



# TAC Tanker Tales



Volume 7 Issue 3

March 2007

## Some Changes in Store For Our Branson Reunion

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### ATTENTION:

**This is a reminder for all of you who came to the Dayton Reunion to bring your new Blue Wallet Type name tag holders to Branson. IF YOU TURNED YOURS IN PLEASE LET US KNOW SO WE CAN GIVE IT BACK. They were not suppose to be collected! Those of you who did not attend in 2006, we will give you a new holder at registration. Thanks! N and N**

If you are on the internet or had tried to make your reservations at the Lodge of the Ozarks, you would have learned that we had to change our hotel at the Lodge which had filed for Chapter 11.

When we heard of this from our TRN (The Reunion Network) contact, we contacted the Radisson and were given the same rate of \$70 (which unfortunately was shifted off our BLUE registration form in the "box").

All those who had made Lodge reservations have been notified and have switched over to the Radisson. Yeah!

Next, we had to do some more adjusting regarding our Banquet. Since the Radisson already had a group on Saturday, we will have ours on Friday night. We swapped it for Branson Belle Showboat and Jim Stafford which will be Saturday. Then we also found out that the Broadway Stars show didn't run on Friday, so the "Spirit of the Dance" will take its place. Please note those changes when you send in your Registration.

Last, but not least! The Banquet menu could not be duplicated at the Radisson, but we were given 3 similar choices. Circle either PRIME RIB, SALMON, or CHICKEN CORDON BLEU. Circle your Choices!

Our plans for a Hospitality Room are still "On go" and will have the usual beverages, snacks and "store." We don't plan on new shirts, but have a few left over from WPAFB-06 and plenty of patches and several hats for sale.

We have been in contact with Gathering Plus regarding our transportation and shows. Since we are not able to walk to the three evening shows as previously planned, we are providing the necessary buses to see that everyone gets to these 3 shows (Gilley, Hughes and Stafford).

### 2008 Agenda Update

This summer Nate is working toward a reunion in Ft. Worth for his Viet Nam group, the 310th Air Commando Squadron. We plan to slip down to San Antonio to site visit the Holiday Inn Riverwalk and nail down plans for the TAC Reunion in May 18-21, 2008. I have been checking the internet and found possible transportation companies and tours to line up.



AND, as soon as we get this "puppy" in the mail this week, Nate and I will drive to Virginia for hotel site inspections for our Washington DC Reunion in October 2008. We have been in contact with the Heritage Tour Company and the Bessettes regarding the places we plan to visit during the reunion so as to give you the best and least expensive deals.



We contacted both Arlington and Fairfax Visitors' Bureaus and learned the vast difference in

rates, taxes and parking fees. Thus we are checking out 7 hotels in Fairfax County and hopefully visit with the Bessettes. -  
*The Editor and co-Reunion Planner*



It is springtime in Williamsburg, Virginia. The tulips are up, the breeze is turning warm, and the golf is good. How grateful we are and should be to live in this great country with the changing seasons and opportunities to pursue our many interests.

Szanyi

We have one sad note to share. Bill Szanyi took his last flight on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2006. He died in his sleep at home in Byhalia, Mississippi. Bill was a great friend to all TAC Tankers. He was a founding member and served faithfully on the Board of Directors of the Association. Tom Blake attended the funeral service and presented the eulogy on our behalf.

I have selected Tom Blake to replace Bill Szanyi on the Board of Directors.

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Our KB-50 continues to guard the gate at MacDill AFB. The authorities are still committed to moving it to Dover AFB as soon as the USAF declares a KC-135E excess, designates it for storage and moves it to MacDill. It will replace the KB-50 in their air park. This action is getting closer to happening as the USAF issued a revised Request for Proposal (RFP) for a new tanker and Boeing looks like the leader at press time.

John Bessette

I shared the stage with our historian, John Bessette, at a meeting of the Virginia Aeronautical Historical Society. We dazzled the audience with the video and John's Power Point presentation on TAC Tankers. We had about 15 members of the association present that live in the area of Jamestown.

Air Force Association Magazine

The current issue, February 2007, of this magazine had an article titled, The 90-Year Tanker Saga. It was full of errors and did not begin to tell the story of tactical fighter and tanker operations. Several members have written letters to the editor as well as our historian and your president. We hope to see them all published. You should feel free to add your letter if you are as disappointed as we were.

General Merrill McPeak

We received an email from this former Chief of Staff of the USAF. It came out of the blue and from our address on the website. He wrote "I took a lot of gas from KB-50s in both the F-100 and F-104. Many thanks for professional support, and also for saving me and six other F-104 pilots during one particularly memorable trans-Atlantic deployment in the early 1960s."

I asked the General to elaborate a little on the "save" and he sent me the entire Chapter Five of his to-be published memoirs. The incident occurred over Bermuda December 14, 1960. The F-104s are coming in from Lajes and their fuel is down to less than 1000 pounds. They cannot pick up the VOR (wrong frequency) and the weather is bad. He states that "the lead navigator gives us a steer of 145 degrees and it led to a visual sighting. The tanker navigator has saved the entire flight of seven aircraft."

So, who was the navigator? Check your logs and let me know if you are the one.

(\*\*\*See Article on Page 4)

2007 Reunion

I hope to see all of you at Branson in May. It is the RADISSON Hotel. Natalie has an outstanding list of tours and events to suit every taste. There are less than 30 members listed on the website. Check it out to see if your buddies are coming. If they haven't, then do them a favor and insist that they get the paperwork in to Nate.



**JOIN THE STARS OF  
BRANSON**



**New Life Members**

John J. Ambrose, McMinnville OR-431

**Welcome New Members**

James E. Holland, Kenly NC-421

Paul Jacobs, Chestnut Ridge NY-SAC 407th

James Thompson, Copperas Cove TX-421

Jimmy J. Tucker, Charlotte NC-431

Clarence D. Ward, Keokuk IA-421

## **Letter to the Editor:**

Reading the very interesting letters in the TAC Tanker Tales inspired me to tell my story, but it cannot compare with most of the others. The way to tell a story is to start at the beginning.

After working for Vultee Aircraft for a year building BT-15s, I enlisted in the Army Air Corp in September 1942. Graduated in Class 44A on the 6th of January 1944 and was immediately reassigned to be an instructor in Advanced train at Marfa, Texas, in the Bamboo Bomber (AT-17) with its wings of thing wood and canvas. The engine was odd with both magneto and conventional coil and distributor ignition. Somehow the combination worked, but I could not visualize my future in that role.

So I did what everyone warned me against, I volunteered for B-17 co-pilot training in Yuma, Arizona. There I flew gunners, but after just one ride in the aircraft, I ended up in the left seat. There I was flying the biggest plane I had ever seen with practically no dual time. Fortunately, I had studied and was familiar with the emergency procedures. After three months, off I went to Salt Lake to be crewed up. We proceeded to transition and crew training at; guess where? England AFB, only then it was called Alexandria Air Station (?). We had a bunch of weary B-17s and managed to fly once in a while.

Finally, we were off to England and the 8th Air Force and arrived at the 91st BGM, Bassingborn, near Cambridge. My tour there consisted of 28 1/2 combat missions but I was shot down on my 29th on Nov. 2, 1944 and incidentally on one extra mission. I was supposed to complete my tour after 28 as I was the senior combat pilot and considered to be worn out, but again I had volunteered.

My six months as a "Guest of the Third Reich" was pretty typical of the POW story. I was liberated and went home on a troop transport by way of Venezuela (way out of the direct route for some unknown reason.) After a month at the Santa Monica R & R center, where I met Pappy Boyington, I was assigned to Bakersfield (Minter Field) California as the Purchasing and Contracting Officer (but with limited funds I could only buy fuel for the WAAC Barracks and pay Mortuary Fees). After a little string pulling I went to Dayton, Ohio, at AMC in the Quality Control Division.

That began an eight-year association, four years in Dayton and four years in Albuquerque with assignment to provide the AEC with AF Quality Control assistance. As it turned out my job was primarily trouble shooting for AEC and writing TOs for loading nuclear weapons on USAF aircraft. Lots of TDY during those years was the rule.

Meanwhile, I had attended Squadron Officers and Command & Staff schools together with my AEC experience which, by AF personnel logic, qualified me to be the CO of the 3rd Aviation Depot Squadron on Guam. This squadron's mission was to store atomic and H bombs. Two years later, in view of my limited flying hour time, I was assigned to an Albany GA SAC refueling squadron. However, during my transit time, it became the 431st TAC Refueling Squadron. I had jumped out of SAC into TAC!

And that began my seven years in the TAC KB-50J & K career. That is finally what this letter is really about.

The 431st ARS, at Turner AFB, was collection of newly assigned crew members and aircraft in various stages of repair. Spare parts were scarce and flying time

consisted of waiting for hours under the wing on a very hot and humid Summer day. I decided to help the support situation by using my AMC contacts and organizing a support conference. It was attended by representatives from several AMC depots and the General Officer, chief of USAF supply. Almost immediately, spare parts became more available and we started flying on a reasonable schedule.

My second son was born about two weeks before our first TDY to McClellan AFB. As luck would have it, I lost an engine and had to wait for ten days for repair. At the time I was more than anxious to get back to my wife and our new born. I resolved that if I was ever in a position to do something about this kind of delayed maintenance, I would and I did. With the help of Major Wackerbarth of the 622nd and our outstanding maintenance people record engine change time was reduced to an amazing 17 1/2 minutes.

During the time I was assigned to the 431st, I was the detachment commander at Bermuda, Lajes, McClellan and also in Adana, Turkey. When the 431st moved to Biggs AFB, I was the advance party CO. My job was to convert the old SAC facilities for our use. Later and from time to time I assumed command of the Squadron during the absence of Col. Chapman.

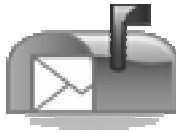
I received orders to proceed to Langley to assume command of the 429th, but when I went home to El Paso for Christmas, I received word from the TAC Commander that there were a lot of Lt. Colonels around Headquarters doing nothing and so, I as a major, was ordered back to the 431st. My 429th days lasted just two weeks.

Transferred to Langley to be the Ops officer of the 427th and in due course the Commander. What an outstanding collection of professionals. Harry Morris was assistant Ops Officer and he developed a sensible method of assigning TDY evenly. Harry continued on with his career to become a Lieutenant General.

One Saturday night at a dance at the Langley Officers' Club, Col. Kneen asked my wife what she thought about living in Alexandria, LA. That was how he told us that I was being transferred as Commander of the 622nd. Alexandria was not one of my wife's favorite places to live. But after living there for five years she changed her mind. The KB-50K was very slightly different from the J model, and as it was a little newer it required less work. It was rewarding to have control over both operations and maintenance. Of course there were problems and they were challenges, and they were solved with the help of the whole squadron. When the 622nd was phased out. I became the Chief of Maintenance of the 3rd TAC Fighter Wing still at England AFB.

The wing consisted of 82 F-100's drafted from several wings. Naturally, we did not receive their best aircraft, but one year later all were combat ready and all aircraft took off within five seconds of the original schedule. All aircraft arrived in Viet Nam in commission and ready to fly combat. But, I lost my job as Chief of Maintenance and was transferred to Saigon with 526 aircraft and 9000 Maintenance and Supply personnel. I was the Director of Material at Ton Son Nhut for a year. Even now I cannot believe what happened. Combat Zone problems required unique and unusual solutions, and there were many opportunities presented. I could write a book about that assignment. (Cont. on page 4)

## Letters Received From Our New Members



### John J. Ambrose of McMinnville, OR (December 2006)

Best known as Sludge in those days, I was a Recip Engine Mechanic. Left Biggs in 1965, back to home in Michigan, but froze and decided to return to CA, with wife Carol, and 3 kids aged 1, 3, & 5.

Settled in small town of Ripon, south of Sacramento about one hour. Joined the stationary engineers Union, and was mechanic of another sort.

Retired in 2003, moved to Oregon in 2004. I am a volunteer at the Spruce Goose Museum, here in McMinnville, and am enjoying it. My hobbies include classic car shows. We own a '67 Mustang Fastback.

\*e-mail: [sludge431st@aol.com](mailto:sludge431st@aol.com)

### Paul Jacobs of Chestnut Ridge, NY (December 2006)

Was a pilot of the KB-29P from 1952-1956 in the SAC 407th Air Refueling Sq. at Malstrom AFB, Great Falls, Montana. Refueled F-84, F-94, B-50 and B-47. Presently retired.

### Jimmy Tucker of Charlotte, NC (February 2007)

I joined the Air force in August 1958. After Tech. School, I went to Albany, GA to the 43rd Air Refueling Sq. After a short stay, the squadron went to El Paso, TX. I was in the maintenance hanger for awhile and S/S Norman Newsom was crew chief on KB-50 #00321. I joined him as an assistant crew chief and we flew missions to Hawaii, Azores, Philippines, Wake Island and others.

On one flight from El Paso, someone said a KB-50 would not turn left off the runway. Our pilot decided to try it and we just barely made it. That mountain came pretty fast! Needless to say, he was told NEVER to do it again.

I was discharged in 1962. I was offered Airman First Class stripes to stay, but opted to leave the rank to the squadron and return to Charlotte NC. I worked at a Ford dealership for a few months and then in 1964, joined Holman & Moody Ford Race Team as an engine builder and I'm still there today.

### James K. Thompson of Copperas Cove, TX (February 2007)

Retired from the 305th Air Refueling Wing at Grissom AFB in 1973. Since then have been a salesman, business owner, airport operator, paralegal and home construction inspector.

## ***BITS AND OBITS***

Word from Stan Aronberg of the passing of SMSGT Roy Byrd, a flight engineer in the 421st from 63-65. He spent 30 years in the Air Force. Services were held on 18 December 2006 in Apopka FL.

*We have also lost Tony Pronier last November. He was a retired AF pilot from the 431st and joined the TAC Tankers in January 2005. His home was in Long Beach CA..*

Sgt. Gene Holligan of Bryan TX and a member of the 420th ARS died on 20 December 2006.

*More sad news for this column was the passing of Lt. Col. Justin W. Shires USAF Ret., age 81 on 16 January 2007 after a long bout with cancer. He was born in Oklahoma and served 30 years in the AF. Justin was an avid RVer and a volunteer at Brooks Medical Center in his hometown of San Antonio.*



As mentioned in the President's Corner, Ret. Lt. Col. William L. "Bill" Szanyi, died the day before Christmas in his home in Byhalia, Mississippi. He was on the TAC Tankers Board of Directors has attended every Reunion since the first in 2000 in Tucson with his wife Annella.

We received a note from his daughter, Roganne following the funeral saying: "He was so proud of being a part of the TAC Tankers and spoke very highly of all the reunions. I had never really appreciated the totality of Dad's TAC career. I watched the DVD that was made for the memorial reunion. I remembered so much about the

*bases we were stationed at, but never realizing how scary and tense it could have been up there in the air. I was so proud of my father and his kinship with his 'Band of Brothers.' My father loved 'bonding with buddies' so please let the group know he enjoyed laughter and 'rippin knickers' with the guys! We will miss him!"*



### **Letter** (Cont. from page 3)

On the 10th Reconnaissance Wing in the 3rd AF in England as DM for 2 1/2 years, then on to Headquarters 3rd AF as Deputy Chief of Staff Material. New challenges and new solutions were in order. London was a choice assignment. Had dinner with the USAFE Commander on a number of occasions to brief him and his staff on progress in getting ready for the F-111. He enjoyed classic English restaurants. It was a distinct pleasure to work with the English government. Red tape is much less than in the USA and a handshake is usually enough.

I look back at those individuals who helped me in getting ready for those demanding assignments. I remember George Bremner (431st) and his gentle nudges at leadership when I needed them the most. Floyd Mills (also 431st) was an instinctive mechanic and taught me basic principles of how to get the maintenance job done.

The whole TAC Tanker gang from Commander to airman represented a wonderful collection of talent and professionalism. On many occasions tanker crews achieved brilliant flights of airmanship usually to go unrecognized. I can only look back with fond and rewarding memories. My seven years with the KB-50 represents a prime part of my thirty year career in the Air Force.

Robert W. Harris, Colonel USAF (Ret.)

**1957: Jamestown's 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

This coming May, the 13<sup>th</sup> to be exact, is the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the first permanent English-speaking settlement in the New World, at Jamestown, Virginia (just up the road from Langley AFB). There will be formal celebrations with many a VIP present. All this brings to mind what happened there fifty years ago, 13 May 1957, when the nation celebrated the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary. On that day KB-50 tankers were vital players (behind the scene as usual) as Tactical Air Command F-100s on their way from London, England, buzzed low over the VIPs. The next day's *Washington Post* said that the jet fighters "stole the show."

What was that about, and how did we play a part? The years 1956-58 were a time of rapid learning about how to do long-range deployments of jet fighters, and General Otto P. Weyland, TAC's commander, was looking at any opportunity to test and display TAC's growing capability. So, among other strenuous exercises in 1957, he directed "Operation Jamestown." Six F-100s from the 322<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Day Group, Foster AFB, Texas, were to launch from London at dawn, get air refuelings off Iceland and overhead Goose Bay, Labrador, and arrive overhead Langley. Three of them, named for the occasion for the three sailing ships in the original 1607 voyage, would do a low-flypast over the crowd at Jamestown, land at Langley, and deliver mementos to the ceremony. The other three F-100s would be refueled overhead Langley and then over Texas en route to Los Angeles, thereby setting a new nonstop long-distance record for single-engine jet-powered aircraft.

The operation went off as scheduled. The 429<sup>th</sup> AREFS at Langley provided 13 KB-50s and crews (a real max effort) to make this happen. They flew from Keflavik, Goose Bay, and Langley, and performed flawlessly. The three F-100s destined for the ceremony arrived early overhead Langley, and then made four passes over the crowd before landing (the last pass just as Vice President Nixon mounted the platform to begin his speech). Then the F-100s landed and the pilots were helicoptered to the ceremony. The commander, Col Carlos Talbott, presented the mementos, consisting of the London morning newspapers, a letter from Winston Churchill, and commemorative coins, to Vice President Nixon and the festival guests.

The three other F-100s, after their Langley air refueling, continued across country and landed at Los

Angeles as scheduled (one of them suffering a canopy failure, however). Together these two phases of the operation took over 6700 statute miles (4100 London-to-Langley and 2600 more to Los Angeles), a new world record. In an era before routine jet airline travel around the world, this was a very impressive demonstration of TAC's developing air deployment capability, a prelude to the Composite Air Strike Force concept's becoming operational. And we tankers were vital to it all.

The unit histories for both the 429<sup>th</sup> (KB-50s) and the 322<sup>nd</sup> (F-100s) show much irritation over the - Jamestown Airport. We had about 10 or more TTA members among the approximately 55 folks attending. Our frenetic planning process for this exercise and all others in this era - too much lack of coordination, lack of written plans or other material, last-minute major demands from on high, insufficient staffing, etc. A lot of this always happens, now as then, but in the early years this was especially prevalent. A major factor in improving mission planning and execution was to come only with the activation of the 4505<sup>th</sup> Air Refueling Wing headquarters the next year, giving the refueling role in any operation a more decisive influence.

Do any of our members who participated in this operation have any more to add? For example, where did the tankers stage from which refueled the F-100s over Texas? Was anyone not in the 429<sup>th</sup> involved? Both the 427<sup>th</sup> and 429<sup>th</sup> commanders got "thank-you letters" for Operation Jamestown, but the 427<sup>th</sup> had only just received its first KB-50s by the spring of 1957. So did some 427<sup>th</sup> crews participate with the 429<sup>th</sup>? Neither the unit histories nor other material I have an answer this question. I would appreciate your help.

**Tanker Talk at Williamsburg**

On 21 February I gave the "tanker talk" to the Eagles' Chapter of the Virginia Aeronautical Historical Society at Williamsburg. President, Rufe Mewborn, led off the program by talking about the KB-50 itself and then showing a short version of his video, featuring the KB-29/F-84F and the KB-50/F-100 refueling sequences. Then I launched the talk. I used the "long" version you saw at the May 2006 reunion, with an additional piece on the 1957 "Operation Jamestown" refueling effort. As always, I learned about as much as I taught. For example, from a naval aviator in the audience I learned that the refueling sets from our KB-50s in the bone yard were "recycled" and used on US Navy Douglas KA-3 carrier-based tanker aircraft. So, like our J47 engines and rendezvous radar sets used later by the ANG KC-97Ls, these refueling sets saw further use. (Cont. on page 6)

(Cont. from page 5) Thanks to everyone there on the Peninsula. We had a great time.

I have two more sessions for military history groups lined up, both in May. One is here in northern Virginia, and another at Fort Monroe, Virginia. If you know of a potential audience, I am willing to "blather" to it. Contact me!

### **Boom Symposium to Honor 421<sup>st</sup> Casualties from April 1954**

The 28<sup>th</sup> annual "Boom Symposium," to be held at Altus AFB, Oklahoma, 20-22 April 2007, will have on its program a rededication of the Boom Operators Memorial, created in 2003 to honor those Air Force refueling operators who have given their lives in the line of duty. This year the rededication will feature the addition of two names from our past. They are A2c Frederick L. Marshall and A2c Wayne D. Whitsell, refueling operators on a 421<sup>st</sup> AREFS KB-29M which caught fire and crashed near Nagoya, Japan, 8 April 1954 (see "Tanker Tales," June 2006, page 5). Marshall and Whitsell are in addition to the 26 other airmen from our units who were honored when the Memorial was first dedicated in April 2003. Just last year I had uncovered this aircraft loss, and submitted the names of these two airmen, our own people.

I have just heard from Nate that we will have at least four representatives at the ceremony: Jim Holbrook, Dick Hermans, Willie Perry, and T. P. Fowler. The Association would welcome anyone else willing to come. Contact them through their website, [www.altusboom.com](http://www.altusboom.com), their phone 580-481-6499, or their address: Altus Boom Operators Association, PSC Box 3252, Altus AFB, OK 73523.

### **"The Gleaming KB-50," or "Polished to Perfection"**

Those of you at Langley in 1962 might recall that the Wing got the word that in May it was to pick a KB-50 and a select aircrew to be on display at Eglin AFB, Florida. This was to be part of an enormous airpower demonstration, featuring every operational AF aircraft type, directed by Gen Curtis LeMay, then AF Chief of Staff, for President Kennedy and his staff. So the Wing selected KB-50K 51-447 and a special crew from the 429<sup>th</sup>. The crew consisted of Capt Paul Munson, 1<sup>st</sup> Lt John Hanna,

1<sup>st</sup> Lt Chuck Diver, T Sgt Jim Lane, SSgt Charles "Chick" Wright, and A1c Robert "Bo" Ault.

I remembered this task vividly, and a few months ago I emailed these folks asking them for any photos or comments they might have. John Hanna sent me a good set (thanks, John), and several folks sent me their remembrances. The photos show six young stalwarts lined up in front of a gleaming KB-50, polished to perfection. John recalled being told that it took 1000 maintenance man-hours to polish that beast, and when they flew it to Eglin they discovered it flew several knots faster than a regular KB. Thankfully for the maintenance troops, no decision to polish the rest of the fleet was made.

I used one of the photos in my talk at Williamsburg, to the surprise of Bo Ault, who was in the audience. He recalled that the crew was issued brand-new gear (flying suits with Wing patches, parachutes, helmets, masks, etc., all for the display (Bo said they had to turn it all back in afterward). Once they got to Eglin they were subject to innumerable rehearsals, and, according to John, "colonels were jumping through their 'you know what's getting us ready.'" Chuck Diver says he would like to say that the President stopped the entourage in front of the KB, asked Paul Munson for a ride, and sat in the navigator's seat. Alas, it was not to be. But the President and General LeMay did pass by less than 15 feet in front, and Bo recalls thinking, "Ah Ha!...now this is why I joined the Air Force!"

### **Breaking News: KB-50 Article Coming Up in the Air Force Times**

In mid-February I saw a short article in the Air Power History magazine, winter 2006/07 issue, about the KB-50. It was written by Robert F. Dorr, an Air Force veteran and noted military aviation historian. It was good but had a few errors, so I emailed him and later talked with him. I gave him my corrections, and he asked me to comment on a forthcoming article he is to do for Air Force Times. So I did, providing some hitherto-unknown facts and insight into the KB's use. So if you can get your hands on an Air Force Times issue of 19 March 2007 (available in exchanges about the 12<sup>th</sup>), you should see the article, with mention of our Association thrown in. Hope you like it.

### **Air Tanker Plows Off EAFB Runway**

(an undated News Clip sent in by Jim Holcomb)

A KB-50 air tanker plowed off the runway and into the mud on landing England AFB, Sunday, but none of the 10 men aboard was injured. Col. William D. Brady, base commander, said today damage appeared to have been extensive. He said the accident was caused by difficulty with the plane's landing

gear, which collapsed upon landing. The big plane had just taken off on an operational mission to Clovis AFB, NM, when the pilot 1st Lt. Charles E. Harrell, detected the trouble with the landing gear. Base authorities said he decided to return to the base to check the gear, although all visual indicators pointed to normal functioning. The gear collapsed and the plane went off the runway.

## **Tankers Save Future AF Chief of Staff**

Recently the Tactical Tankers website guestbook received a very interesting input. Here it is, quoted in its entirety:

**"I took a lot of gas from KB-50s in both the F-100 and F-104. Many thanks for professional support, and also for saving me and six other F-104 pilots during one particularly memorable trans-Atlantic deployment in the early 1960s.**

**Regards, Merrill A McPeak"**

General McPeak later in his career rose to become the Air Force Chief of Staff from 1990 to 1994. Naturally we wanted to know from the General just what had happened, so TTA President Rufe Mewbom asked him to provide some background. General McPeak quickly replied with an extract from the memoir which he is currently writing. The following is a summary of what he provided, including some interesting quotes.

The General entered the Air Force in 1957 as a distinguished graduate of the San Diego College AFROTC program. He began pilot training, and graduated from F-100 combat crew training at Luke AFB, Arizona, and Nellis AFB, Nevada, in December 1959. At that time he took advantage of an opportunity and secured an assignment to the only USAF wing of F-104C Starfighters, the 479<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing at George AFB, California. He then went through the rigors of converting to this supersonic fighter. As part of his initial F-104 checkout he had to qualify in both day and night air refueling and the tanker in use was, of course, the KB-50. After describing the air refueling process that he experienced, he described a memorable incident:

**"During my night checkout, I'm comfortably positioned and receiving fuel under the right wing when the tanker's number four engine catches fire. We're up over Death Valley, not many lights on the ground. It's a moonless night and the flames are quite spectacular, and quite close—plus, we're transferring fuel. Often the seal between the probe and drogue is not all that tight—after all, the connection is meant to make and break easily—so fuel sometimes sprays out from around the coupling. With all this flame so close it seems a good idea to discontinue refueling, so I back away to a disconnect, at the same time warning the tanker of the engine fire. I get back a dispassionate acknowledgment, "Yah, we know." Disconnected, I watch as the propeller feathers, its rotation abruptly stopping, and the fire snuffs out. Then another laconic radio call: "Cleared back in."**

First Lt McPeak continued his career in the F-104. In August 1960 he deployed with his squadron, the 436<sup>th</sup> TFS, to Moron AB, Spain. This deployment was known to us as Fox Able 111, and went over the standard route via Kindley AFB, Bermuda, and Lajes Air Transport Station (ATS), Azores, being refueled by our intrepid tankers on the way.

After extensive training in both air-to-air and air-to ground (nuclear and conventional delivery) in the European theater, his squadron's time to return to the US came up in December. The squadron would redeploy in two waves, a day apart. He was in the second wave, of seven F-104s, led by Capt (later Col) Earl W. "Snake" Pitts, which would reverse their deployment route, arriving Lajes the first day, and the next day overflying Bermuda enroute to a landing at Myrtle Beach AFB, South Carolina. They left Moron on 12 December 1960 and arrived Lajes "in

terrible weather."

They were scheduled to depart early the 13<sup>th</sup>, but bad weather in the refueling areas forced the mission to be postponed a day. Hearing that the weather on the 14<sup>th</sup> was also expected to be bad, the pilots celebrated, perhaps a little too much. They were "rudely awakened" with the news that they were to launch. There were to be two sets of tankers from Lajes which would refuel them in two different areas outbound, and a third set would refuel them in the vicinity of Bermuda. So launch they did.

**"We're certainly a sad looking bunch and some do not feel so good, but we manage to get all seven birds started and airborne, notwithstanding crappy weather, with severe crosswinds on takeoff.**

**"We find the first set of tankers and refuel without incident. We'll join the second set quickly since, if unable to refuel for any reason, we have to turn around and go all the way back to Lajes with the fuel on-board at the second rendezvous point. The KB-50 has search radar with better range than the F-104's. After a short cruise segment, the lead navigator in the second set of tankers picks us up and steers us north to a routine join up. This refueling, too, goes well.**

The seven F-104s pressed on, next overflying a "Duckbutt" aircraft, probably an Air Rescue Service HC-54 from Lajes whose mission was to orbit beneath the fighters' flight path well beyond the last tanker dropoff point and provide navigational and, if necessary, emergency rescue service. The Duckbutt crew told them they were well north of course, probably gave them a suggested corrective heading, and wished them well enroute to the next refueling, near Bermuda.

The F-104's only radio navigational aid was its VOR (VHF Omni-directional Range). The pilots expected to pick up the Bermuda VOR up to 200 nautical miles (nm) out. Also, the fighter's intercept radar was capable out to 40 nm, so they expected also to paint the tankers. Add to that the KB-50's APX-29 rendezvous radar set, which could paint the F-104's IFF squawk well over 100 nm away and provide both range and bearing, and navigation should not have been a problem. Nevertheless, as the seven fighters cruised on, they were increasingly apprehensive as the timing of their tanker rendezvous approached and they had no indication whatsoever of either the tankers or Bermuda.

**"My two tip tanks are long since empty, so I've been burning internal fuel. Another piece of pilot wisdom: Any attempt to stretch fuel is guaranteed to increase headwinds. The thing about fuel is, it doesn't make much difference how good a pilot you are; when you're out of gas, the engine quits. In a pinch, I can jettison the empty tip tanks and stretch it a little. But controlling anxiety is a necessary part of the inner work of flying and, anyway, the other six guys are in the same shape. I'm guessing we're all dealing with what, in aviation, has a technical name: the pucker factor.**

**"Nothing doing with the VOR, and no radio contact with the tankers—my fuel gauge showing maybe fifteen hundred pounds. I wonder, just how accurate are these fuel gauges? As a backup, there's a low level warning light that comes on at 750 pounds remaining. If the gauge fails for any reason, this light says you can figure 30 minutes to flameout...**

**"Down to 1000 pounds, now, and the welcome mat not yet out at Bermuda Omni. My attention is (Cont pg 8)**

## TAC Tanker Tales

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(From pg.7) now about evenly divided between fuel gauge and VOR. I'm not painting the tankers and we must be close enough now. The VOR needle turns lazy circles, hunting a signal at the selected frequency but taking no stake in the outcome, a buzzard wheeling carriage—or maybe it's a shark circling, though this time of year we can hope to be north of their range. Even if my receiver is bad, all seven of us are tuned to the thing. Somebody's got to pick it up...

"A burst of relief as, at last, the tankers make radio contact. Their lead navigator thinks he has us on radar and quickly asks us to transmit for a steer. This procedure calls for lead to hold down his UHF mike button, transmitting the carrier wave. A radio compass on board the tanker gets a bearing to the transmitter. Flying the reciprocal of this bearing should take us to the tanker. The KB-50 navigator gives us a steer of 145 degrees, meaning a turn south of more than 90 degrees, back in the direction we've come from! We head toward Africa. It seems very improbable we should have drifted so far off course, but we follow his advice because nobody has a better idea. In any case, he sounds quite confident.

"Still no signal from Bermuda VOR.

"The tanker navigator is right, his vector taking us to a visual sighting. We each grab a few pounds, deferring the emergency, then cycle back through to fill 'er up. No doubt the tanker navigator has saved the entire flight of seven aircraft.

"While refueling, a break opens in the clouds and I see an island—it must be Bermuda—slip beneath us. I glance at the VOR needle—still no lock on. I ask the KB-50 navigator if he is pulling in Bermuda Omni. He says, 'Sure, it's five square. Maybe you guys didn't get the word: It changed frequencies this morning.'

"Bermuda Omni has changed frequencies, with the news announced in the regular way through Notices to Airmen (NOTAMS) that are posted at every air base. None of us

was awake enough—or sober enough—to read the NO-TAMs, an elementary precaution. A stupid mistake, paid for with much tightening of the GI tract.

"We drop off the tanker, leaving Bermuda behind, its meritorious VOR loud and clear now we've cranked in the right frequency.

"Towards the end, the Carolina coast appears from starboard and slides effortlessly down to fill the wind-screen. The weather at Myrtle is warm and gentle, even in December. It's great to be alive and back to terra firma."

Lt McPeak was reassigned in August 1961 to the F-100-equipped 79<sup>th</sup> TFS at RAF Woodbridge, England. There, until early 1964, he probably was often refueled by the KB-50-equipped 420<sup>th</sup> AREFS from RAF Sculthorpe. He then went on to various staff and operational assignments, including a stint with the Thunderbirds and another at Phu Cat, Vietnam. In the 1970s and 1980s he had progressively more challenging assignments, including wing commander at RAF Upper Heyford and flag billets in USAFE, TAC, and the Air Staff. He commanded 12<sup>th</sup> Air Force and then PACAF before becoming the AF Chief of Staff in October 1990. But his early memories include this vivid recollection of what a young fighter pilot crossing the North Atlantic in our day had to – and did – face one cold December.

Given the rotation patterns that we had in the Atlantic islands in 1960, it is likely that the Lajes-based tanker crews involved with refueling Fox Able 111 on its way back to the States were from the 427<sup>th</sup> AREFS (from Langley AFB), and the crews out of Kindley were from the 429<sup>th</sup> (also from Langley). Can anyone out there confirm that they were involved in this mission? If so, you saved a future AF Chief of Staff!

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