Ditty Bops and Gooney Birds

My time in the EC-47

by Joe Martin

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Ditty Bops & Gooney Birds:

My time in the EC-47

BY JOE MARTIN

I doubt if more than one or two percent of the USAF enlisted force ever draw duty assignments that actually involve flying. But May 15, 2024, will mark 50 years since the end of a Vietnam War intelligence gathering operation in which some 3,000 enlisted specialists, many of them E-4s or E-5s in the final year of their first and only enlistment, found themselves in the backend of a World War II relic crammed with electronic gear worth more than the airplane and flown by pilots who weren't supposed to know what they were doing back there. There had been nothing like it in the Air Force before, and with changes in both technology and warfare it's unlikely there will ever be anything like it again.

I was among that group, although it was never something I expected, let alone planned for. Ultimately, the program operated over 60 aircraft in three flying squadrons, but aside from those involved, it remains all but unknown. That is due in part to the formerly classified nature of the activity. This hush-hush mission was Airborne Radio Direction Finding (ARDF), pinpointing the radio transmitters of the elusive Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army forces, then immediately radioing that intelligence to friendly ground units as an attack warning or for possible offensive exploitation.

I knew none of that as I took the oath of enlistment in March 1967. In fact, it would be another year before I was completely immersed in the arcane world of Signals Intelligence — SIGINT, as it is known to its practitioners. In the meantime, Lackland Air Force Base (AFB), the traditional home of Air Force basic training, was in the throes of a meningitis outbreak, and enlistees were shunted off to a temporary alternative at Amarillo AFB, Texas. The initial rite of passage was a head shaving, which took all of maybe 30 seconds. Adding insult to injury, we were ordered to pay the shearer a dollar.

Air Force basic training couldn't be called fun but compared to, say, the Marine Corps and Parris Island it was a relative piece of cake. I'd had two years of ROTC, so I knew most of the marching drills and had some idea of how things were done in the Air Force. Trainees were routinely administered a battery of tests to determine to what sort of work an individual might be best suited. What impact, if any, that had on my future, I don't know, but shortly thereafter a group of us were given a sheaf of forms to fill out, detailing just about every aspect of our young lives to that point. We weren't told, but this was the first step in a lengthy background investigation that, provided nothing untoward was discovered, would eventually lead to the granting of a top-level security clearance.

Toward the end of the stay in Amarillo, most of that group received orders to Keesler AFB, Mississippi, for some sort of radio operator technical school. For the only time in my Air Force travels, I didn't go by air. Fresh out of basic

training, our squad of one-stripe "pingers" — a mocking reference to the follicles beginning to sprout anew on our barren scalps — were given rail tickets for Biloxi, Mississippi, via Dallas, Texas, and New Orleans, Louisiana. It was like boarding a time machine bound for the 1930s. This was in the pre-Amtrak days, and passenger trains were a mode of transportation clearly on the way out. But it was a welcome break, and probably the only night I'll ever spend in a Pullman sleeper berth. To this day, every time I hear the song "City of New Orleans" I think of that train ride.

I spent about six months at Keesler, most of which is now little more than a blur. There, radio operator school was more precisely defined as training for Air Force Specialty Code (AFSC) 292 - Morse Intercept Operator. The Morse part was obvious, but the intercept part of the deal would be revealed only gradually. The course consisted of listening to live code some six hours a day, in my case tapped out by a crusty old civilian assisted by an Air Force Technical Sergeant. On occasion, particularly for testing purposes, tapes were also used. We learned to copy the letters and numbers represented by these "dits and dahs" (never dots and dashes) on a manual typewriter. In addition to A through Z, we were given another five or six "special characters," typed as "!," "&," and other punctuation marks. These, as it turned out, represented the "extra" characters in the Cyrillic alphabet.

As the light at the end of the Keesler tunnel grew brighter, we were fed bits of information concerning our future as "ditty bops," the label universally applied to Morse operators. Details remained sparse, but we would be assigned to the U.S. Air Force Security Service (USAFSS), verbally rendered "you-soph-iss," with the accent on the second syllable. USAFSS offered some interesting duty station possibilities. Among the choicest were England, Germany, and Italy. Then there were the not-so-choice spots, namely Turkey and Pakistan. (We were booted from the latter in 1968.) My dead last selection would've been the continental U.S. (which was practically out of the question anyway) or Alaska. And what did I get? The 6981st Security Group at Elmendorf AFB, a mile or two north of downtown Anchorage, Alaska. Aside from not really being overseas, Elmendorf was a two-year tour, as opposed to 18 months for most other locations.

I left Keesler within a day or two of Thanksgiving, 1967. After a month's leave, I departed Atlanta, Georgia, on or about December 29, bound for Seattle-Tacoma, Washington, and a connecting flight to Anchorage. Atlanta weather was 29 degrees with snow flurries. I was already clad in the heaviest USAF garb I possessed, dress blues with overcoat. I thought, "My God, what's it going to be like in Alaska!" When I deplaned at Elmendorf, it was a freakish 49 degrees and light drizzle. The Last Frontier was full of surprises. As if to confirm my misgivings about this assignment, the Airmen's Club burned to the ground on New Year's Eve.

The Security Service's motto, "Freedom Through Vigilance," reflected both the Cold War mindset of those days and the determination that there would be no repeat of a Pearl Harbor-like surprise attack. The 6981st operated like most U.S. SIGINT sites worldwide. Four "flights," or "tricks" as they were sometimes

USAF photo via Martin

▲ Ditty Bop school, Keesler AFB, MS.,1967. The author is second from left, middle row. Morse code was widely used into the early 1970s.

called, manned intercept positions 24/7/365. There were three shifts; regular daytime hours, "eves" or "swing" shift, followed by the overnight "mid watch." That meant working each of the shifts for four consecutive days, with a short break in between, before transitioning to the next. One flight was always off while the others covered the three shifts. This 12-shift cycle would be followed by "big break" — three days off, the exact length of time depending on what order the shifts had been worked.

Inside the windowless operations area were several consoles, consisting of a row of six or eight positions, connected side-by-side. Each Morse position mounted a pair of R-390 high frequency receivers, stacked one atop the other, in front of which was a typewriter into which was fed box after box of folded six-ply paper, perforated to separate into standard 8½ by 11 sheets. Each of the underlying layers was of a different color, with carbon paper in between. The operators sat in standard office chairs with caster wheels. In keeping with the times, each position had a built-in ashtray — a drawer maybe 3 x 3 inches and 5 or 6 inches long. These were often full. And each shift consumed coffee by the tens of gallons. Analysts would harvest the "take" periodically then route the individual sheets, by color, to various destinations for further processing.

Ten or fifteen years earlier, with the threat of Soviet bombers coming across the Pole a realistic possibility, Elmendorf was probably an early warning hot spot. But with the advent of the ICBM, it had become something of a SIGINT backwater. Three or four times a year, Tupolev Tu-95s would venture into the Gulf of Alaska, and one-off events like the capture of the USS *Pueblo* or the shootdown of the Navy EC-121 by the North Koreans in 1969 created a stir throughout the whole Pacific region. Even then, the "81st" was only peripherally involved.

Alaska contains some of the most dazzling natural beauty in the United States. For those who love to hunt and fish, it's probably still a dream assignment. But it's an expensive place, and my Airman two-stripe pay didn't make for much fun. That amount increased when I made E-4, but it was still a pretty austere existence. For me, ditty-bopping in Alaska translated to hours of utter boredom punctuated by moments of sheer tedium. I must've typed my weight in that six-ply paper. Did it make a difference? I'll never know. Most of what I was assigned to copy, so I concluded after dealing with it for a few months, was routine administrative traffic between desolate Siberian outposts, monitored mostly to maintain "continuity" in case conflict suddenly appeared to be looming.

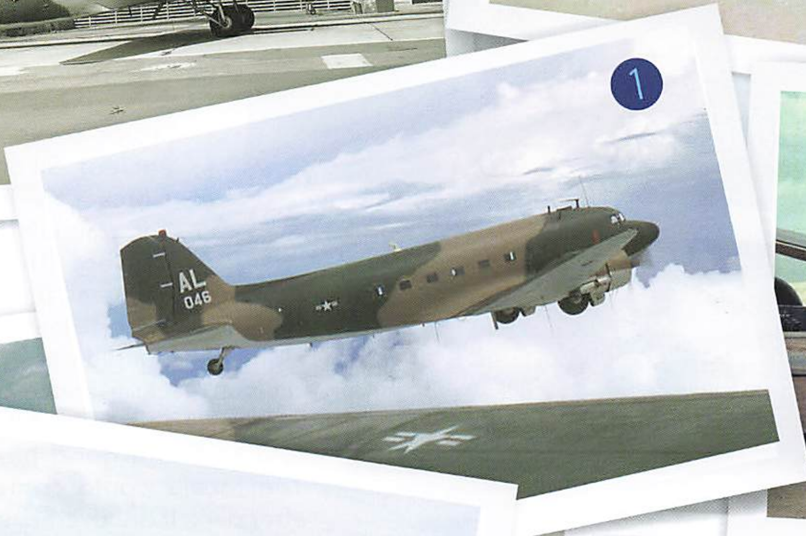
After a tour in the "81st", most "only termers" would have roughly a year left in their enlistments. That meant a couple of likely spots to finish up, Texas or Vietnam, and I wasn't sure which was worse. In the fall of 1969, I received orders for the 6994th Security Squadron at Tan Son Nhut Air Base (AB), at the international airport of Saigon, Republic of Vietnam. In a repeat of my Keesler exit, I left Anchorage around Thanksgiving. I remember that it hadn't snowed.

The good news about Vietnam was that I'd be in a flying outfit. The 6994th and its detachments furnished the "back end" SIGINT personnel manning the USAF's Douglas EC-47 Skytrain fleet. After thirty days of much needed leave, I began a round of training in preparation for my new adventure. First stop was Goodfellow AFB, Texas, home then and now to a variety of intelligence schools. Here we got something of a feel for the ARDF equipment on the EC-47 and the associated operating procedures. In mid-January 1970 I went through "global" survival school at Fairchild AFB, outside Spokane, Washington. We made shelters from parachutes and so forth but having spent nearly two years in Alaska, tromping hungry through knee deep snow in the wilds of Eastern Washington didn't strike me as being relevant to anything I might encounter in Vietnam.

One of the delights of the Fairchild school was the mock POW experience. This was split into two segments, one representing a Soviet-style gulag, the other a more "individualized" treatment that might be expected in Asia. But we knew that overt

A collection of photos of "Electric Goons." AL 046 (1) was the first aircraft Martin flew a mission on. Note the open paratroop door on aircraft out of Tan Son Nhut (2 & 3) to alleviate the heat. Webbing was fastened over the doors in flight. AN 636 (4) was shot down in Feb 1973 with loss of the crew. The sharks mouth on the "Goonfighter" (5) was an homage to the 366th TFW "Gunfighters" the 362nd TEWS shared Da Nang with. The author recalls that the once prevalent nose art on the Tan Son Nhut birds (6) was painted over in mid-1970.

Photos by or via Martin except where otherwise noted.



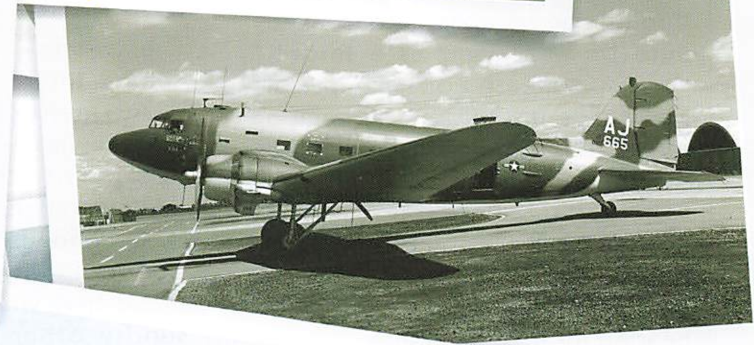


Photo Ray Rhode

physical punishment was prohibited. The closest approximation was "the box," a row of plywood structures each about the size of a two-drawer filing cabinet but a little shorter and maybe a couple of inches wider. A hinged door fastened from the outside. A guy 5'6," 135 lbs., probably didn't suffer unduly, but the level of discomfort increased in direct proportion to the mass of the body being wedged in. Everybody got at least one session, but a wise guy might be awarded multiple trips. If the stuffiness and claustrophobia became unbearable, yelling "flight surgeon" would secure release, but I don't believe anyone opted for whatever the alternative would've been. All time pieces were confiscated upon being "captured," so we couldn't tell how long any of these drills lasted. The consensus was about 20 minutes, max.

From Fairchild, it was on to Hamilton AFB in San Francisco, California, for Southeast Asia weapons training, the highlight of which was trying to put an M-79 40mm grenade launcher round through the windows of the junked auto body serving as a target. We also squeezed off a couple of M-16 clips on full auto. It rained (or something), which canceled the grenade throw. With an arm full of some rather exotic vaccines and several school diplomas, I departed Travis AFB, California, on a government contract charter headed for the Philippines.

The PACAF Jungle Survival School (PJSS) at Clark AB, Republic of the Philippines — snake school, as it was referred to only partly in jest — was actually useful. "The College of Jungle Knowledge," proclaimed the entry archway, "Learn and Return." A major PJSS attraction was the "petting zoo," which contained a variety of slithery specimens, among them a cobra.

Major Frank Cross, 362nd TEWS navigator, stands beside 45-0945, the original Hawkeye prototype, after it was turned over to the Republic of Vietnam Air Force, February 1973

As a special treat, we were invited to witness a feeding. *[Editor's Note: Cobras rely on their sense of smell to hunt, using their forked tongue to gather scent to a special organ in the roof of their mouth to locate prey.]* The snake would not eat dead meat, we were told, so a live chicken was tossed into the plexiglass enclosure. Much bobbing, weaving, and spitting of venom ensued, but the serpent finally made a deadly strike. We elected to skip the finale.

The principal PJSS classes were held in the jungles above Clark. USAF instructors teamed with their Philippine Air Force cohorts to supervise the outing, but the demonstrations were made mostly by indigenous Negrito tribesmen who pointed out edible flora, those that were poisonous, and sundry other forest facts. Our little guy, "Fred," put on one of the most amazing displays of outdoorsmanship I'll ever hope to see. Using nothing but a machete, he whacked off a segment of dried bamboo, scraped away some curly shavings, stuffed those inside, then proceeded to rapidly saw a sliver across a slot cut crosswise on the bamboo cylinder. A little blowing, and the embers burst into flame. From there, it was a simple matter to get a cooking fire going. Some rice and other ingredients packed into bamboo sections and tossed onto the coals made for a tolerable lunch.

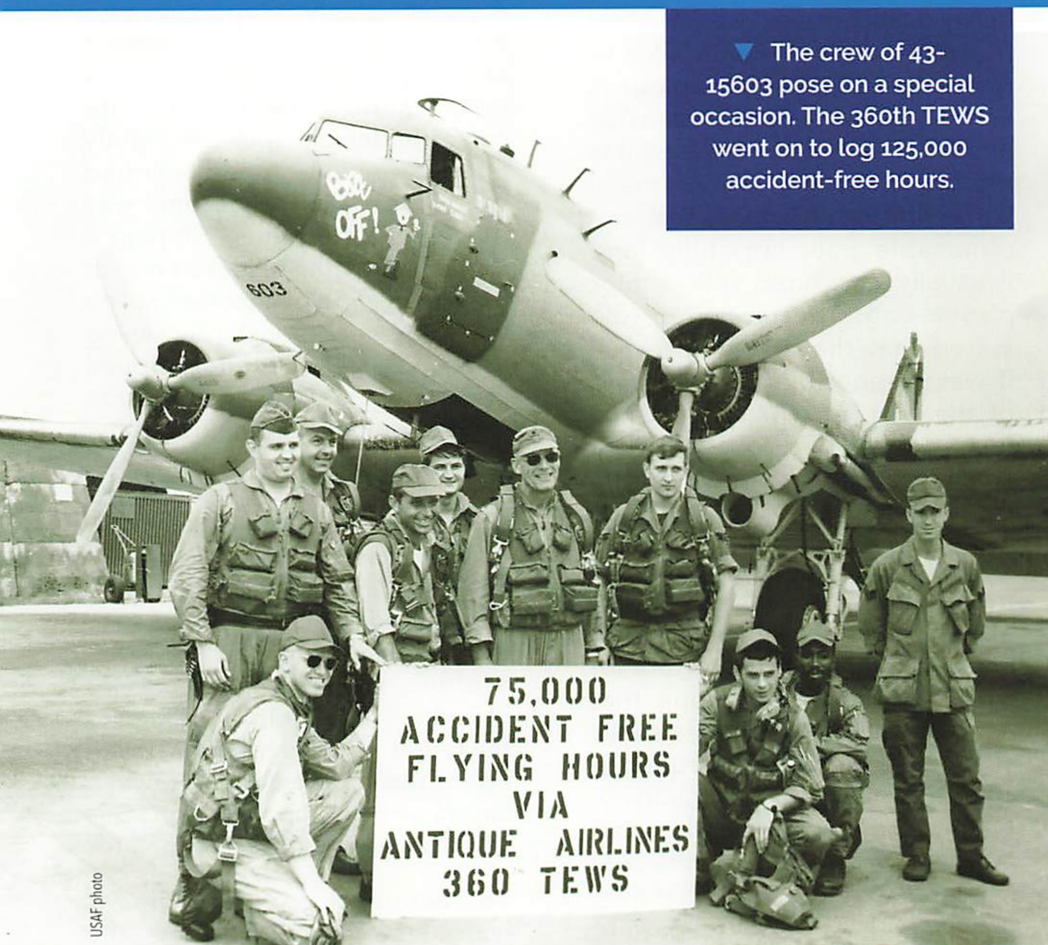
On another day, we used survival radios to vector in an ancient Sikorsky H-19 Chickasaw helicopter for a simulated rescue pickup. That sort of training could mean the difference between life and death. The final night in the jungle was a test of our skills at escape and evasion. We were given three metal chits and told to find a good hiding spot. The locals would come looking after dark. If discovered, we were to give the individual one of the chits, redeemable for a bag of rice. It was nearly sundown before I reached the designated area, so I burrowed in right next to the PSP helipad. No one thought to look there, and I got away clean. Next morning, a Sikorsky HH-3 Jolly Green Giant helicopter arrived to haul us back to Clark. That remains my only helicopter flight. On February 15, 1970, I boarded another contract airliner, destination Saigon, Republic of Vietnam. As we made landfall somewhere around Cam Ranh Bay, I got my first glimpse of Vietnam. Only then did it finally sink in — people down there were trying to kill each other!

As I stepped on to the Tan Son Nhut tarmac, the US was already on the way out of Vietnam, although that was not readily apparent. A quick phone call, and I was ensconced in the open bay barracks that would be my home for the next 22 months. A few days were spent attending to administrative details and drawing jungle boots, fatigues, and flight gear. About ten missions with an instructor would be required to learn the ARDF equipment, master the peculiarities of Morse code as practiced by the VC/NVA, get comfortable with air-ground radio

procedures, and adjust to the general routine of flying in a war zone.

Radio direction finding is one of the oldest tricks in the SIGINT trade, dating to the days before World War I. But the atmospheric environment in Southeast Asia, coupled with the low powered enemy radios, rendered ground-based DF unreliable from any appreciable distance. Going airborne seemed to be the answer, and in 1961 the Army modified a handful of De Havilland U-6 Beavers as ARDF platforms. The setup was primitive, but it worked, and the results were eagerly sought by military intelligence.

As the war widened and demand for ARDF coverage increased, the Air Force got into the game with Project Hawkeye, a C-47 fitted with a more capable ARDF system. Results exceeded expectations, and under a follow-on program named Phyllis Ann, an initial batch of 35 C-47s was modified as ARDF platforms. The venerable Gooney Bird was not ideal for the job, but they were plentiful, and they were paid for. Nonetheless, it would be many months before all the "Electric Goons" were converted and calibrated, then flown from CONUS to Elmendorf, thence to Adak in the Aleutians, on to Wake, Midway, Guam, the Philippines, and finally Vietnam. Three reconnaissance squadrons were established to operate the aircraft, based at Tan Son Nhut, Pleiku AB in the highlands, and Nha Trang AB on the coast. The ARDF mission was soon redesignated as "special electronic" rather than recon, with the aircraft becoming EC-47s and the operating units Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadrons (TEWS). The ARDF gear would be operated by USAFSS personnel assigned to the 6994th Security Squadron and its detachments, colocated at the TEWS bases.



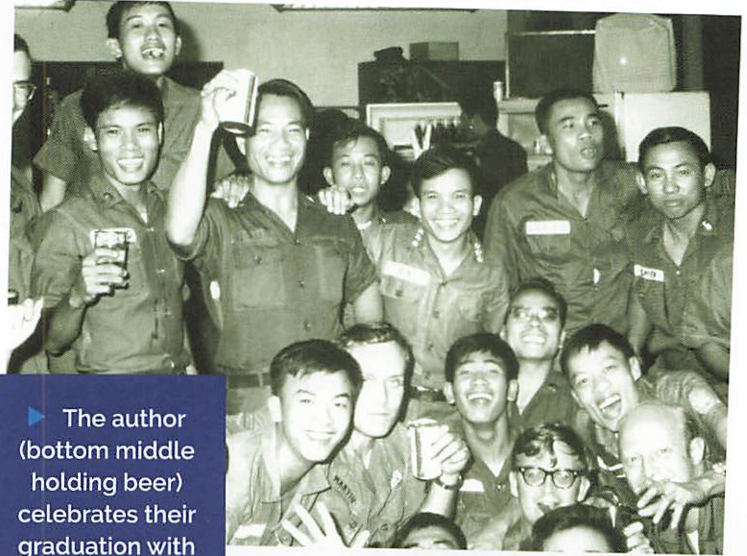
▼ The crew of 43-15603 pose on a special occasion. The 360th TEWS went on to log 125,000 accident-free hours.

By the time I arrived in Vietnam, the EC-47 basing scheme had changed somewhat. The 6994th remained at Tan Son Nhut, flying with the 360th TEWS' "Antique Airlines," the eldest of the three EC-47 squadrons. Detachment (Det) 1, teamed with the 361st, was now at Phu Cat, while Det 2 and the 362nd were in the process of moving from Pleiku to Da Nang. Newly formed Det 3, stationed at Nakhon Phanom (NKP) Royal Thai Air Force Base, flew four or five missions a day in support of the "secret war" in Laos. The aircraft were detached from the 360th, and regularly rotated back to Saigon for maintenance.

I flew my first EC-47 mission on February 25, a 7.7-hour sortie down in the Mekong Delta. Completing a minimum of ten combat missions entitled one to the Basic Aircrew Member Badge (Permanent) — enlisted aircrew wings. Being on flying status opened a whole new world, one which very few USAF E-4s would ever be privileged to see. We didn't flaunt it, but at the same time we felt a certain superiority over our earthbound brethren. War or no war, as I reflected on many miserable hours "sitting rack" in Alaska, the change was worth the risk.

A bare minimum EC-47 mission required a pilot, co-pilot, navigator, and two back-end radio operators. Until mid-1970, another enlisted crewmember, a TEWS flight mechanic, was usually carried. About three-fourths of the fleet was fitted with two additional back-end positions, designated Z1 and Z2. The former was occupied by a linguist, with Z2 being a Morse position tasked with copying enemy messages for future decryption. On occasion an analyst would join the back-end crew. With instructors or other personnel aboard, it was not uncommon to have eight or ten people on the aircraft. A couple of the WWII paratroop benches ☛

ARVN ditty bops. Student (L) and senior NCO instructor.



The author (bottom middle holding beer) celebrates their graduation with ARVN troops

were retained for additional accommodations. Parachutes were stored in a bin opposite the back door. In anything much different than straight and level flight it would've been practically impossible to fetch them, clip them on, then bail out — a pretty unlikely scenario, most of us believed.

Crewing of the Electric Goon was unorthodox to say the least. It might be argued whether we were a crew at all. The TEWS "front end" and the Security Service back-enders traveled in entirely different orbits. You'd probably have to go clear to the Pentagon to find a common link in the chain of command. Only at the preflight briefing did everybody on the flight come together, and after landing we went our separate ways. Since target identification and other aspects of ARDF were part and parcel of a wider SIGINT effort, the back-end work was classified. The navigators, by virtue of the fact that they plotted the fixes, possessed the requisite security clearance. Most of the pilots did not, although they couldn't help but be aware of the basic mission.

Inside, the old Goon was pretty spartan. There were a few cockpit upgrades, notably the weather avoidance radar screen in the spot where the autopilot had been. That meant 100% hand flying, but it didn't seem to be an issue. Creature comforts were few, although a heavy duty "hot cup" was installed to heat water for instant coffee or to warm an unopened soup can. A urinal was mounted on the backside of the tail cone door. Close by was the "honey bucket," a short metal barrel fitted with a toilet seat and removable pail, hopefully (and it usually was) lined with a thick plastic bag. The unwritten rule stated that the first guy to use it was responsible for disposing of the bag, post mission. Once used, the rest of the crew made a concerted effort to augment the contents.

The bare walled fuselage housed the mission positions. The heart of the ARDF system was the "X" console, the central feature of which was an oscilloscope that enabled the operator to visually scan a preselected frequency spectrum for any radio activity. Enemy communications became more sophisticated as the war went on, but the overwhelming majority of ARDF targets were Morse transmissions in the lower HF range. More than once I picked up warbling signals from a transmitter clearly being powered by a hand or foot cranked generator.

A "spike" on the scope indicated a potential target, which almost always proved to be hostile. A tuning knob moved a separate cursor under the spike. A slightly different audible tone confirmed that the ARDF system was processing the signal. Flipping a toggle switch then "locked on" to the target, and a pointer resembling a TACAN needle instantly swung toward it. The X operator torqued his interphone control hard over to CALL position, overriding all other conversations, and announced target lock-on and signal strength, which gave the navigator some indication of the target's proximity. The pilot immediately rolled the airplane level and the nav began to direct course changes as necessary to obtain optimal bearings, or Lines of Position (LOP) from the aircraft to the target. If the transmitter stayed up for two or three minutes with a strong enough signal, enough LOPs could usually be obtained for a fix.

To account for equipment inaccuracy and other factors, the fix location was expressed as falling

within an estimated radius from a given position. The minimum reportable fix radius was 250 meters, that being the width of a perfect intersection of LOP lines drawn on a 1:250,000 scale map. The ARDF equipment of the 1960s came nowhere near the precision of today's GPS-based systems, and fix radii of a thousand meters or larger were not uncommon. If only two valid LOPs were obtained, the location was reported as a "cut."

When the plot was finished, the navigator handed the results across the aisle to the "Y" operator, who logged the fix coordinates, radius estimate, and other pertinent information. At the first opportunity, he relayed that info to the designated army Direct Support Unit (DSU) on the ground via the KY-8 secure voice "scrambler." If the KY-8 became inoperative, the data would be encrypted on a "one-time" pad and passed "in the clear," a tedious and time-consuming method no one looked forward to using. It happened to me only once.

ARDF operating areas were well defined and weather permitting, we didn't stray. After the "incursion" of May-June of 1970, most of the Saigon-based missions were flown over Cambodia, but I also pulled 30-day temporary duty at both NKP and Phu Cat. Mission duration was seven hours for the ARDF-only (X and Y) configured aircraft. The extra weight imposed by Z1 and Z2 reduced mission time to five hours for those birds. Sixteen additional aircraft were configured as EC-47Q models, with more powerful R-2000 engines and enhanced ARDF capability. They also carried Z1 and Z2 positions but could still fly seven-hour missions. All were based further north, and I never saw one.

Flying in Southeast Asia inherently involved some danger. Barely two months after my "cherry" flight, a Pleiku based EC-47 was hit by anti-aircraft fire while working the Steel Tiger area of southern Laos. The badly stricken Gooney made it "across the fence" to an abandoned Special Forces camp, but one of the pilots and a back-ender were killed in the ensuing crash landing. Three other Electric Goons had been shot down previously, and another would fall to hostile fire in early 1973. Others would be lost in operational accidents. In all, airborne incidents would claim the lives of 36 EC-47 crewmen. But I would go on to spend around 1,400 flying hours, the equivalent of 60 days and nights, in the back end of the faithful Gooney Bird. She caried me safely from the southernmost tip of South Vietnam to the Plaine des Jarres in upper Laos — the infamous Plain of Jars. A handful of missions aborted, but only once did I experience anything like a true emergency; an engine shutdown on takeoff from Tan Son Nhut. We went around on the good engine, and the pilot greased the still fully loaded Goon onto a perfect landing.

ARDF unquestionably represented some of the most prized tactical intelligence of the Vietnam War, but exactly what impact our efforts had is hard to judge. During my tenure, I'd guess that slightly more than half the ARDF targets could be identified, which enhanced the intel value considerably. Declassified ☛

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VIETNAM ANTIQUE AIRLINES, OLD TIGER SIGN

The emblem of the 360th TEWS was originally designed by Major Sidney Johnson in 1966, who took his design to Japan to have this sign painted. Although the original design had a yellow ring, the artist who painted it talked Johnson into a blue ring so the tiger would stand out. Johnson came up with "Antique Airlines" and "Old Tiger" as a joke about the age of the EC-47 and the age of his flight crew, who were all in their 40s at the time. This sign remained with the squadron until the unit was deactivated in November 1972. The unit's last commander, Lieutenant Colonel John Griffith secured it and later donated it to the Museum in 2002.

ENLISTED AIRCREW MEMBER AVIATION BADGE

The Enlisted Aircrew Member badge evolved from the WWII Army Air Forces version, with the Air Force issuing them starting in 1947 to enlisted personnel who receive advanced training and serve in in-flight support roles. The center of the badge features the Great Seal of the United States and the seniority is determined by flight hours and years of service. The basic level seen here is awarded after 36 months of flying service or after the completion of 10 combat missions.

https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/Collections/Donate-an-Item/

NMUSAF photos

6994th histories indicate that, overall, the average take was about a fix per flying hour. Even at that, thousands upon thousands of fixes were made in the course of the eight years the EC-47 program operated. We received very little feedback, however, and singling out a specific mission was rarer still. But during the Cambodian campaign a special project called Blue Beetle cast things in a whole new light. The intelligence officer in the 19th Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS), the OV-10 "Rustic" Forward Air Controllers (FAC) responsible for supporting Cambodian forces against a renewed North Vietnam Army (NVA) onslaught, had been previously assigned to Security Service and was aware of the EC-47 mission. Why not, he wondered, have the Gooney Bird pass fix locations directly to the FAC? As with most good ideas, the upper echelons were not immediately sold on it, but once underway Blue Beetle got good, even spectacular results — when the FAC could take time to check out the tipoff. With the Cambodians pressed ever harder, working a TIC (troops in contact) became the Rustics' top priority, and Blue Beetle suffered accordingly. Nonetheless, a few lucky Electric Goon crews were able to stand off a mile or two and witness the fruits of their SIGINT labors as the FAC called in a strike.

If you had to be in Vietnam, Saigon was the place to be. The "Paris of the Orient" was now a smoggy, stinky jumble of colonial era buildings and squalid hovels, some with flattened beer cans for roofs or siding, but there were diversions of every sort for those so inclined. Long before my arrival, enterprising souls had scrounged materials to construct a bar between the two 6994th barracks. "Cougars Cavern," in reference to Combat Cougar, the best known of the several EC-47 cover names, provided cheap liquid refreshment, with a perpetual card game going on out front.

Meanwhile, the powers in Washington were trying to keep fighting the war without sending more people to Vietnam. Those in country who volunteered to extend for six months were offered a free roundtrip ticket to any place in the so-called Free World and 30 days in which to use it. I'd already been to Sydney on R&R, but I was 25 years old and figured I might never have a chance like that again. One evening a buddy and I were enjoying a brew outside the Cavern when the subject came up. Several cans later, one of us mumbled, "Wuh, wuh, why don' we go to Copenhagen?" So, we did. We didn't plan it that way, but we ended up going around the world, first via JFK to London, on to Copenhagen, then down to Frankfurt, by train to Munich and Zurich and finally back to Frankfurt, then across the Middle East and India to Bangkok, where we spent what little time and money we had left before going back to Saigon.

◀ "Antique Airlines," a fitting nickname for the 360th TEWS or any other C-47 outfit! The border colors were originally blue with red text (see opposite page), but later changed to the more "Vietnamese" red on yellow. The old tiger, in his slippers and scarf to ward off the chill, sits in the stately Douglas DC-3/C-47 rocking chair.

▶ A back-end takeoff of the photo recon community motto. The upper echelons failed to see the humor, but the patch remained in circulation. Later versions reverted to "unafraid."

Author's Collection

By the summer of 1971, the Nixon administration's "Vietnamization" exit strategy was gathering momentum. Technically it was the Republic of Vietnam Improvement and Modernization program, one facet of which would involve the transfer of 33 EC-47s to the South Vietnamese Air Force. Reflecting the American split crew arrangement, the back-end troops were South Vietnamese Army (ARVN). The Vietnamese had a rudimentary SIGINT organization and had outfitted a trio of U-6s with their own homegrown ARDF gear. But the Electric Goon would be a quantum leap. The 6994th was tasked with training the Vietnamese radio operators, while the 360th TEWS prepared to orient the pilots and navigators.

When I got wind of the program, I hustled over to operations to volunteer. Along with most of the other ditty bops who had arrived as E-4s, I'd been promoted to staff sergeant, and by that time I'd flown over 200 missions. Six or seven of us would teach ground classes, then pair up with one of the senior Vietnamese NCOs as flight instructors. Some of these guys had been at it since the French days, and all were highly experienced. They were already well familiar with the enemy communication system, so it was mostly a matter of breaking them in on the ARDF gear in order to instruct the young students. In the air, our main function was to advise and assist as necessary and to work the radios, although one of my favorites spoke good enough English to handle that as well. For Vietnam, it was pretty cushy duty.

I'd extended my enlistment twice to keep flying in Vietnam. As crazy as it sounds, I didn't have a better plan. I'd never seriously considered reenlisting, although in the lean years of the mid-1970s, there were times I wished I had. But as 1971 drew to a close I realized that it was either go home or go native. I left Tan Son Nhut on December 10. It was a rather hurried departure, and on my way out, one of the Vietnamese students flagged me down to present a simple medal and a neatly inscribed certificate, in Vietnamese, acknowledging the help we'd tried to render. It's the most treasured memento of my Air Force service.

In January 1973, Richard Nixon proclaimed "peace with honor" to be at hand for Vietnam. In the end, there was neither. The Vietnamese and their EC-47s soldiered on until the day Saigon fell, when those still flyable escaped to Thailand. By then I'd almost finished college on the GI Bill, and I went on to a solid if unspectacular career in the aerospace/defense business. In 2004, two of my 6994th squadron mates and I went back to Vietnam. Coming in over the river to land on Tan Son Nhut's runway two-five-left brought back a flood of memories. We taxied past the empty revetments where our Electric Goons once parked. Saigon (I refuse to call it Ho Chi Minh City) bustled as it always has, and new 20 or 30 story buildings dotted the skyline. Now Uncle Ho's benign countenance gazes down from the walls of every establishment as tourists of many nationalities wander about. The Rex hotel is still there, and we had a few drinks at the rooftop bar. People were reluctant to talk about "pre-1975," and no half-American kids or ARVN vets with missing limbs were to be seen. In the War Remnants Museum, along with various items of military hardware, are rows of glass jars containing deformed fetuses, blamed, probably correctly, on Agent Orange. Half a century later, it's hard to see the Vietnam War as anything other than a tragic mistake, made doubly so by our failure to learn from it in Iraq and Afghanistan. But I look on my time in the Air Force and in Vietnam as an education no amount of money could've purchased, and I have no regrets.

Joe Martin served as an Air Force Security Service Morse Intercept Operator from 1967 to 1971. His final assignment was to Vietnam in the EC-47 Airborne Radio Direction Finding program. After finishing college on the GI Bill, he worked in the Aerospace/Defense industry. Now retired in Prescott, Arizona, he keeps busy as co-manager of the EC-47 History Site (ec47.com), and as editor of the American Aviation Society's newsletter.

JM: My bad here. Should be Aviation ***Historical*** Society, but I left that word out when I submitted the bio, and the train had already left the station before I caught the error.