

DRILL PRESS REFLECTIONS

PART 2

Reflections

By SMSgt (Ret'd) Darwin Bruce, Drill Press AMS, Apr 1966 – Apr 1967

In September 1959, a 21 year old kid, me, bored with college and expecting to be drafted, enlisted in the United States Air Force. After surviving Air Force basic training at Lackland Air Force Base, the Air Force, in its infinite wisdom, sent me back to college. I spent a year learning the basics of the Japanese language at IFEL (Yale University) and then was sent to Goodfellow AFB to learn how to be a radio intercept analyst (RIA), Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC) 202xO. In September 1961, I was assigned to the 6918th RSM, Brady AB, a ground intercept site at Hakata Japan.

In April 1962, I was given the additional duty, as a RIA 20250, with a contingency group called TEAM-1A. After more training on First Aid, driving all kinds of military vehicles and how to use all kinds of weapons, we were sent to SVN (South Vietnam) to a ground intercept site in 40 foot vans at Danang AB. There I met MSgt Carroll “Chief” Miller who



became my mentor. I knew “Chief” Miller from the 6918th, but not personally. I was an A1C and a fast learner. Under “Chief Miller I honed my 202 skills and after six months, returned to the 6918th for another one and a half years under SSgt Rudolph Albonico, another good teacher. (Chief Miller, left)

But I had higher hopes. I'd heard about the USAFSS flying positions for airmen and wanted in on that program. I re-enlisted and applied for a new 202 slot at the 6988th SS, a flying unit at Yokota Japan. My hopes were dashed because of a manning fight between the NCOIC of the 6988th and headquarters USAFSS. So, I spent approximately 2 years as an operations administrative gofer. Then, in early 1966 a rare chance occurred. A message came through channels requesting a well-qualified RIA (202) for a flying slot at a new unit starting up in Vietnam.

I volunteered immediately and the 6988th was happy to get rid of me. (I had a standing disagreement with the commander about where I was living). The 6988th shipped me off to “snake school” in the Philippines at Clark AB then to the new 6994th SS at Tan Son Nhut AB outside of Saigon Vietnam. I was assigned to Project Drill Press and then sent to Basic Survival School at Fairchild AFB in Spokane Washington. Then back at TSN, I was assigned to my mentor, SMSgt “Chief” Miller. It was like old home week. Chief Miller knew my capabilities as a RIA and only had to train me on the airborne aspects and my new responsibilities as the AMS (Air Mission Supervisor), the most coveted position on a USAFSS aircrew.

Drill Press didn't have an AZK course or Flight Examiner. We learned by doing. As the AMS I was the mission supervisor. I was in charge of the backend USAFSS crewmembers and, by virtue of being mission supervisor, operationally in charge of the front end crew, usually a Lt Colonel, a Major and a MSGT (Master Sergeant). All of them except one Morse operator out-ranked me. This situation was not unusual in the USAFSS where skills and experience trumped rank. However, our front-end crews weren't in the USAFSS. They were in TAC (Tactical Air Command). On my first solo mission, the aircraft commander and liaison officer for the 360th TRS (Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron) was Lt Colonel John Brotherton. He came to me and said, "Airman Bruce, it's my responsibility to fly the plane and take care of aircrew safety. Your responsibility is for the mission." That was that, as they say.

Years later, at a reunion, I was talking to Lt Colonel (Ret'd) Al Stein. He was the Operations Officer at the 360th when I was flying with Lt Col Brotherton. Al said, "You guys from the USAFSS were the most un-disciplined, unmilitary looking and acting characters we ever ran across." I think I'd heard that reaction about USAFSS personnel before. He also said that the officers of the 360th lobbied for my promotion to Staff Sergeant (SSGT) so they would be taking orders from an NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer) instead of an Airman First Class. I thank them for that. Several times Lt Col Brotherton took off his "leaves" and joined us in the NCO Club at Phu Bai. He claimed the Army officers were too boring for him. I believe we had a good working relationship with the TAC front end crews.

Lt. Col. Brotherton also asked me and my senior Morse operator (SSgt Joe Dennison at the time) to get some "right seat" time on his plane in case of an emergency and more hands, with even limited experience, were needed in the cockpit. Over the year I was there I probably got 50 or 60 hours in the co-pilot seat.

My mentor and teacher during my first flights was SMSgt Carroll "Chief" Miller. My first flight was in the Mekong delta. We took a bullet in the starboard oil cooler causing a small fire and had to abort the mission. A few minutes after the "May Day" call, "Sandys" surrounded us, checked us out and herded us safely back to TSN. My second flight was a night flight over the Tay Ninh Province and Black Widow Mountain in War Zone C. It was the first time I remember seeing tracers being fired at our plane. It was sort of surreal seeing a red ball coming up and getting bigger, then falling off at the top of its trajectory as its energy was spent. After that I paid little attention to the bullets being fired at us. We were issued "FLAC" vests and chaps with the heavy metal plates. We lined the floor with them. They were too heavy to wear while working.

During the first half of 1966 the Drill Press Ops bldg was a 40-foot comm Van parked behind the TSN Comm Center. An officer (a Lt) was assigned to us, but he only lasted about a week. After the Lt made a "bone-head" decision, Chief Miller took the Lt aside, inside the van, and "chewed" his backside, unmercifully. The Lt left, in tears, and never came back. We never had another officer assigned to us while I was assigned there. The CC (Commander) of the 94th gave us hell for being so hard on the Lt. I can't even remember the Lt.'s name.



Drill Press crew by Comm Van

(Looks like MSgt Tony Z. Odom, NCOIC Drill Press)

Later in the tour, the higher up muckity mucks decided that, since we would soon be losing the older pilots due to normal rotations, we should begin training young Lt's as Gooney Bird pilots. Drill Press was assigned a "butterbar" Lt who had gone through F-4 school and in no way was going to fly a "Trash-hauler". After a week of flying the right seat, Lt Col Brotherton gave him his chance to prove what a "hot-shot" pilot he was. He was going to get the opportunity to land the "tail-dragger". After the very rough landing (he bounced it four times) an anonymous voice came over the intercom and said, "Nice landing, Lt. Never knew when we landed. First time, second time, third time,...". The Lt left our plane and never came back. He complained bitterly to Colonel Jim Jelly, CC (Commander) 360th TRS, about those nasty back-enders from USAFSS and how they sabotaged his career. We were hard on Lt's.

During a mission in the Ah Shau valley, as we flew our usual "racetrack", at about four or five thousand feet, the ARC Light Commander called down to us and requested that we move our track eastward and parallel to where we were at that time. Moments later we saw the ground erupting at the north end of the ARC Light track as they "carpet bombed" that area. We couldn't see them because they were above the clouds at 35,000 feet. Their target track was about 1/2 by five miles long by the time they finished. During the night it rained and filled the bomb craters with water. The next day the sun reflected off the water in the craters creating a twinkling effect from the air.

During one of our DMZ (De-Militarized Zone) missions we got a bit of a scare when a SA-2 SAM missile was fired through the area where we were flying. Our linguist heard

the Fan Song “rattle”, advised me and I called the AC to “break left and dive”. The missile roared past us approximately a quarter mile away. It was fired from the northern side of the DMZ. I was told by someone (can’t remember who (CRS)) that a U.S. plane got shot down by a SA-2 in the same area a few years later.

Another interesting event during my tenure was the use of the plane to dry our laundry. The humidity in the summer was so high all the time that, even with electric dryers, we couldn’t get our laundry dry. So we rigged some para-cord lines in the plane to hang the clothes. At five thousand feet the air is very dry and in minutes we had dry undies, socks and uniforms. So we got the nickname as the “Flying Chinese Laundry” from our ASA friends at the 8th RRU at Phu Bai. From the beginning our relationship with the ASA at Phu Bai was a friendly rivalry. They had several names for us, like, “The Hollywood Air Force” and the “Drill Press Gypsies”. The 8th RRU was often called, “B-52 Dispatch.”

Every hundred hours on the plane or about three weeks, we had to take the plane back to Tan Son Nhut for PM (Preventative Maintenance). The routine was to fly a short mission in the DMZ in the morning and then recover at Pleiku for fuel and then press on to Saigon for a well-earned 48-hour rest and recuperation. On one of these trips the weather was lousy and when we were ready to land at Pleiku the RAPCON (Radar Approach Control) told us we would break out of the clouds at 200 feet AGL. We broke out at 50 feet and had a hard landing. We gassed up and then took off for TSN. When we landed at TSN, in the dark, the pilot hit the brakes and we “ground looped” a couple of times. During these loops I saw the landing lights of a Navy P-2V almost on top of us as he tried to land behind us. He had to do an emergency procedure to get up above us and back into the flight pattern for a “go around”. The hard landing at Pleiku had cracked a casting on the brake system and it failed when we touched down at TSN. Pretty scary seeing the headlights of a plane coming right at you with those huge propellers churning just a few feet away. It was “change my underwear time” back at the barracks.

Not too long after Lt Col Wallander took over the unit, I was on a “ferry flight” from TSN to DaNang to meet my Drill Press bird. The new, full time commander of the 6994th, Lt Col. Robert L. Wallander, was sitting next to me. He was on his way to Danang to have a “meet and greet” with Lt Col. Harry Edwards, the commander of the 6924th SS and other SIGINT commanders in the area (ARMY and Marines). We talked for a few minutes then he asked me to show him how the equipment worked on the plane. It was a Phylliss Ann bird and I knew absolutely nothing about it, other than the fact that it was an ARDF plane. After a few minutes of my refusals to operate it, he threatened to have me Court Marshaled at his earliest convenience. When we landed at Danang, I scuttled off to find my plane and “got the hell out of Dodge” and back to Hue Phu Bai.

Three weeks later when I was due back at TSN while the plane was PM’d, I was met by Lt Col Gilbert, the new 6994th Exec Officer. He told me I was to report to Lt Col Wallander ASAP. Visions of “slick sleeves”, Leavenworth, permanent KP and other undesirable duties were running through my mind at the speed of light. I reported and sweated “bullets” while I waited for him to speak and destroy my career.

He said, “Stand at ease Airman. I have an apology to make to you.” I almost collapsed. He continued to tell me that he had been only briefed and filled full of BS about the Phyllis Ann Project and had been given absolutely no information about Drill Press, “his” other two planes and mission. However, conversations with others in the SVN Intel community claimed that 90% of the “good” (usable) Intel received by the Marines in I Corps came from Drill Press. Lt Col. Wallander and I became good friends after that and we continued to correspond until his death in 2001.

Another time I got my behind “chewed” by Lt Col Wallander was in September 1966. 100 hours flying time was authorized under normal circumstances, however, Vietnam was different. The flight surgeon authorized an additional 20 hours due to the needs of the mission. Now, exceeding the extended flying hours was normal for us due to the length of the missions, but that month I logged 122 hours. Lt Col Wallander “grounded” me for the remainder of the month and told me “to fly’m but not to log them” after 115 hours.

One time we used the plane to carry four refrigerators, purchased at the Army PX at Hue Phu Bai, back to TSN. There we sold them for an obscene price and used the proceeds to buy more Class Six materials for trading in the Northern provinces. Refrigerators were worth their weight in gold at TSN and the BX (Base Exchange) in Cholon had very few available on a regular basis. We used the profits on the refrigerators to buy booze at the Cholon BX and then trade the booze at Phu Bai for whatever we needed, like a nice mortar bunker. The Navy CB’s (Construction Battalion) were quite appreciative for the booze, and the Army Colonel at the 8th was quite putout because he wanted to see USAFSS crews out in the hot sun digging holes in the ground. I left Vietnam before the mortar bunker was supposed to be finished.

On one occasion, during a “fire fight” in the DMZ, we became the “On-Scene-Commander” for a couple of shoot downs of USAF F-4 Phantoms and a Navy F-8 Crusader. The first two F-4 crewmen didn’t make it out alive. The second F-4 crew bailed out and had two “good chutes”. The Navy F-8 who came in to help suppress the enemy fire got shot up also. He came back alongside of us with a fire traveling towards the cockpit along the dorsal spine of the aircraft. He said he was heading back towards the Quang Tri River and friendly territory before ejecting. Moments later we heard the “Weep weep” of his chute beacon, indicating a successful ejection.

One of the primary uses of the Drill Press plane was for any “as needed” ABERU missions. I did one of those, on September 2, 1966. We did a normal morning mission in the DMZ, then a mission while transiting from Hue Phu Bai back down to TSN. I released my crew for their 48-hour break while I finished up the paperwork (PMFR). Col Wallander came into the Ops area and asked where my crew was. I told him. He said we needed to do an ABERU mission. (This mission is cited in PART 1.)

After a quick briefing on the mission by Lt Col Wallander, we decided that it would be better, due to language requirements, to get two French linguists from the ASA (Army Security Agency) 509th RRR, 3rd RRU (3rd Rock and Roll) across the base. That was my third mission of the day. This mission was still classified until April 2014. See Part 1, Mission Accomplishments.

During the 1966 through March 1967, we had fires on board five times due to small arms fire. One day, as we flew into Danang with the starboard engine on fire and a Kaman flying alongside with a fire suppression bottle attached and the silver suited man standing in the hatchway, the Danang controller asked that we land at least half down the runway. "In case you guys crash, I don't want you to mess up my runway." He declined to drink with us at the club that night. I wonder why. During this period, not one member of our Drill Press crew was injured due to enemy action. We did, however, get "hurt" (read, inebriated) at the club on numerous occasions, while playing Double Deck Pinochle.

Our parts depot during the early days was a terminally broken VNAF C-47 at the east end of the Hue Phu Bai airfield runway or the "Spookys" at Danang. The VNAF plane was an empty shell when I left Phu Bai and several of the Spookys were missing working generators. The power hungry electronic equipment on our planes "ate" generators on a regular basis.

The daily routine for me started with an "O-dark-thirty" wake-up, a quick shower and an early trip to the 8th RRU operations building. There I coordinated things with the Army analysts and filled my flight brief case with classified "cheat sheets", KAC pads (KY-8 Communications Encryption devices were not installed until 1968), checklists etc. I left the bag with the guards at the entrance to the 8th's building and went to the chow hall to meet the rest of my crew and eat breakfast. After breakfast our maintenance guys and drivers picked us up at the chow hall in our ¾ ton weapons carrier, stopped by the 8th's operations building so I could retrieve the brief case and then drove to the airfield. We unlocked the plane, and literally lifted the tail end and pushed it out and at right angles so that we would not blow FOD (Foreign Object Debris) into the MASH unit behind the location where the plane was parked.

Most of our missions were five to six hours long, however on one occasion we asked the AC (aircraft commander, Lt Col Brotherton) to extend the flight as long as he could. A C-47D carried 800 gallons of fuel and used almost 100 gallons per hour. The AC squeezed us to 8 hours and 45 minutes from take-off to touch down and he wasn't real happy about landing literally on fumes. Thank goodness for a 13: 1 glide ratio. But for the sake of the mission he did it. After the landing, the Flight Mechanic opened the "fuel petcocks" and nothing came out. The tanks were dry. This caused the 360th to make some rules for reserve fuel amounts on the C-47s in their charge.

After Major "Crash" O'Malley PCS'd out, we got a replacement co-pilot, Major Weathersby. The CP usually carried the frontend crew's briefcase with the mission materials inside. However, on his initial flight with us, Maj. Weathersby carried two briefcases. Naturally we were all curious as to what he had inside. It was our "combat rations". We thought that went out with WWII. So, the month of January 1967 saw the completion of a full month's distribution of "combat liquor rations" to aircrew members after each combat mission. This ration was dispensed at the centralized maintenance and intelligence debriefing, the crew van, following the completion of the mission flown. The liquor ration (VSQ 100 Proof Brandy) was obtained in coordination with the Flight Surgeon's Office. The 360th squadron Intelligence Section controlled the dispensing of the

combat ration and also maintained the necessary records for control and requisition purposes.

One day I got a message from Lt Col Wallander with the name, serial number and clearance status of a representative from NSA. Apparently, due to the quantity and quality of exploitable intercepts, NSA decided to send a rep out to Hue Phu Bai (8th RRU, our support unit) to fly with us and see what we were doing. The rep, a Marine Master Sergeant from Ft Meade, followed me for a mission day. He sat in on the briefing I had with the 8th RRU analysts and then watched what I was stuffing into my mission briefcase, references, cheat sheets and KAC pad. All references and cheat sheets were on water soluble paper in case they need to be destroyed quickly. After the mission he thanked us and went back to Washington DC. NSA never doubted us again.

Christmas 1966 was one of the best experiences of my life. We came back to Saigon for our preventive maintenance break, just in time for the Bob Hope show in the soccer field at Tan Son Nhut. Unfortunately, all the spaces from where you could see the show were taken up by the local "office commandos". So I stood behind the stage next to an Air Force car and listened to the last half of the show. When it was over, Bob Hope came back to where I was and asked two other Army troops and myself to sit with him in the car until it was time for him go back to Thailand. (Bob Hope had a price on his head by the VC in Vietnam, rumored to be about \$50K in gold.) After 15 minutes in the car, his driver and PR man came back and they left. Bob Hope was a very nice gentleman, the best.

One night at Phu Bai, after Turk and his crew returned from their 48 hour break in Saigon, we had a mortar attack about 1 AM. Turk "hurt" himself in the club that evening and I couldn't wake him when the attack began. I rolled him off his bunk, threw his mattress over him and then went out to the slit trenches. Six inches of muddy water in your underwear isn't very nice. The next morning we saw the damage. The Drill Press barn didn't have a scratch on it, but a couple of the Army admin buildings were beat up a bit. They announced 24 casualties for the attack. Turk slept through the whole attack and was surprised the next day when we told him what happened.

On one of my mail pickups at Tan Son Nhut I got a letter from a Selective Service Board (draft board) in St. Clairesville, Ohio. I had never been to St. Clairesville in my life, but it had my name on it. It said I was to report for my induction and that failure to do so would result in punishment under some law and code. I sent a letter back and said, "If I don't show up, what are you going to do? Send me to Vietnam?" The return address on my letter was for the APO at Tan Son Nhut. I don't think there was a law or code for being a "Smart-ass".

Being an AMS on Drill Press was the best duty I ever had in the Air Force. I started as an A1C AMS and was later promoted to SSGT. It was the job I was trained to do in the USAFSS. We were told what had to be done and we were allowed to do it without any interference. We made a difference for the Marines we supported and, I was told later, the Marines tried to show their appreciation, but the administrative ROE wouldn't allow it.

The Drill Press Cadre

Jan 66 thru Jul 66 (TDY)
AFSSO 2nd Air Division

Troy Little	Coy Glasgow
Robert Chew	Juan Rodriguez
Jay Browning	Chuck Long
Dave Husby	Ron Mitchell
Carroll Miller	Robert Groves
Wilbur St John	Henry Bomar
Gary McPherson	George Barnhart
Joe McClure	Lem McCullough

Apr 66 thru Apr 67 (PCS)
NCOIC, Drill Press (6994th)

MSgt Tony Odom [RA20270]

AMS's (1966/67 partial)

TSgt "Turk" Claire [RA20270]
SSgt Darwin Bruce [RA20250-L]
SSgt Robert Bachelor [RA20250]

Radio Operators (Morse Intercept)
(All RA292x0)

SSgt Joe Dennison	A1C Dave Forbes
SSgt Byron Boekel	A1C Jack Haulsee
A1C Gene Ross	A1C Jim Luther
SSgt Bob Lovett	A1C Ken Klahn
A1C John Fitzpatrick	A1C Dave Sothard
A1C Russ Raymond	
A1C Ed Klem	

Radio Operators (Linguists)
(All RA203xx)

SSgt Larry Mills (TDY 6924th/6994th)
SSgt Gene Willis (TDY 6988th)
A1C Will (Unknown) (TDY 6988th)

AMT (Airborne Mission Technician)

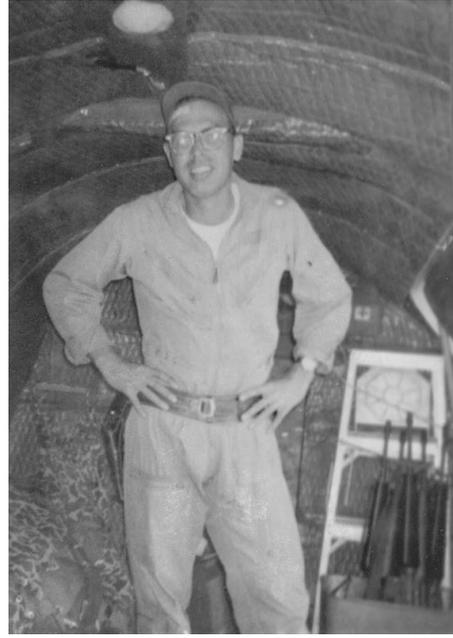
SSgt Jerome Cotton [A304XX]

[I apologize in advance if I left out anyone. Senior moments, you know.]

The Drill Press home base was TSN during 1966 and 1967. Danang was the FOL (Forward Operating Location) for a brief time and then Phu Bai became the long term FOL at the 8th RRFS. After the NVA TET offensive, in early 1968, Drill Press assets and crews were moved to Pleiku for safety.



TSgt "Turk" Claire, AMS aircraft 680



SSgt Darwin Bruce, AMS aircraft 254



[Above] 1967 Drill Press crew, L to R, A1C Ken Klahn (RA29250), SSgt Robert Bachelor, (RA20250 and AMS), A1C Eugene Ross (RA29250), SSgt Robert Lovett (RA29250), SSGT Larry Mills (RA20350-Vietnamese Linguist), Lt Col. Robert L. Wallander (Commander 6994th SS).



JC-47D 43-49680 Drill Press



JC-47D 43-16254 Drill Press

The three Drill Press “criminals” from left to right are, Juan Rodriquez, Russ Raymond and John Fitzpatrick (back to camera), some of the best of the best Morse operators.

As new, younger pilots were phased into the Drill Press project, we did get a few dandies. One, a Captain, was a degree’d Aeronautical Engineer, and he let everyone know about it. He also didn’t like having enlisted pukes running the mission. He was an “I know everything about airplanes” person. One day, after a heavy rain storm, the “pot-holes” in the aircraft parking area were filled with muddy water. As the Captain taxied over a water filled depression, the left landing gear dropped in about a foot.

The force of the drop caused the left wing to flex downward and the fabric covered aileron was pierced by a metal pole that was next to the runway with a sign stating, "Danger. Use caution when crossing." His embarrassment was awesome. He, like some of the Lt's, never came back. We bartered for some "1000 MPH Tape" from the Army helicopter company at the west end of the runway to patch the plane temporarily. I think that tape was still there when I left Vietnam.

When the Drill Press (Sentinel Sara) mission was absorbed into COMBAT COUGAR and then COMBAT CROSS ZULU, the emphasis was on getting enough information to target the enemy and not exploit the useful intelligence available. The quality of SIGINT intelligence dropped significantly according to the end user, and Drill Press faded into history. Drill Press was a "de-facto" organization unto itself and was successful because of its people and way it was run.

RIP Drill Press