

A Crew Chief's Story

By Harley Dahler

I was involved with the B-47 as a mechanic from August 1951 to December 24, 1954. I was assigned as the "3rd wipe" on the second one, 50-046, delivered to the Air Force's 369th Bombardment Squadron, 306th Bombardment Wing at McDill Air Force Base Florida. Then, as assistant Crew Chief on 51-2284, and finally Crew Chief on 52-533 until I was discharged.

As the first unit to receive the B-47s, and the first to become operational and take them overseas to England and the first to lose one in flight, we learned a lot. First, the book *Boeing B-47 Stratojet* by Lindsey Peacock has a few things that need correction. First, on page 120 he states that on landing the first B-47 at McDill Air Force Base, the fire chief halted it on the runway and sprayed foam into the engine. In the landing pattern at reduced thrust, the engine did not leave a trail of smoke as the book states. For the first few weeks the fire trucks did pace the planes to their parking places to familiarize the trucks to the new planes. Col. McCoy landed, taxied to the parking spot accompanied by the trucks and shut down. The truck went back to the firehouse. I was there and saw that.

Second, on page 126 he states Col. McCoy diverted to RAF Brize Norton, England because of problems and his discomfort with the pressure suits. B-47's didn't use pressure suits - no equipment being installed for their use. My close friend was on the ramp waiting for him, and had to load APUs and go to Brize Norton to get the crew started for the flight to Fairford RAF Station, and stated that the Col. had landed at the wrong field. Walter J Boyne gives a different description in his book *B-47 Stratojet*, pages 55 & 56. Page 115 shows a 305th B-47 staging through Limestone Air Force Base and described as the integral RATO system being "deactivated" and a new piece of skin being applied. The new piece of skin was an alternate cover plate to be installed whenever RATO was not needed, to reduce drag and they came with the plane from the factory. On a deployment to England our plane carried the flight crew, pilot, copilot and navigator, and motor scooters in the compartments behind the "skins".

In the summer of 1952 we were grounded for a month due to leaking fuel tanks, requiring disassembly of the wooden former skeleton and passing out the pieces through the access door one at a time. The aft main was over 1000 gallons, meaning a lot of pieces and bolts and very time consuming. An air conditioning unit blew cool ventilating air into the tank for the mechanics. One day, the mechanics working in the tank on an adjacent airplane came tumbling out the bottom fast. Seems they were goofing off playing poker when they realized one guy was smoking a cigarette inside a fuel tank.

Goodyear and Goodrich made the tanks and one company didn't have the procedure right. 081 was used to run low altitude high speed fuel and oil consumption tests. Takeoff with the full tanks and back home in less than 4 hours when normal missions were around 7 hours. It took off one morning and came apart over Barton, Florida. Lots of speculation over the cause from overheated aux fuel pump in the bombbay tanks to aileron reversal. In retrospect it was probably the first instance of the wing spar failure of the milk bottle pins. The 367th BS lost one shortly after takeoff when the canopy came off and decapitated the pilots and it went straight in at full power. The engines were found 36 feet down in the sand.

In the summer of 1952 some members of Congress were unhappy about all the money being spent on the program and the Senator at the head of the appropriations committee came down for a first hand look see. We defueled our airplane for a light load and took him for a check ride. The pilot took off, tucked wheels up immediately, held the nose on the deck till the end of the runway, pulled the nose up in a gentle arc going like a bat out of hades, and came back over the field at 16,000 feet, in sight all the time. When they came back the good Senator was grinning from ear to ear.

When Eisenhower was inaugurated we were going to put up a 16 airplane formation flight over Washington D. C. All airplanes were briefed on position procedures very carefully. At the command "break" they would each leave formation in a carefully organized pattern to all points. So the good wing commander called break and went right instead of left. Our airplane came back with wrinkles in the skin behind the rear gear that stayed there from violent maneuvering.

Deploying the first wing overseas, there was a strong feeling about getting all planes over on schedule - 15 the first flight, 15 the second day, and 15 the third day. Each group would stage overnight at Loring Air Force Base, Maine and go on the next morning. Our plane was in the 1st bunch and landed at Loring with an oil tank cap missing. Not wanting to wait for a

replacement, a piece of 2X4 was whittled to shape, hammered down, and sawed off flush. They took off with all engines - shut down #6 and flew across the Atlantic on 5 engines then started #6 for landing while we brought a new cap on the KC-97 tanker.

In late 1953 there were several incidents of bleed air flapper valves breaking between the inboard and outboard engines, which meant the plane was down for close to two weeks when the whole leading edge was removed to gain access to that little valve, about 6"x 6" x 8". When the valve on our plane failed, as a dumb farmer I couldn't see why it couldn't be taken out of a small access panel next to the out board engine, so the crew chief said "to go ahead and try". So I unbolted the valve from the air pipes and sure enough it was about 1/2 inch too big to come out. But there was a flange on the end held on by 4 x 28 screws, and by removing the flange it dropped right out. Take the flange off the new one slip it through the hole, put it back on, bolt the valve back on, and we were back in business — total time was 2 hours. Next day the Boeing Tech Rep came out to see if we had changed the valve and if so how. When I told him he didn't say a word - just turned and walked back to his office. No more planes on the ramp with leading edges off after that.

The 368th had a plane on a night mission when the #4 engine inboard turbine wheel came apart. One piece went through the #5 turbine and another piece went up and out the fuel line to #6. They were over North Florida heading back to MacDill at the time and radioed an emergency. The Deputy Wing Commander at the time was a colonel fresh out of fighters and decided they needed a chase plane to escort the B-47 in. But by the time he got the T-33 chase plane started, and started to take off, the B-47 was close enough on approach that it had to make a three engine go around, and there was nothing in the manual about that. Fortunately, they made it just fine, no help from the Colonel in the chase plane.

One holiday weekend when everybody, and I mean almost everybody, had left the base, the charge of quarters found myself and one corporal and told us the Air Police wanted somebody from maintenance down at the main flight line gate right away, so we got in my little 36 Ford Coupe and drove over. One of the Air Police guards had reported a canopy cover had come loose and was flapping in the strong wind. The Air Police were forbidden to touch the planes - so would we reattach the cover please. At that time the entire parking ramp was being covered with fresh asphalt and the planes were parked on a taxiway close to a mile away around the end of the active runway. All our tugs and support pickups were locked up in the motor pool so we had no way to get out there. It was getting close to dark, and walking out and back in the dark was out. The Air Police couldn't take us out in their jeep - policy. The AP sergeant called his Officer In Charge. A young 2nd Lt. came and looked things over and handed us a checkered flag and told his sergeant to escort us across the ramp and runway, and escort us back when the cover was secured. So away we went, white side-walls tires, fender skirts and all, checkered flag flying.

When we first received our planes in 1951 we painted the 306th Wing square with a P inside on the tail, but very shortly the order came down to wash it off as the doctrine was no identifying marks were to be on any aircraft as the other side could tell where they came from. I think the 306th was the only wing to carry tail identification.

In late 1952 our plane commander was a very fine Lt. Col. He was at our plane one day talking when I mentioned how neat the B-47 would look if we painted the nacelles stripes on the engines like the airline radial engines had. He thought a bit and asked just what I had in mind so we walked to the outboard engine and I described a little more detail. He said to get some blue paint and do it. 2284 was the only B-47 with nacelle stripes on all 6 engines although 2294 did put a thin spear on the outside of the outboard engines when they saw what we did.

We had several incidents on our TDY to England. An English Canberra buzzed the runway, about 20 feet up the full length of the runway full speed, pulled up around and landed. A few days later one of our B-47s returned the deal at the Canberra's base and the English raised all kind of fuss. Our flight crew lost their licenses and were returned to the States immediately. The English claimed the B-47 blew a man off his bicycle on its pass.

The runway at Fairford had a 5 foot drop off at one end that was square, not rounded at all, and a short overrun on the other end. On one night landing a pilot landed long and ran off the drop-off, locked the brakes, ground off the tires and some of his wheels. He slid to a stop in time, but the runway was blocked and the other returning planes had to divert to other bases. The problem was the plane could not be towed with the wheels ground down, and the jacks would no longer

fit under the jack points to raise the plane. The English brought in some big airbags that were placed under the wings and they raised it up enough to put on new wheels and towed it away.

2272 took off on a mission and used the entire runway and some of the overrun before finally getting airborne. The aft fuel tank gauge failed and the tank had only a small amount of fuel in it making the plane very nose heavy. After that all tanks were dipped before every flight. The 368th lost a plane when it landed way short at another base. A Master Sergeant due to retire in a few days after 30 years of service was along for "one more ride" and was killed along with the crew.

One last tidbit. Col McCoy wanted to set an East-West speed record on return to MacDill, and a crew of men spent 2 weeks hand polishing his plane. Another crew picked a slightly different path and altitude and beat him back, and **no**, they were not credited with a record.

Two more incidents at other bases. At Lockbourne AFB, Ohio a B-47 was taxiing out for takeoff. The crew switched on the bombbay auxiliary fuel tank and the aft main gear retracted. The pump and the landing gear motor were grounded with the same bolt in the rear wheel well. Each of our planes were issued one bolt and we had to drill a new hole and secure the bare ground wire 4" away to keep the pump from grounding through the gear motor. At Savannah GA, while refueling, the APU cart backfired and caught fuel vapors on fire. After fire fighters thought the fire was put out, the plane exploded and several were killed.

Last Item. Jimmy Stewart and June Allyson starred in **Strategic Air Command**, which was made at MacDill in part. Our plane was parked by the main hanger in the background, and I remember seeing them sitting on the grass waiting for another take. One sequence called for losing a canopy and a canopy was removed from one B-47 and our Deputy Wing Commander took it up for aerial shots. He said it flew fine but despite the best effort of the ground crew there was a lot of dirt flying around.

Hope these adventures reveal a little of the B-47 early history from a mechanic's end.

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