rolls of 16mm microfilm (not micro fiche), from the Air Force Historical Research Agency. After using the microfilm to provide data for the Batcats book, I donated the microfilm to The Vietnam Center & Archive at Texas Tech University.

In the Beginning

Homepage visitor Bill Person provides some information about the development of Batcat. "Batcat was the result of a think tank concept named 'College Nine,' because of the 9 college professors who thought it up. Once in application, it was dubbed 'Practice Nine.'" The concept would be called by several code names during its life, but the overall operation is best known as "Igloo White." Chris Jeppeson, who had an excellent Homepage covering Igloo White, refers to a August 1966 study group known as the "Jason Group."

Igloo White comprised 3 major elements, the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing at Korat RTAFB, the Infiltration Center at Nakhon Phanom, known as "Task Force Alpha," and the sensor delivery system, first initially operated by the Navy with the code named "Dual Blade," also at Nakhon Phanom. Later the USAF assumed the task of air delivery of the sensors.

The Igloo White concept which emerged from the "think tank" discussions was to create an "Electronic Fence" that would interdict and reduce the flow of supplies from North Vietnam down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the Viet Cong insurgents in South Vietnam. Primary objective was to create an anti-vehicle barrier. If the vehicles could be stopped, then a major quantity of enemy supplies would be halted. The project was assigned a very high priority by the Department of Defense. Later it became known as "MacNamarra's Electronic Fence" after then Secretary of Defense Robert MacNamarra, who was a primary proponent of this form of electronic warfare.

Defense Secretary Robert MacNamarra, who strongly supported the electronic fence concept, now code named "Practice Nine," wrote a memo on January 6, 1967 to President Johnson recommending a go ahead with the concept. Next day, January 7, 1967, the Deputy Secretary of Defense sent another memo to President Johnson also recommending the project. During a National Security meeting at the White House on January 13, 1967, President Johnson approved the "Practice Nine" project, and issued National Security Action Memorandum 358 which gave "Highest National Priority" category to "Project PRACTICE NINE." This document effectively gave birth to Batcat and the other segments of what would most frequently be identified as "Igloo White." Often individuals have emailed me asking how Batcat got what it needed so quickly. When the President assigns "highest national priority" to a project, normal bureaucratic road blocks disappear, projects get accomplished.

“Practice Nine” would eventually use several different code names. Biggest reason for code name changes was to maintain secrecy. Even with the declassified documents in hand, this author had difficulty determining the sequence of code name changes. To avoid confusion this history will refer to the project going forward as “Igloo White.”

While enemy vehicle traffic was the primary target, it was also intended to detect individuals walking down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. To assist with detection of individuals, small bomblets were dropped along the trail. When someone stepped on a bomblet it would detonate, and this small explosion was picked up by the sensors.

Planning for Igloo White comprised the USAF, Navy and Army. The “electronic fence” concept envisioned using Navy sonobouys delivered along the Ho Chi Minh Trail by air, with special receivers in the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing EC-121R aircraft to pick up the signals. The EC-121R would, when in range, automatically relay the signals picked up to the Infiltration Center. Several target areas along the Ho Chi Minh Trail were outside of the range of the relay equipment; during out of range flights the signals were processed manually by the crew on board the EC-121R, then radioed via High Frequency Single Side Band radio directly to 7th AF HQ in Saigon.

Modifying Navy WV-2 and WV-3 aircraft to USAF EC-121R

Previous USAF and Navy use of the Lockheed C-121 and EC-121 Super Constellation series aircraft fell into 1 of 2 roles, as a transport aircraft (C-121), or as an airborne early warning aircraft (EC-121D or H). The Batcat EC-121R mission was quite different, the electronic signals picked up by the EC-121R’s were used to locate ground based enemy vehicles and/or personnel. Because of this unique mission the EC-121R’s were camouflaged. No other US military (E)C-121's wore camouflage paint (The C-69 Constellation prototype was camouflaged during early flight tests during WWII).

Col. Ted Ostendorf, later a 553rd Wing Commander, was assigned to Air Logistics Command in Sacramento, California, and the officer responsible for the conversion of Navy EC-121's to “R” standard.

Conversion of the Navy EC-121's to “R” configuration began in the latter part of 1966. These Navy EC-121's had been stored at Davis-Monthan AFB, Arizona, for more then two years when selected for conversion to “R” standard. In addition to the long storage period, the Navy EC-121's did not have modifications to the power recovery turbines which the USAF considered essential to safety.

After competitive bidding, Lockheed Aircraft Services at Ontario, California, was awarded a contract to make the modifications to the Navy airplanes. Because of the long period in storage it was decided to fly the airplanes from Arizona to Ontario, California with the landing gear kept extended in the down position. Lockheed Air Services completed the conversions by late 1967.

Bill Person provides some more information about the conversion. “New AC generators were installed to accommodate the extra power needed for the 40 ARR-52s and an ARC-109 with a

paddle setting KY encryption system. EWO gear also drew on the power as did the S-band relay system.”

EC-121R aircraft were modified to two standards. Twenty of the aircraft were equipped with passive Radar Homing and Warning (RHAW) ECM only. The other ten EC-121R's had RHAW plus active jamming capability as well as expanded range receiving capability. Those aircraft equipped with active jamming ECM were referred to in wing documentation as those with “special equipment.” Some orbits required they be flown only by aircraft with special equipment.

Activating the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing

Activation of the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing occurred on February 9, 1967, as part of Air Defense Command. The 553rd Reconnaissance Wing, and its subordinate units, were organized at Otis AFB, Massachusetts on February 25, 1967, where it became part of First Air Force, Air Defense Command.

Bill Person provides more information. “Although it was subordinate to 1st AF, Maj. Gen. Gordon H. Austin was in the chain as Commander of the 26th Air Division and Eastern NORAD/CONAD Region at Stewart AFB, New York. I was the SSO and received a lot of highly classified messages for him on the project. That was how I knew and got in on the ground floor.”

The 553rd Reconnaissance Wing comprised 5 squadrons. Maintenance squadrons included the 553rd Electronic Maintenance Squadron (later renamed the Avionics Maintenance Squadron), the 553rd Field Maintenance Squadron and the 553rd Organizational Maintenance Squadron, plus headquarters squadron. The flying squadrons were the 553rd Reconnaissance Squadron and the 554th Reconnaissance Squadron. Both the 553rd and 554th Reconnaissance Squadrons were activated at the same time, however both squadrons are listed as “non operational” from February 25 to February 28, 1967.

First Wing commander was Colonel Gus Weiser, who assumed command on March 1, 1967. Col. Weiser's Deputy was Col. Jewel. Lt. Col. George Costi was the Operations officer. Lt Col. Arnold Stamler was Commander of the 554th.

Initial cadre of personnel came from Air Defense Command, consisting mostly of personnel with previous experience in the EC-121 aircraft. Training was accomplished at Otis AFB under the direction of First Air Force, part of Air Defense Command. The wing insignia, designed by cartoonist Milton Caniff, was approved on June 19, 1967.

The Test Deployments

During the work up period three deployments were flown, two to Howard AFB, Panama Canal Zone and one to Eglin AFB, Florida. Purpose of these TDY's was to evaluate the sensor/aircraft combination, and refine initial techniques to be used when Batcat went overseas.

The first TDY was code named operation "Pot Lid." Note that the aircraft used has what appears to be a U.S. Navy paint scheme, carried the word "U.S. Air Force" on the nose, and was tail number 67-21472. Sending the second prototype out of the country before painting provides further evidence that a high priority was attached to refining the system as soon as possible.

Bill Person gives more information about the temporary duty deployments. "It was a special test for RFI, radio frequencies interference outside the U.S. It was helpful to determine which frequencies to use on the ARR-52s."

Shortly after 67-21472 returned from Panama, it was used at Eglin AFB, Florida for further testing with the sensors. Operation "Dune Moon" started in late May, 1967.

Al Bosse, who participated in the "Dune Moon" operation, provided this interesting side story. "We had the nose gear door and the prop spinners painted with the Wonder bread dots. We were quartered on, I believe field four, in WWII officers quarters. These quarters only had full baths, no showers. They constructed outdoor showers for us because of the complaints. I used the bathtub. Couldn't get over my fear of snakes to walk outside and take a shower, who knows what a snake would bite. Near the quarters was a short runway. It was said that Jimmy Doolittle used this runway to practice his B-25 takeoffs for his raid over Tokyo."

Bill Person gives this additional information about the Eglin TDY. "There were Special Forces Green Berets walking the trails to activate and test the sensors for us. They wore plastic leggings because of the rattlesnakes. They caught one and had it rattle so we could hear it in the plane on the acusid. Also, button bomblets were sown on the pine tree test area which prompted a few strong words when the army guys stepped on them. We had a big rain one day and a bunch of the bomblets were washed out into the gulf and then back on the beach. They had to close that part of the beach for a while to sweep it clean. Some stupid press release was given, which I doubt anyone believed."

Operation "Dune Moon" was completed in late July 1967. Kerry Maxwell, who also participated in Dune Moon, e-mailed me to say that when 67-21472 was flown for Dune moon, it had its Navy paint scheme replaced by the standard USAF camouflage seen on all other Batcat EC-121R aircraft.

Another, second TDY to Panama, and the third and last evaluation TDY, was from Aug 25, 1967 to September 2, 1967. Purpose was to "participate in test and evaluation of aircraft." The aircraft used on that TDY was 67-21496.

Wing Operational - Movement to Korat RTAFB

The 553rd Reconnaissance Wing was declared operationally ready in September 1967, and received its "POM" (Preparation for Overseas Movement) inspection from ADC.

Bill Person adds this information about the POM inspection. "This was when we had our Mess Dress Dining-In at Otis before deploying. Milton Caniff was at the dinner to explain his BATCAT, the red sulfur symbol, and the term "CAVETTE CATTAM," which is Latin.

Translated into English it means “Beware the Cat.”

Personnel of the wing's initial support team arrived at Korat on September 20, 1967. Less than a month later, on October 13, the first seven EC-121R aircraft departed the Continental United States for Thailand. The flight was lead by Col. Weiser. First stop was McClellan AFB, Sacramento, California. From McClellan the flight proceeded to Hickam AFB, Hawaii, then to Wake Island, proceeding on to Anderson AFB, Guam, arriving at Korat RTAFB during the afternoon of October 19, 1967. The deployment of the full wing was completed in 3 months.

On October 19, 1967 the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing, at Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base, became a unit of Pacific Air Forces under 13th Air Force. Operational control of the Wing came from detachment 1, 7th Air Force, at Udorn. Administrative control remained with 13th Air Force out of Clark Air Base, in the Phillipines.

Initial facilities at Korat were minimal. Construction to support the 553rd Reconnaissance at Korat began in late August 1967 with the headquarters building. The Headquarters building was dedicated on January 26, 1968. Living quarters were tents with only a few permanent buildings. By the end of February 1968 all units were moved into permanent facilities. All missions were accomplished during this initial period.

The 553rd shared the use of Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base with the 388th Tactical Fighter Wing, which was the primary USAF unit at Korat RTAFB. Orders for those assigned to Batcat were actually to the 388th Combat Support Group. After arrival at Korat subsequent orders were issued to transfer to the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing. When the 553rd first arrived the 388th flew the Republic F-105 Thunder Chief. Later the 388th made a transition to the McDonnell F-4E Phantom II. In addition the Royal Thai Air Force operated North American T-6 trainers based at Korat.

Batcat Combat Missions Begin - Dropping Sensors

Combat reconnaissance missions began on November 25, 1967. These missions normally required the aircraft to be on station for 8 hours. Including transit time to and from station, an average flight was typically about 10 ½ hours.

Before BATCAT could be effective aircraft from other bases dropped sensors along the area to be monitored. During early operations the Navy used OP-2E observation aircraft (which were modified Lockheed SP-2H Neptune sub hunter/killer aircraft). The OP-2E aircraft carried the sensors in one of two places on the aircraft. Smaller ACCOBOUY sensors were in racks inside the aircraft while the larger ADSIDS were carried on ejector racks outboard of the piston engines.

It was necessary to plot accurately the position of the sensors by the drop aircraft. Accurate placing of the ADSIDS required the use of the WWII Norden Bombsight due to altitude required for the correct position on the ground of the unit. The obtaining, the training and the use of the sight is a story all by its self. Most of this was accomplished by U.S. Navy Squadron VO-67. ACCOBOUY accuracy was accomplished by "eye ball" using an IP very close to the desired

emplacement location.

Several different types of sensors were used during the Vietnam War. One of the most common was called ADSID, Air Delivered Seismic Intrusion Detector. These sensors picked up vibrations in the earth and transmitted a signal which was picked up by the orbiting Batcat EC-121R. Knowing the sensor location, as recorded by the drop aircraft, allowed the EC-121R crew to know where along the trail that the activation occurred.

The sensors were dropped in strings of 4 to 12 sensors, sometimes more, along the trail area to be observed. As a vehicle moved it would set off one sensor, then the next in the string, etc. By plotting the sensor activations, a route and speed could be determined. On occasion the sensors were hand planted in Laos and Cambodia by Special Forces, and also sometimes dropped by USAF H-3 helicopters.

Sensor variations occurred regularly. Another type of sensor was named ACOUSID. ACOUSID sensors transmitted an aural sound to the EC-121R which was picked up by the CIM, and recorded on reel to reel tape drives. With ACOUSID it was hoped to be able to identify precisely what type vehicle activated the sensor.

Sensors were camouflaged with the extended antenna also camouflaged. Life of each sensor was two weeks to a month depending on how much the sensor transmitted. Some sensors had the capability of being put in an inhibit mode to extend battery life.

Operations were flown using 25 EC-121R aircraft of the 30 aircraft converted. All aircraft were assigned to the Wing and both flying squadrons flew the same aircraft. Three EC-121R aircraft remained at Otis AFB, MA for training, two more were assigned to Eglin AFB, Florida, for ongoing sensor development.

Normal crew complement was 17-18 comprised of: Aircraft Commander, Co-Pilot, Flight Engineer, Second Flight Engineer, Navigator, Second Navigator, Radio Operator, Second Radio Operator, Electronic Warfare Officer, Radio Maintenance Technician, Assistant Radio Maintenance Technician, Combat Information Control Information Officer, Assistant Combat Information Control Officer, and 4 to 5 Combat Information Monitors.

Missions flown out of range of Nakhon Phanom required greater aircrew involvement. Combat Information Monitors (CIM) recorded each sensor transition and passed the information to the Combat Information Control Officer (CICO). It was the job of the CICO and ACICO to plot the sensor information. When tracks were thought to be legitimate, the information was then passed on to Saigon via High Frequency (shortwave) single sideband radio. Some orbits were flown in direct support of Army or Marine units. In these cases tracks were radioed directly to Army or Marine units via VHF FM radio.

During the time the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing was activate, eleven different orbits were flown. Not all at the same time. Different orbits were flown as the ground combat situation warranted.

Enlisted quarters were concrete "cinder" block barracks. One barracks for each squadron, each

accommodating 192 men. Non-Commissioned officers used hutches with, I believe, 8 men per hutch.

Change of Command and Operations

On Jul 1, 1968 Col. John W. Emig relieved Col. Weiser. He remained Wing commander until Col. Timmermans arrived on July 8, 1968. On July 8, 1968, Colonel Henry Timmermans assumed command of the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing, relieving Col. Emig.

About this time, June 1968, the Navy relinquished to the USAF the job of dropping the air delivered sensors. During VO-67's tenure dropping the sensors, Navy squadron VO-67 lost 3 of their OP-2E aircraft, and 20 aircrew men. The remains of one crew lost were not recovered until 2003.

USAF used the F-4D along with an RF-4C to photograph the position of the drops to ensure accuracy of sensor placement. At times CH-3 helicopters were used to make the sensor drops.

During January 1969 while landing at Otis AFB, MA, an EC-121R, 67-21476, returning from a training flight overran the end of the runway. The nose gear collapsed, but fortunately no serious injuries occurred. Photographs I've seen show this airplane was used afterwards only as a source of spare parts, apparently not flown again.

Testing the EC-121R Replacement begins - the QU-22

A detachment of the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing provided an evaluation of the Beech YQU-22A and QU-22B aircraft at Nakhon Phanom. The YQU-22A was a derivative of the Beech Debonair (straight tail Bonanza), the Beech model 1074, intended to be operated by remote control as a drone, although operationally they were never flown without a pilot. These Beech aircraft were occasionally seen at Korat. These U-22's were unofficially referred to as "Baby-Bats." The YQU-22A was underpowered and too small to properly perform the sensor relay mission. Later in 1969 and early 1970, the YQU-22A was replaced by the Beech QU-22B, Beech model 1079, which used the larger Beech model 36 Bonanza fuselage with an upgraded engine and larger alternator. After the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing was inactivated on Dec. 15, 1970, the QU-22B detachment at Naknon Phanom became the 554th squadron and continued the sensor relay job started by the EC-121R's.

From January 30, 1969 through February 28, 1969, the 553rd flew out of U-Tapao in Southern Thailand. This deployment was required so the runway at Korat (Korat had only the single runway, aligned 60/240 degrees) could be repaired. The longer distances to the orbit area increased the average flight time to a little over 11 hours per mission.

TDY to U-Tapao - Batcat EC-121R Incidents and Crashes

Enlisted crew quarters at U-Tapao were quite primitive compared to Korat. Living quarters provided were those built by the Japanese during World War II, at that time unused at U-Tapao.

I (Larry Westin) can remember the hutch I was assigned to was not far from the Air (now Security) Police station. Every shift sirens were tested by the incoming AP's. Just a little further down the line was the SAC B-51/KC-135 maintenance engine run up area. Sleep could be difficult with sirens or jet engines running nearby! Although it wasn't the cleanest water I ever saw, it was nice to swim in the Gulf of Siam, the beach of which was at the south end of U-Tapao's runway.

On April 25, 1969 the 553rd Wing lost its first EC-121R aircraft, 67-21493. All on board, 18 crew members of BATCAT crew 39, 554th Reconnaissance Squadron, with the call sign Batcat 21, perished in the crash.

Orbits varied somewhat as ground combat operations changed. Early fights over the water off the East coast of Vietnam, just above the DMZ, were terminated after a short time. The off shore orbit (the first BLACK orbit) was unique in that the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing EC-121R's provided targets directly to a U.S. Navy battleship, the USS New Jersey. This orbit had to be discontinued because of the bombing halt of North Vietnam by President Johnson. Technically dropping the sensors was considered the same as dropping bombs by the Johnson administration.

By the middle of 1969 3 standard orbits were established and flown 24 hours a day. Other orbits were operated as the situation demanded. Some were as far south as lower South Vietnam (Amber), and as far north as 60 miles from Hanoi (Rose).

During June 1969 a 553rd Reconnaissance EC-121R experienced an incident thought to be unique with the Lockheed Constellation/Super Constellation aircraft. All four propellers feathered simultaneously during flight. Some anxious moments ensued when engines were restarted, then feathered again. Aircraft Commander Col. Jack January and crew was able to get the engines running and make a safe emergency landing at Da Nang, South Vietnam. This aircraft, EC-121R USAF serial number 67-21487, would go on to be nick named the "Da Nang Glider."

One additional EC-121R aircraft was taken on charge at Korat to make up for the loss of the aircraft in April. Howard Cooper was on the crew which picked up this airplane at JFK International Airport, New York, where Lockheed has a maintenance facility. Arriving at JFK on May 29, 1969 to ferry the airplane to Korat, there was a 3 to 4 hour delay when smoke filled the cockpit at engine start. Route was JFK to McClellan, Hickam, Wake Island, Clark AB, then onto Korat. Another incident occurred about 3.5 hours after departure from Hickam, a problem in #3 engine developed, the prop was feathered, and return made to Hickam. After a day on the ground at Hickam the problem was resolved and the trip completed successfully.

With the January write off after the landing overrun at Otis AFB, and the transfer of one aircraft to Korat to make up for the April loss, this left only 3 EC-121R's in the U.S. Training continued at Otis AFB, with at least one C-121G assigned for pilot/engineer training. Sensor development continued using one EC-121R at Eglin AFB.

553rd EMS at Nui Ba Den Mountain - Change of Command

During the middle of 1969 Radio Maintenance Technicians were assigned on temporary duty to Nui Ba Den Mountain, South Vietnam. Nui Ba Den mountain was equipped with electronic receivers to monitor sensors similar to those monitored by the EC-121R's. During the night of June 18, 1969 the Viet Cong mounted a sapper attack. The Viet Cong sapper team crawled through the Army lines to make a deliberate attack on the relay vans. In the attack the vans were severely damaged and the 553rd EMS Sergeant on duty at the time, TSgt. John Linaburg, was wounded and at least two VC were killed by Army personnel responding to the attack. Sergeant Linaburg was the only 553rd Reconnaissance Wing member known to receive the Purple Heart for wounds suffered in combat with the enemy.

On July 1, 1969, Colonel Ted Ostendorf assumed command of the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing.

A personal remembrance from Larry Westin about flying with the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing - "One particularly rainy night about 04:00 our aircraft, flying the Blue orbit, began picking up sensor activations around Khe Shan. The problem was we could not determine if it was the rain or the enemy which was activating the sensors. Direct radio contact with the Army at Khe Shan was established, and they were notified of our sensor activity. The Army advised immediately they would send a patrol out to find out if these sensor activations were enemy, or rain. At that time I was happy to be flying around in a warm dry airplane, rather than going out on patrol in enemy infiltrated territory, in the jungle, at night, in bad weather."

About this time crews were assigned to specific aircraft. However that was not necessarily the aircraft you flew in. Aircrews performed some work on "their" aircraft, mostly cleaning duties, when not flying.

A second EC-121R, 67-21495, was lost during September 1969. Four crew members from BATCAT crew 40, 554th Reconnaissance Squadron, flying as Batcat 19, perished with the loss of this aircraft. Four Thai nationals on the ground were also killed.

Change of Command - Readyng the QU-22B for Service

On December 7, 1969, Colonel John Mitchell assumed command of the 553rd.

Orbits were flown as dictated by events on the ground. Detachment 1 at Nakhom Phanom proceeded during this time to evaluate and refine operations with the Beech QU-22B aircraft to replace the EC-121R. Automatic plotters were added to some of the EC-121R aircraft. Eventually 9 plotters were available, so they were installed on an as needed basis for missions. During 1970 EC-121R aircraft were being flown back to Davis-Monthan AFB to be scrapped. October 1970 saw the first 5 EC-121R's returned to Davis-Monthan go to a local Tucson company to scrap.

In later 1970 Col. Mitchell confirmed to USAF headquarters that the QU-22B was ready to fly operationally. With that confirmation USAF planned the end of the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing.

Last 553rd Reconnaissance Wing Commander - Wing Deactivated

On December 11, 1970, just before the wing was deactivated, Colonel Robert Slane assumed command of the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing. Formal deactivation of the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing occurred on December 15, 1970.

553rd Reconnaissance Wing Commanders:

1 Mar 1967	to	30 June 1968	Col. Gus Weiser
1 Jul 1968	to	7 July 1968	Col. John W. Emig
8 Jul 1968	to	30 June 1969	Col. Henry L. Timmermans
1 Jul 1969	to	6 Dec 1969	Col. Ted H. Ostendorf
7 Dec 1969	to	10 Dec 1970	Col. John W. Mitchell
11 Dec 1970	to	15 Dec 1970	Col. Robert A. Slane

Please note the differences shown in this history and what the Office of Air Force History has in some official publications. I list Col. Weiser as 553rd Commander from Mar 67, not Oct 1967 as some USAF documentation list. Col. Weiser assumed command on March 1, 1967, he did not arrive in Southeast Asia until Oct. 1967.

The Office of Air Force History has in an official publications misspelled Col. Slane's name. His name is Robert Slane, not Robert Sloan. The last official history of the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing was written in early 1971, after Col. Slane was reassigned. The last official history has, at some points, Col. Robert Slane incorrectly identified as Col. Robert Sloan.

553rd Reconnaissance Squadron reassigned to the 388th TFW

The wing was disbanded on December 15, 1970, however one squadron, the 553rd Reconnaissance Squadron continued to operate as an EC-121R flying squadron of the 388th Tactical Fighter Wing. The Batcat EC-121R's flew from Korat until December 1971. At that time the last EC-121R departed for Davis-Monthan AFB, Arizona.

When the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing deactivated, the 554th Reconnaissance Squadron number was assigned to the QU-22B aircraft at Nakhom Phanom. This unit previously flew as Detachment 1 of the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing at Nakhom Phanom RTAFB.

EC-121R sensor relay missions continued to be flown by the 553rd Reconnaissance Squadron, now part of the 388th Tactical Fighter Wing from Korat. Some orbits were out of relay range from Task Force Alpha at Nakhom Phanom, so they could not be flown by the QU-22B, and had to be flown by the EC-121R with its large crew.

While it was intended for the QU-22B aircraft to be flown remotely, that never occurred in practice. There was always a pilot on board the QU-22B for operational missions.

553rd Reconnaissance Squadron performs Ramrod ABCCC mission

In addition to continuing the sensor relay mission, the Batcat EC-121R aircraft now had an additional task with the code name Ramrod. Bill "Mac" MacDonald was a CICO with the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing, and continued with the 553rd Reconnaissance Squadron after the wing was deactivated. Mac provides this first hand knowledge of the Ramrod ABCCC mission now flown by the EC-121R's over Cambodia on what I call Black orbit 2 (the first black orbit which I call Black orbit 1, was flown at the northeast coastal part of South Vietnam):

"Black Orbit in 1971 was an Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center (ABCCC) mission over Cambodia. We used the call sign "Ramrod." Our Area of Responsibility was from zero to 2,000 feet and if memory serves we flew a racetrack pattern along the 40 degree radial out of Phnom Penh at 10,000 feet.

"The Senior Duty Officer was a rated O-5 (Lt. Col.), not assigned to the 553 Recon Squadron. I flew with a few different SDO's who were at Korat TDY from the Tactical Air Control Center (TACC) in Saigon. A major responsibility for the SDO was to clear fire missions. We carried a very heavy map book with annotated topographical maps of the area. We also had the Rules of Engagement, 'BENO' Book information, e.g., 'there will be no bombing of temples.'

"I was a Duty Officer. DOs were CICOs and sat at the CICO station for this mission. We were in constant contact with Blue Chip (call sign for the 7th AF Hq Ops in Saigon) and the Airborne Forward Air Controllers operating in the area. At designated times before B-52 strikes, the DO was required to broadcast messages on UHF Guard Frequency for all aircraft to avoid the strike area.

"Two CIMs acted as Air Traffic Controllers. They cleared the US aircraft into and out of Cambodia and kept track of them through 'Ops Normal' reports while in country.

"We supported the Cambodian Army and had a Cambodian field-grade Army Officer on board in contact with troops on the ground at all times. If the Cambodians needed anything, we relayed his requirements to Blue Chip, but that was rare.

"Fragged US missions checked in and out with us. We had the authority to divert them if and when required. We carried a frag for our Area of Operations, so we knew who to expect. 'Rustic' FACs were assigned to one or more of several Areas of Responsibility within Cambodia and it was these people that we primarily worked with.

"Whenever a FAC needed air support, he called us and we relayed to Blue Chip. When the FAC called in he'd give us the target and the ordnance he needed. The SDO would clear the target, making sure it was authorized, and we'd immediately relay the request to Blue Chip. Several aircraft were on strip alert in Vietnam. When Blue Chip got the call, they'd match up the requirement to the flight with the proper ordnance load, and scramble them. The flight would check in with us crossing the border and we'd match them up with the FAC. The FAC would direct the firing mission.

“We also worked with Army helicopters; there were several in the area.

“The Ramrod missions were great. Since I arrived in Korat late in the program, the Batcat missions were dwindling down. I got as many Ramrod missions as I could. I was a Mustang, having been enlisted for ten years before going to OTS. Most of the CICOs were much younger than I and didn’t have the experience of working side-by-side with screaming field-grade officers. So they were happy that I took the missions.

“Our ‘finest hour’ occurred when a CIM hollered out that he heard an emergency beeper and at the same time a Rustic FAC called us. A US helicopter had been shot down in flames. We had no idea who it was, but that wasn’t uncommon in the ‘secret war.’

“The FAC reported the helicopter on the ground and survivors getting out. Enemy ground forces were in the area, very close. He gave us the coordinates and went in to help. We appointed him On Scene Commander and we immediately contacted Blue Chip. I remember it well, ‘Blue Chip, Ramrod with Emergency Traffic.’ And the instantaneous response, ‘Go.’

“I reported the location and Blue Chip launched a Search and Recovery team, four A-1E Skyraiders (Call sign Sandy) for fire suppression and the Jolly Green rescue helicopter. The Sandy’s came in first and we handed them off to the FAC. He was quite busy and was quite glad to see them. Then the Jolly Green hit the fence and checked in. He knew the location, so I told him ours to be sure we were out of his way. They took it from there.

“Between the Sandy’s, the original FAC and one other FAC, the enemy did not get close to the downed helicopter. A total of six people had been aboard and all were extracted successfully. Once the SAR team left the area, we still had cleanup work. The helicopter was on the ground in enemy area and it contained classified documents and equipment. It had to be destroyed. For the next hour or so it seemed that anything flying in the AO was put onto that target. I know we put two F-4s in and a friendly Cambodian gunship got in a few licks. I know they were many more, but I’ve forgotten just who they were. The big thing was that everyone got out OK and nothing good was left of our helicopter.

“In summary the 553 Recon Sq flew many ABCCC missions over Cambodia in 1971, using call sign Ramrod. The Squadron did a great job. The call sign Ramrod may still be in use today in ABCCC operations.”

Dale Cullop provides the following information about the last period of Batcat after the wing deactivated. “There were about 11 EC-121R’s left there in Dec 70 when the wing deactivated, and we started losing them slowly. By Dec.71 there was just the one. The 553 Reconnaissance Sq. continued to operate from Korat AB, Thailand, until Dec. 1971 flying the same missions. The last airplane left Korat on 5 Dec 71. The last personnel left in January 1972. I arrived at Korat in Nov. 70 was assigned to the 553rd as a Flight Engineer.”

Another Homepage visitor, John Tomany, questioned me about some “strange” Constellations at Korat. At the time I thought he was mistaken. Since then I’ve learned about Lockheed EC-121S aircraft operating at Korat. I believe the 553rd EMS, FMS, and OMS squadrons provided

maintenance support, with the aircraft and pilots for the EC-121S aircraft coming from the Pennsylvania Air National Guard. I have a few books on the Lockheed Constellation, but there is only a passing reference to the S model and none of the books I have a photograph of the S model. My Batcat Homepage now has two photographs of the EC-121S taken at Korat, my thanks to Greg Krzyzak, 553rd FMS, for making these photos available of a very little known variant of the EC-121.

Final EC-121R Departs Korat for Davis-Monthan and Scrapping

On December 15, 1971 the last Lockheed EC-121R at Korat, 67-21498, departed for Davis-Monthan AFB, arriving on December 18, 1971. By April 1972 the last of the USAF EC-121R aircraft were being scrapped. No EC-121R exists today.

During its time in South East Asia the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing earned the following:

553rd Reconnaissance Wing Campaigns and Awards

CAMPAIGN STREAMERS: Vietnam Air Offensive, Phase II; Vietnam Air Offensive, Phase III; Vietnam Air/Ground; Vietnam Air Offensive, Phase IV; TET 69/Counteroffensive; Vietnam Summer-Fall 1969; Vietnam Winter/Spring, 1970; Sanctuary Counteroffensive; Southwest Monsoon; Commando Hunt V.

DECORATIONS: Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards with Combat "V" Device, 1 April 1967 to 31 May 1968; 1 July 1968 to 15 April 1969; Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm, 1 April 1967 to 15 December 1970.

As with all my material there is always a date and revision level. Those revisions occur when readers find errors or omissions to the article. Anyone who can provide additional details, correct my errors, or omissions, are asked to contact the author, Larry Westin, e-mail <westin@westin553.net> or via postal mail at:

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