The Last B-50 on Its Last Flight
by Pete Zuras

Boeing KB-50J refuels two F-104C

In one of my conversations with Dan Weber at the Hampton Re-union, (who, was our sponsor when we PCS's from the 429th at Langley to the 420th at Sculthorpe), I had mentioned that I had flown the last B-50 on its last flight in the Air Force.   Dan recently e-mailed me and asked me to pass it on for the newsletter, so here goes.

That last flight was in March 1968, but the story really began several years earlier. In the spring of l964, we were in the process of shutting down the 420th at Sculthorpe. After flying our KB's to the bone yard at Tucson, we came back to Sculthorpe, packed our belongings, and drove to Athens, Greece, our next duty station. I had been reassigned to the Flight Service Station in Athens as an Air Operations Officer. The following month, around June, I had an appointment with Personnel, which was staffed primarily by Greek employees, for the purpose of updating my records. The young lass that interviewed me mentioned that my last name sounded Greek. "Yes it does, doesn't it," I answered in fluent Greek.

Needless to say, our meeting was a piece of cake from there. She wanted to change my Primary AFSC to Air Operations Officer, and delete my 1065A, B-50 driver. I knew that the entire B-50 program had gone, or was about to go, to Davis Monthan, where all of our Sculthorpe birds were now sitting, waiting to be chopped up. I felt that I would be shunted out of a subsequent flying job when I returned to the states if I didn't keep a flying specialty code up front in my records. I asked her, a fellow Hellene, and for the Glory of the Greek Spirit, etc., (you get the picture) if she would just keep my Primary AFSC as 1065A, and make Air Operations Officer my Duty AFSC. I'm not even sure why I asked her to do this, since I knew there would be no B-50's around when I rotated from Athens three years later. What harm would it do? I think it was when I started whistling the Greek National Anthem that she uttered the Greek equivalent of *Oh, what the H——!,* and updated my 1065A as Primary, which, in June of l964, was probably the only one in the Air Force.

Now fast forward to January 1967. I arrived at Wright Patterson AFB in Dayton, Ohio, from Greece, with orders to report to the Directorate of Flight Test, Aeronautical Systems Division of Systems Command. *Systems Command?* All I knew about Systems Command up to that time was that they had a 5-mile runway out in the California desert, called Edwards AFB, and they did Chuck Yeager stuff. I had no idea of the extent of the experimental work being done at Wright-Patt. I was soon to find out.

They took me out to the flight line and there sat a B-50. Not a KB, but a B-50, nevertheless. I couldn't believe my eyes. The conversation went something like this:

"That's one of the planes you'll be flying here."
"Where did that come from?"
"Tucson, the bone yard."
"How many others are there?"
"You're looking at it."
"How about parts? How are you going to keep it flying?"   "That's not your problem. You just have to fly it." That sure as hell was my problem, I thought.

It was then that I realized what must have happened, and why I was standing there. They must have needed a B-50 driver, didn't have a flight test pilot familiar with B-50;s, so they pushed the computer button in personnel just for kicks, and bang—the only B-50 AFSC in the Air Force shows up from Athens! So here I was. Assigned to fly as co-pilot for Captain Ernest Patrick Hanavan, the project engineer, and a former WB-50 driver in MATS. It seems that the Air Force was running several hi tech R&D projects for South East Asia, such as LLTV (Low Light Level TV) Side Looking Radar, Laser Imagery, and night vision devices, all for jungle warfare. All of these sensors needed to be correlated with human vision and they needed a platform with a glass bubble visual observation. Ho Ho! The only thing the Air Force had, or used to have, was a bomber with a glass nose.

Enter the B-50. It was retrieved from the bone yard a couple of months prior to my arrival and refurbished as best it could. Thank God the 4360 engine was still in the inventory, because sure as heck, nothing else on the airplane seemed to be. The civilian mechanics at Wright Field, where the B-50 was maintained, were magicians, as well as con artists. We flew that bird for almost two years, and they managed to keep it in the air for us. John Bessette, our Historian, ought to verify this, but Systems Command had, and I saw it with my own eyes, a KB-50 in a hanger, that I believe was being restored for the AF Museum there at Wright Field. It was cannibalized time and time again for parts to keep our bird in the air. I suspect that they stripped it down so far, that there was nothing left to be displayed in the museum. Check it out, John.

We flew the B-50 to Howard AFB in Panama for a month in order to check out the various sensors and devices against real jungle foliage. That trip was a mini homecoming of sorts for me, in that my first deployment after joining the 429th in 1960, was a trip to South America via Howard AFB in the Canal Zone.

After about 10 months on the project , Pat Hanavan got orders for Viet Nam, and I moved up to A/C and project director. We flew several missions to Ft. Polk in Louisiana, because there the Army had reproduced a complete Viet Nam compound and village in the woods near the post, and we logged quite a few sorties there. All of our flights, except Panama, were round robins because all of our recoveries had to terminate at Wright Patt. Our maintenance people dreaded the thought of us landing somewhere else. They figured we'd never get the plane back in the air. There was a constant battle between the SEA project people and the Flight Test Operations and Flying Safety over the status of the B-50. The operations people and maintenance wanted to ground it because of the maintenance headache it posed. The project people had so much sophisticated equipment attached to the bird, and other good ideas that they were thinking up to do with the B-50, that it was a constant between the two.