

I'M THE NAVIGATOR, AND I HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THAT LANDING!

By: Alex P. Brewer, Jr. (Lt./Col. USAF Ret.)

It's the early '50s – MacDill AFB – Tampa, Florida.

Colonel Mike McCoy was the 306th Bomb Wing Commander. I was assigned to the 367th Bomb Squadron, the first SAC outfit to get the all-new six jet engine swept wing Boeing B-47. I was crewed up with a “new” crew and after completing the necessary 50-8 training as a Ready (Combat Ready) crew we had just been upgraded to “Lead” status. My Aircraft Commander was a WW2 F-51 pilot with over 350 combat missions over North Africa, the co-pilot was a “wet behind the ears” Second Lt. just out of pilot training and myself, who had just finished a combat tour as a Nose Nav/Bombardier in RB-26s in Korea. General LeMay originally had decided to fill all three crew seats with rated pilots called “Triple Headed Monsters”. This was a costly ill-conceived idea, which was abandoned as it soon became evident that pilots made poor radar navigators. Fortunately, I was one of the first Aircraft Observers/Navigators to be assigned to B-47 crew duty who was not a rated Pilot.

My AC, who should have stayed in fighters, somehow got the idea that volunteering for what ever came along would somehow get us “Brownie” points for a coveted “Spot” promotion. SAC 50-8 training requirements were challenging enough for crew L-72, but my AC always hung around after duty hours and was a frequent Saturday morning volunteer. He would somehow get into the command post over the weekends and always knew about upcoming special events or missions that were in the planning stage that he could volunteer us for.

I wasn't surprised to find out that the AC had volunteered us for a “Special” SAC promo mission to Bryan AFB, the Air Force T-Bird (T-33) School near College Station Texas. Some demented individual at SAC HQ got the brilliant idea that showing off a B-47 to the student pilots at Bryan would somehow help SAC's image and that these young “Gung Ho” pilots would turn down Fighter assignments and be standing in line to volunteer for SAC. My co-pilot had been a recent graduate of this advanced pilot training base and was a classic example of a young pilot who had no concept of the SAC mission or of the importance of the Nav-Bombardier on a SAC combat crew. The Aircraft Commander was elated, but I wasn't all that excited about giving up a weekend, especially in Texas in the middle of summer. On top of that, the idea of trying to impress a bunch of student pilots who wanted to go to jet fighters seemed a little far out.

The Friday 50-8 training mission was planned to go like this: Take off from Mac Dill AFB on Friday morning, climb to altitude and then fly a routine

Training mission to include a Nav-leg, Radar Bomb Scoring (RBS) runs, "Camera" attacks on Nike sites and then land at Bryan for the weekend stay. Saturday, we were to show off the bird with a static display, give a recruiting pep talk to the students at the base theatre and then return to Mac Dill AFB on Sunday, so we could get back to work on Monday morning.

After planning the regular 50-8 training mission on Thursday, we arrived two hours early for preflight on Friday morning. Mac Dill AFB was built on swampy landfill and from a biological standpoint; it was the ideal breeding ground for "Salt Water" mosquitoes. By the time we did the walk around and were able to get into the airplane, the mosquitoes were flying formation around us and attacking like the Marine "Black Sheep" squadron of "Pappy" Boyington. The Crew Chief and ground crew usually sprayed insecticide in the cockpit area, but these pests were by now immune to the citronella and those on board would follow us to altitude and continue to munch on us the entire mission. As we departed Mac Dill early Friday morning we deviated from the checklist and delayed pressurizing the cabin area until 20,000 ft. The idea was that we had oxygen masks and the mosquitoes didn't, so our improvised euthanasia program was very effective. Flies were another story as they would go unconscious during un-pressurized flight, but recover once we pressurized. For some bizarre reason, the flies seemed to like the gourmet flight lunches that the In-flight kitchen prepared for us. You know the lunches I am talking about, greasy chicken legs, ham on white bread (hold the mayo), a banana for the pilots, some peanuts and the little two packs of free cancer sticks.

After leveling off at altitude, we departed over Pinecastle AFB near Orlando (Later to be named McCoy AFB) and flew the radar navigation leg up to Atlanta for scheduled RBS runs against the Atlanta RBS site. We then proceeded westward to make RBS runs on Oklahoma City Bomb Plot, then south to Dallas Nike Site for a couple more simulated "Camera Attack" bomb runs. By now we were over six hours into the mission and after making a north to south camera attack on Dallas Nike, proceeded south bound to Bryan AFB which is in the heart of "Aggie Land" just north of San Antonio. Everything was proceeding as planned with the Co-pilot making a departure report to Dallas Center and then switching frequencies over to San Antonio Center where we were cleared to start our penetration from altitude by flying over the let down fix near Bryan AFB.

Bryan tower advised that there were several T-33's in the area with Instructor/student crews and to use caution. The tower also advised us of surface winds and temperature, in Celsius. The Co-pilot asked me to convert the temperature to Fahrenheit and when I told him the runway temperature was 109 degrees he got busy figuring stopping distance from the Dash-1 chart. This was interesting, as some mental midget at SAC had

insisted on us making an initial fly by at 13:00 local, with a landing at 13:20, the hottest time of the day. I stayed off interphone, since "Fric" and "Frac" were arguing about approach speed, aircraft gross weight and all of those factors that account for a safe landing on a short runway like Bryan. In addition, not only had someone at SAC HQ made a dumb decision on the landing time, at the pilots request we had made our arrival over the base heavy on fuel so the pilots could look over the surroundings before making this short field landing. The Co-pilot was talking to Bryan tower and the tower had somehow got the message from SAC that our ETA was two hours later and consequently had several T-33s scheduled to land after 13:00. After making a radar directed let down and approach and taking the pilots down the centerline for the pilots to "look it over", I became more or less a passenger and merely monitored the upcoming "Monty Python Flying Circus" show.

As a backup, I of course had my own Dash-1 landing charts in front of me and was carefully checking on their activities, since I suspected that the Co-pilot suffered from bouts of dyslexia when it came to reading landing and speed charts.

In any event, we were cleared for an orientation pass over the runway and with us being heavy on fuel; the tower requested that the T-Birds stay clear of the area to let us do our thing. After doing "our thing" several times and buzzing the hell out of the local area (after all the B-47 was a little noisy below 1000 ft.), we were still too heavy to land. Three T-Birds declared "Bingo" on fuel and were sandwiched in for minimum fuel landings between our flybys. I really broke up when I heard one of the Instructor Pilots declare on Guard (the Navy channel) that if he were armed he would shoot us down.

After we had finally burned off the excessive JP-4, the pilot elected to put out the "approach" chute. This brought out several unsolicited comments by the T-Bird pilots who were still in the area, who had never seen an airplane with a parachute in trail position. Later we found out that a local Texas "Redneck", (probably an Aggie) called the base to advise them that someone had bailed out of the airplane and a body and parachute were hung up on the tail. This was probably the same guy who had reported seeing a UFO landing in a cow pasture west of Waco.

I leaned over to the left and looked over my shoulder at the Crew Chief, who we had brought along to prepare the aircraft for the return flight. For some reason the Air Force paid the enlisted personnel less flight pay than the rated officers. This didn't make sense since we had ejection seats and they had none. Today, he was earning his flight pay and then some as the "fourth" seat was in the crawl way with no safe way of egressing the aircraft in case of bailout.

Not that the downward ejection seat of the Navigator was that entirely safe when you think about it. So visualize, low altitude, turbulence and hot stuffy cockpit area! A brief glance at the Crew Chief (who had turned pale green) told me that his “pucker power” had reached critical mass.

On what I hoped would be the final approach, we came over the fence a little fast and since it was really hot out there over the runway, the big bird really wanted to float and float and float. The pilot finally swallowed his pride and brought the power up to make our first go around. Just about the time the engines spooled up and the power kicked in, we were in a great position to land altitude wise except there wasn't any more runway left. Having never been excited about amusement park thrill rides, from my seat in the nose, this was getting to be a little scary to say the least and I was wishing that the people at Boeing had figured a way to put upward ejection seats for all crew members. After a quick glance back at the Crew Chief, I surmised that he was wishing he was on KP back at Mac Dill or better still was in the navy.

After flying what we will call a shortened pattern because fuel (or the lack of) was now becoming an item of interest, actually a matter of dire concern. The AC reverted back to his WW-2 experiences as a F-51 pilot and now made what I would describe as a tactical fighter approach at low altitude. His 60-degree banks and gyrations would have surely qualified him for a seat with the “Thunderbirds”, the AF acrobatic team. He somehow got us lined up and the airspeed bled off as we came over the fence pretty well descending at the proper rate and started the flair for the final touchdown. With fingers crossed (mine), we started our final landing, but again the “float” problem, but this time he had the altitude and airspeed pretty well under control and managed to stick the front wheel trucks on the runway at about the 500 ft. marker. This was an interesting pilot technique to landing this big 6 engine swept wing pride of the SAC fleet and contrary to the briefings I had attended with “Tex” Johnson, one of the Boeing Test Pilots who had briefed the pilots to never – never do this.

Somehow the word had spread across the base that an airplane (guess who) was in trouble, so with just about the entire cadre of Instructor Pilots, Student Pilots, Base Personnel, BX employees, dependents and several interested Civilian employees as witnesses, our landing now became a classic impersonation of what a porpoise looks like at Sea World doing its grand finale leaps. Somewhere around the 3rd or 4th bounce, I heard the Pilot say SH_ _ , which the Co-pilot interpreted as Chute, so he deployed the brake chute. I think at the time he deployed the brake chute, the rear mains were on the runway and the nose (with me hanging on for dear life) was about 20 feet in the air. We banged down really hard and I thought for a minute that I had blacked out as my helmet sunshade visor had slammed down on the bridge of my oxygen mask. If you have ever ridden a

mechanical bull in a bar, you know what I mean about a hard landing. To add to the fun, the 5-gallon relief can located behind me in the crawlway had somehow unlatched and bounced/slid back to the rear of the crawlway. I glanced back and fortunately, the Crew Chief had somehow managed to get a wrestler type leg hold around it and kept it from spilling. Boeing never used the word in their Emergency section of the Dash-1, but had General Dynamics written the Dash-1 for the B-47, they surely would have warned that this type of landing would give you “Catastrophic” results.

The Pilots are frantically pumping the brakes and are now screaming back and forth at each other, blaming each other for this controlled (?) series of crashes. Bryan tower interrupted the discussion between these two gentlemen and asked if we needed assistance, (like a wrecker, fire truck, ambulance or perhaps the Base Chaplin).

The Co-pilot stretched the truth and told the tower that everything was under control and everything was just fine. The Pilots somehow managed to stop just a few yards short of the overrun and the tower advised us to turn right on to the last turnoff, which led to the taxiway. Unfortunately, when they brought up the power and started the right turn on the asphalt turnoff, the forward main tires started to skid on the hot slippery asphalt so the pilot applied the brakes and with the weight shifting forward, the front tires proceeded to sink into the hot asphalt of the turnoff which obviously was not stressed for the weight of the B-47. Then, to add to the confusion and dilemma, the Pilot decided to power out and other than making a lot of noise and scaring the hell out of the fire truck crew and “follow me” truck driver, we were stuck with the rear mains on the active and the forward tires stuck in the soft asphalt turnover.

SAC in all of its glory had arrived, Peace Is Our Profession!

Fortunately, the tower realizes what has happened and is diverting the remaining T-Birds into Bergstrom AFB and Randolph AFB, which are just a few miles north and south of Bryan. Two T-Birds were Bingo on fuel and were allowed to land on the runway behind us, before the base was officially closed because of our “Stuck” position half on and half off the runway. Thanks to SAC, the runway was closed for all flying activities for several hours. I am sure this went well with the T-Bird Training Wing Commander.

After completing my “after landing” check list and reinstalling the ejection seat pins, I had my nav briefcase and my overnight bag ready to go, so as the pilots were doing their after landing and shut down checklist, the Crew Chief opened the side hatch, lowered the ladder, climbed to the ground and walked under the aircraft to inspect the forward main gear. I was a few

steps behind him and what a nice surprise as the Base Commander, Pilot School Commander and a handful of Full Colonels were there to greet me, (the lowly Navigator). The greeting party had been out there in the sweltering heat for over an hour and their uniforms were wet with perspiration and they did not appear to be happy campers. They erroneously assumed I was the pilot and all had this “What the hell was you doing?” look on their faces, so after saluting the brass, I announced for all to hear that “I am the Navigator and had nothing to do with that landing!”

The “old” Colonel Base Commander who wore flat wing pilot wings, (no star on top) who was near sighted, took off his glasses, leaned over and looked at the Navigator wings on my flight suit and said “Damn!” The others, (all pilots) shook their heads in disgust, as I was probably the only Navigator on the base and having to deal with a wise A__ Navigator at a time like this didn’t really make their day. When the two pilots finally climbed down the ladder, I was already in the crew truck and figured it was prudent to keep out of it and let the pilots tell their own story using pilot talk, which is similar to “Fishermen” talk.

Saturday briefing for the Student Pilots in the Base theatre was a fiasco with questions like: “Was that a normal landing?” or “Do you usually make that many approaches before you land? or “How long do you have to stay in SAC?” With most of these Student Pilots aspiring to be “Fighter Jocks”, I am sure our visit to Bryan set back the relationship with Training Command and SAC several years. Before going on stage, my AC had advised me not to answer any questions and to “keep my mouth shut”, so when one of the young students ask me if I was one of those “Triple Headed Monsters” I couldn’t pass this one up so my answer was simply “NO, they were flying the airplane.”

With the help of Base Civil Engineers, some huge planks and a lot of tugging, they finally backed the airplane back on the hard surface runway and tugged it down to a concrete crossover where it was finally tugged off the main runway. SAC flew in a recovery team from Barksdale AFB to repair the hydraulic seals on the front mains and make a general inspection of the airframe. The “Yaw” string has somehow disconnected (wonder why) and one of the mechanics fell off the airplane trying to connect another one, fortunately he was not seriously injured. After spending a week in the heat of College Station Texas, with the Pilots taking flak from the Bryan personnel every day, we were finally able to recover the airplane and fly it back to Mac Dill early Saturday morning.

The not to bright person at SAC who had dreamed up this fiasco had overlooked the fact that the B-47 needed a longer runway with the daytime temperatures of the runway well over 100 degrees. We had to wait until the

runway temperature at Bryan was the coolest which was around 2 AM, so with minimum fuel weight on board, we somehow managed to get it off the ground without taking out the strobe lights placed in the overrun. Since we landed back at Mac Dill early Saturday morning, it is a good possibility that the AC went from debriefing direct to the Command Post, looking for another “Brownie Point” mission.

Fortunately, I wasn’t asked to attend the “Special” debriefing that Col. McCoy had with the pilots, but I am sure that it was really as hot as the runway temperature at Bryan.

After all, I wasn’t invited because “I was just the Navigator and had nothing to do with the landing!”

P.S. Never did get that coveted “Spot” promotion, wonder why?

The author: A WW-2 veteran, served as Nose Nav/Bombardier in RB-26s in 12th TAC Recon. Squadron, / 67th Tac Recon. Wing, Korea. After flying 50 missions, he was assigned to 367BS/306th BW for 4 years in B-47s as Navigator. Was selected as first B-47 Nav. to be assigned to B-52s in 364thBS/99th B.W. Heavy. After 5 years as a Radar-Nav on B-52s was first B-52 Radar-Nav to be selected for Worlds First Supersonic Bomber, the B-58 “Hustler”. During 9 year tour in B-58s (43rd B.W.) served as Select Crew Member, Chief of Navigator training in the B-58 CCTS and then was Chief of Navigation for 43rd B.W. as well as Chief of Navigation for 43rd Air Refueling Squadron (KC 135s). When the B-58s were retired, his final U.S.A.F. assignment was Chief of Navigation in the 14th S.O.S., a C-119K Gunship Squadron in Vietnam.