

One of the First PHYLLIS ANN Crews

By J.C. Wheeler

In May of 1966 I received an assignment to Vietnam, but because my wife was carrying a child, I did not have to take it. I was given 48 hours to decide yes or no. Using information I had gained on a new C-47 Mission for Vietnam, my wife and I discussed it and decided I would be better off to accept the assignment, which I did.

I was soon off for "Swamp Rat" training at Hurlburt Field in Florida. On the final day of this training there was a mock escape for us who had been captured by the so-called enemy. To make sure we were not again captured, a friend and I went out into the swamp to hide out. We must have done a good job, because shortly before dark an aircraft with speakers flew over (can't recall what kind of aircraft), broadcasting that the training was over and that we could come in.

From Hurlburt we were off to Louisiana for training in the C-47 Aircraft (I was the Standboard Flight Examiner* at Sheppard AFB, Texas, when I drew the assignment, but still had to go through the training). On the last date of training, when we landed and departed the aircraft I was told that I had a new daughter and that mother and daughter were doing fine. I was soon off for home in Clarksville, Arkansas, to see my new daughter.

(* Standardization/Evaluation Flight Examiner, or SEFE.)

Before long I was off again, this time for Grenier Field, New Hampshire, to ferry one of the early aircraft across the Pacific. It was here that I first met the rest of my crew, Lt. Col. Frank E. Hinkle, Maj. Harold R. Lagasse, Maj. Alfred Mattie, Capt. Robert M. Harris and Capt. Larry Anderson. We were informed that the aircraft were not ready and that we could return home and await further instructions. Remember, this was in May, 1966. Finally in late August, 1966, I received a frantic phone call to get to Grenier ASAP. Leaving that day, I was off and running.

We departed Grenier and upon arrival at McClellan AFB, California, we had two (2) 250 gallon fuel tanks installed inside the fuselage to give us a total of 1,304 gallons of fuel for the trip over. From McClellan we were off to McChord AFB, Washington. The dates and flight times, etc., below are from Lt. Col. Frank E. Hinkle's Form 5:

Departing McChord on August 31st, we started our one-year tour in Vietnam. After a flight of 9 hours and 15 minutes we arrived at Elmendorf AFB, Alaska. Then on Sept. 2nd after a complete sparkplug change on both engines we were off from Elmendorf for Adak, Alaska, a flight of 7 hours and 45 minutes. Then on Sept. 3rd we were off to Midway Island, a flight of 10 hours and 5 minutes. And again on Sept. 4th we were again off, this time to Wake Island; a flight of 7 hours and 30 minutes. Sept. 5th and we were off for the Island of Guam a flight of 9 hours and 25 minutes. On Sept. 8th we were off on our longest leg that being from Guam to Clark AB in the Philippines, a flight of 13 hours and 25 minutes, (and getting very low on fuel). It was here at Clark where the two additional fuel tanks were removed before we departed for Tan Son Nhut on Sept. 10th, a flight of 7 hours and 10 minutes. And yes, I did get away without going through Jungle Survival School at Clark, and so glad I did not need it after all.

We and another aircraft arrived on the same day, Sept. 10th. (The 360th TEWS took possession on Sept. 11th.) Our aircraft was 43-48933, at that time designated RC-47P; the other aircraft as an "N" model. These two aircraft were the fourth and fifth aircraft to arrive in country. I'm not sure which was which, but at any rate we were among the first aircrews to arrive in country.

The sparkplug change in Alaska and one piece of radio gear at either Wake or Guam were the only maintenance problems we had on our trip from Grenier to Tan Son Nhut. Lt. Col. Frank E. Hinkle, Maj. Harold R. Lagasse, Capt. Robert M. Harris and myself were soon off to Nha Trang and the newly formed 361st Tactical Electronics Warfare Squadron. Maj. Alfred Mattie and Capt. Larry Anderson would remain to serve with the 360th TEWS at Tan Son Nhut.

Arriving at Nha Trang, Col. Hinkle, Capt. Harris and myself would be upgraded to and serve as Standboard Flight Examiners for our particular crew positions. Today, I am the sole survivor of this crew; the last of the others to go was Capt. Harris (Lt. Col. Retired), who would be killed in an automobile just south of Jacksonville, Arkansas, in 2004. I do not know about Al Mattie and Larry Anderson; I hope they are still with us. I did get together with Col. Hinkle and Capt. Harris at our first reunion in San Antonio in 1999. Maj. Lagasse had been gone for about a year at that time, I'm so sorry I missed him.

Despite taking an emergency leave stateside, I was still able to fly 114 missions and truly enjoyed every one of them. In those early days we, or at least my crew, could and did (though not officially), operate any of the other front-end crew positions. My favorite was helping out with the navigation, fix plotting, etc., which I can honestly say I did a lot of.

We flew many missions over Laos and along the coast of North Vietnam, and one that I am aware of where we inadvertently got into Cambodia. On this one we had a Navigator named Bill Fenlon flying with us, and of course I was helping him. He was working a target that was across the border into Cambodia. At that time, we were supposed to remain outside a buffer zone 5 nautical miles from the Cambodian border. Well, we were quickly into and across the buffer zone and into Cambodian airspace by a few miles. Col. Hinkle (I know he knew where we were, but just to cover his backside) called, "Nav, ain't we close to the border?", to which the Nav replied, "We're 10 miles from the border". We were, but on the wrong side! It was things like this that I remember and will always cherish.

On one Mission over Laos I did a lot of the navigation and plotting, and in fact I still have the chart I worked that day. After keeping it hidden away for over 20 years, I got it out, cut it down some, and now have it framed in a large picture frame. It's my favorite keepsake from my tour.



J.C.'s fix plot

I have so many other stories, but with my failing memory I just cannot put them together. I will say again what I have said since my return stateside in 1967: "If I could get the same crew, I would go back and do it all over again". Trouble is, I am the sole survivor. But again, since my retirement in 1975 I have always said and will continue to say, "Vietnam and the EC-47 was the best year of my career."

In 1997 I decided to start a website, "The EC-47 History Site", to preserve this history for the families of those who served and for the rest of the world. This site grew to some 1,300 members and we have had numerous reunions. In the Fall of 2014, due to my memory loss, I opted to turn the ownership of the domain name and site maintenance over to Mr. Tom Nurre and Mr. Joe Martin. They are currently doing an excellent job of doing an overhaul of the site and I feel fully assured it will continue. If there is anything you can do to help, please do.

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