

A B-47 is down over the Atlantic

By Sigmund Alexander

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The Collision

Every Monday on various SAC B-47 bases in the United States three aircraft were sent to the UK, Spain, and Morocco to replace three aircraft and their crews that were on nuclear alert. The operation named Reflex started in 1957 and was an integral part of the 24-hour alert program. Prior to 1957, B-47 wings were deployed overseas for 90 days as their B-29 predecessors had been.

During the day of the flight the crew received their reflex briefing, preflighted the aircraft, and had their baggage, as well as spare parts or an engine stowed on the bomb bay pallet. Attempting to sleep during the day was nearly impossible and when the crews boarded their aircraft they had to fight the need to sleep and remain alert as they flew across the pond. Pretake-off briefings were held in the evening and were primarily devoted to weather, last minute changes and a review of the flight. The flights normally hit a tanker going over and coming back across the Atlantic. The operation had become routine and it took under seven hours to make the flight from Plattsburgh to the UK. The only problem encountered during the flight was staying awake after the refueling when the flight became boring due to straight and level flying. Arriving at their destination, the weariness was gone as the adrenaline kicked in as the crew prepared to land.

The flight of three aircraft of the 380th BW at Plattsburgh, NY scheduled on Monday Sept. 13, 1960 to RAF Brize-Norton was cancelled to avoid hurricane Donna. The takeoff was rescheduled for the next day, Tuesday. The three aircraft in the flight were Holt 66, the leader; Holt 61, #2; and Holt 53, #3. The two aircraft involved in the collision were Holt 61 and Holt 53.

The aircraft commander of Holt 66 was Major Dick Blakeslee, Wally Barnes was the copilot, and Earl Moorehouse the navigator.

The aircraft commander of Holt 61, 53-1967, was Capt. John L. Brennan, a veteran of World War II with over 4,500 flying hours and 763 hours in the B-47. His copilot was Capt. Richard Glogowski who

had graduated pilot school in March 1958 and had a total of 718 flying hours with 170 B-47 in the B-47. The navigator was 1st Lt. John A. Carnochan.

Holt 53, 51-7047, was under the command of Capt. Robert C. Huber, who had over 2800 flying hours of which 546 hours were in the B-47. The 380th BW was copilot 1st Lt. Duane E. Bartlett's first operational assignment after graduating pilot training in December 1957. He had 740 flying hours and 194 hours in the B-47-The navigator was 1st Lt. Gary I. Simpson.

Both crews involved in the collision could be considered as typical experienced B-47 crews of the period. However, Capt. Brennan was by far among the more experienced B-47 aircraft commanders.



After taking off late Tuesday evening the cell of three aircraft proceeded to the Presque Isle Maine VOR where they accepted a single altitude clearance to 29,000 feet MARSA, Military Accepts Responsibility for Separation Altitude. At the time the number of 707s crossing the Atlantic was relatively small and the B-47s had the high altitude air spaces almost to themselves. The flight continued in a loose trail formation with no specified distance separating the aircraft VFR (visual flight rules) on top. Number two kept number one in sight and number three kept two in sight; in weather the navigators of #2 and #3 used their radars to station keep.

The flight was proceeding as planned and the cell was given clearance to climb to 33,000 feet. Shortly thereafter Capt. Huber proceeded to fly in close formation with Capt. Brennan's aircraft. It is surmised that Huber's crew had come in close to take pictures. Taking pictures during flight across the Atlantic or during refueling was not an uncommon occurrence.

Unfortunately, Huber positioned his right wing under the down-wash from Brennan's left wing. To maintain his position, Capt. Huber had to pull back on his control column to overcome the downwash to fly straight and level. Reducing power slowly would have allowed Huber's aircraft to leave the downwash safely. Instead, Huber apparently increased power and once his wing was out of the downwash the nose of his aircraft rose dramatically since his control column was pulled back. Huber's aircraft then proceeded to collide with Brennan's aircraft and was last seen spiraling toward the sea.

Brennan's aircraft sustained major damage but with exceptional skill he kept his aircraft in the air. The rear mount on the #1 engine broke and the nose of the engine pivoted upward creating considerable drag. The left fuel tank was torn from the aircraft. the ECM access door was forced open, and only ten feet of the left horizontal stabilizer remained, control of the left horizontal stabilizer was gone, and the #2 engine, though damaged, continued to operate at 70 %. On the ground Capt. Gologowski recalled seeing the red 530th BS identifying stripe found on the tail of 51-7047 on the left side of the nose cone and nacelle of the #1 engine. He further stated that scrape marks on the bottom of wing indicated that the when the wing tank separated that it had pivoted horizontally hitting the exhaust nacelle of the #2 engine and probably the ECM compartment and the stabilizer.



Realizing the aircraft was not about to crash Capt. Brennan proceeded to jettison the right wing tank and to shut down the #2 engine since it was damaged and might disintegrate destroying #3. Capt. Glogowski placed the SIF, Selected Identification Feature, on his IFF, (Identification Friend or Foe), on emergency squawk and notified Holt 66. Holt 66 circled Holt 61 to ascertain the damage to Brennan's aircraft and then obtained clearance from Croughton airways to proceed to Prestwick, Scotland over the nearest landmass of Northern Ireland. Holt 66 escorted Holt 61 as permission was granted by Croughton to descend to 23,000 feet in order for Holt 61 to maintain airspeed of 220

knots. Though the crew calculated that they had enough fuel to arrive at Brize with 8,000 lbs, Capt. Brennan decided to land at Shannon where the weather was good while it was marginal at Prestwick and Brize. Approaching Ireland the crew decided they would ditch and not bail out if they could not make land, but their luck held out and they successfully made it.

On reaching land Capt. Brennan made a minimum control speed check of 170 knots with the landing gear and flaps retracted. The aircraft reacted normally and Brennan began a slow descent to 2000 feet. Holt 66 determined that Holt 61 could safely land and proceeded on to Brize-Norton. Neither aircraft was able to contact Shannon tower. However Shannon tower transmitted the necessary information in the blind on 121.5 with Brennan receiving the instructions over the OMNI radio navigation receiver. After a visual flyover with the navigator keeping track of the runway Capt. Brennan put Holt 61 safely on the ground on runway 23.

Capt. Brennan had done a superb job of flying and landing the airplane at Shannon despite the drag created by the damaged number #1 engine, damaged left horizontal stabilizer and the lost horizontal control of the left stabilizer. The next day articles and pictures appeared in both Irish and English papers. The September 15, 1960 copy of the London Daily Mirror carried a headline "The Pilot is a hero" along with a picture of Brennan and his crippled aircraft.



An intensive air and sea search was conducted by Air Force SA-16s, RAF Shackeltons and ships of the Royal and US Navies; but they failed to find any trace of Holt 53 that had gone down 250 miles off the Irish coast.

Air Force investigative team and security forces were flown to Shannon from England and the crew after being interviewed was flown to Brize-Norton. Security forces surrounded the damaged aircraft and photography was forbidden.



The Recovery of Holt 61, 53-1967

With the aircraft safely on the ground, a maintenance team from Brize-Norton was dispatched to determine whether to repair or scrap Holt 61. The team determined that it was economical to repair the damaged aircraft. However, it also found that maintenance personnel in the UK were unable to repair the aircraft and that a depot team would be needed to repair the aircraft.

A 13 man team was sent from the Oklahoma Air Logistic Center at Tinker AFB, they were assisted by three airmen from Brize to repair Holt 61. The major problem facing the team was the replacement of the left horizontal stabilizer. A stabilizer was found on a B-47 assigned to Brize Norton that was used for the training of MMS, (Munition Maintenance Squadron) personnel in the loading and unloading of nuclear weapons. The stabilizer was removed from the aircraft and sent by truck and then ship to Ireland. In Ireland a special truck was obtained to carry the stabilizer from the port to Shannon over curvy village and country roads that had very little clearance. At the airport the necessary equipment to position the stabilizer was not available and the team had to improvise. A ditch digger and a chain hoist were used to put the stabilizer in place. The stabilizer had come from a Douglas built B-47 while

Boeing built 53-1967, despite the fact that different companies built them, the stabilizer fit perfectly. A local upholsterer made a balance bay seal when it was discovered that only one seal instead of two needed had been sent.

The horizontal stabilizer, the left and right elevators and the trim tab were replaced. The #1 engine mount was repaired and both the #1 and #2 engines were replaced, both the ECM dome the leading edge of the left wing were repaired. Repairs to the aircraft were completed on December 31.

All B-47s in the UK were under the command of the 7th Air Division and the Deputy Chief of Staff for Maintenance at 7th deemed that an FCF (Flight Functional Flight) , (See 1) would have to be flown at Shannon before the aircraft was authorized to fly to Brize.

On December 31, 1960 the flight crew of Capt. Fred Lange as pilot and Capt. Larry Brechel as copilot and a maintenance launch team along with a power cart and liquid oxygen were flown to Shannon in a C-54. Fred was an extremely capable pilot with seven years in the aircraft and was the 7th Air Division Chief of Standardization who flew as the pilot for the division commander. Larry Brechel was a B-47 IP and the Field Maintenance Officer at Brize

The aircraft took off late in the afternoon from Shannon on December 31. Capt. Lange stated the aircraft needed some forward pressure on take off but he trimmed out. On reaching altitude Fred slowed the aircraft down to check trim at low crossover speed, at which time he turned off the power control unit, PCU. The aircraft immediately pitched up violently. Larry Brechel stated that he had the Boeing logo found on the horn of the control column permanently implanted on his knees. Both Fred and Larry exerted all their force to keep the nose down. Holding the trim motor down to its maximum reduced some of the pressure. Capt. Lange felt that if he tried to revert to power control there could have been a violent reaction that might have snapped the wings off. He allowed the aircraft to climb and then started a roll to the left, and when he went through the horizon it neutralized the down pressure and he turned the power controls back on. Fred elected that his chances that the power controls would not fail, cancelled the rest of the FCF and obtained clearance to Brize. The rest of the flight was uneventful until they prepared to make a GCA at Brize where the English civilian controller mistook Fred's B-47 for a RAF Blackburn Beverly transport. Had not the ILS been on to cross check the GCA instructions, a lot of work might have been in vain.

Fred and Larry made it back early enough to attend a New Year's party at the Officers' Club. At the club the leader of the Tinker depot team asked Fred about the aircraft. Fred did not answer him but just glared. Brize maintenance personnel found that the depot team had installed the balance bays

incorrectly. (See 2) CM/Sgt. Walter Satcher, the Non - Commissioned Officer in charge of Job Control at Brize, commented that the Tinker people were supposed experts and they botched the job.

Epilogue

On his return to Pittsburgh, Capt. Brennan faced an accident review board. Capt. Brennan did not receive any accolades as he had in the English and Irish newspapers but was discharged from the Air Force. Having an accident in SAC was a heinous unforgivable sin and Capt. Brennan was a sinner. A former member of the accident board cynically summed up the action of the accident board as Capt. Brennan being told to take a hike on interstate 85, the highway that was located in front of Plattsburgh AFB. With his jet experience, FAA, the (Federal Aviation Authority), hired Capt. Brennan to fly check rides on commercial 707 pilots. John Brennan retired from the FAA and died a few years ago..

Capt. Richard Glogowski stayed on with the 380th where he became an aircraft commander. In an ironic twist of fate Dick flew Holt 61, 53-1967, to the bone yard in 1965. Walking away from the aircraft he recalled the surprise, fear, the prayers and grief he experienced the day of the accident. He retired from the Air Force and now resides in Illinois.

Capt. Lange retired from the Air Force and lives in the state of Washington; his copilot on the flight Larry Brechel died in July of this year in Florida

The aircraft commander of Holt 66, Major Richard Blakeslee, went on to fly B-58s. He was killed when he lost one or two engines on a low-level training mission and was unable to regain control of the aircraft and it rolled over and crashed.

(1) The B-47 had two systems to operate the aircraft's flight controls a manual system consisting of cable wires and pulleys and a hydraulic boosted system, PCU. With the aid of the PCU, power control unit, the pilot could move the flight controls with ease. The PCU was the primary flight control system for the B-47. The manual trim was centered on the ground for straight and level flight. A Functional Check Flight, (FCF), was required to confirm the streamline settings or when a control surface was replaced. Electric trim motors were connected for the FCF and this was the only time the electric trim motor was used, they were disconnected the remainder of the time. At the proper altitude and airspeed, the pilot would turn off the PCU and use the electric trim to set the aircraft to fly straight and level. After the trim was set the pilot would revert to hydraulic operation. On landing the motors were disconnected and stored on dummy plugs.

(2) Balance bays were installed on the ailerons, rudder, and elevator controls where they served to reduce the amount of force a pilot would have to exert in moving the flight controls. Balance bays consisted of balance panels, balance seals, and openings that permitted changing air pressure to act on the balance panels. Each elevator had two outboard and inboard balance areas with both upper and lower bays. Balance bays utilized the differential air pressure between the bays caused by moving the control surfaces to reduce the physical effort needed to move the control. When Capt. Lange took off the PCU was on and he was able to fly the aircraft with relative ease, but when he turned the PCU off, the reversed balance bays pitched the aircraft up violently and he then was fighting an unbalanced condition to regain control of the aircraft.