

B-36: Six Churning and Four Burning Part II

One morning in the spring of 1952, I was sitting in my office, fat dumb and happy, minding my own business. I was commanding the 22nd Bomb Wing at March AFB, equipped with B-29s. We had just gone through the organizational shake-up in SAC which changed groups to wings and wings to air divisions, so I'd just been upgraded from group commander to wing commander without having to make a move. The phone rang and it was the Commander of the 15th Air Force, General Emmett "Rosie" O'Donnell, and he told me that I'd been goofing off in the 22nd for long enough. After a six month sabbatical as his director of operations in 15th, he sent me up to Fairchild AFB, Spokane, Washington, to meet the most amazing airplane of it's time and some of the finest guys I have ever known, as commander of the 92nd Bombardment Wing.

First, I should orient this story in time. During those years, as I previously mentioned, there was no operational air-to-air refueling. Also, there were no SAMs. They didn't come into the picture until Garry Powers was shot down in his U-2 over Russia several years later. Our only concerns were flak and fighters. And there were no ICBMs. They didn't rear their heads until around 1960 and ballistic missile submarines with their SLBMs were in the future too. These two weapon systems put SAC in a 15 minute alert posture with one third of the force living around the clock in the alert building at the end of the runway, waiting for the sound of the klaxon, after which the magazine is named.

In the early '50s, our threat was from Soviet bombers and the DEW (Distant Early Warning) line gave us

about an hours warning. We felt we would have several days of strategic warning, in which to shape up and we could look for the one-hour DEW line warning to give us time to get the strike force off the ground.

It's also appropriate to point out that the nose hangars that later appeared along the Fairchild taxiways didn't exist in the early '50s. There was one big hangar that would accept a few B-36s when undergoing major inspections. For all intent and purpose, maintenance was performed outdoors and in that part of the world, the winters were cold and long and the snow could get very deep. The ground support team in the 92nd did a magnificent job under the toughest of conditions. I bought myself a motorcycle, so I could get around the field during the day and talk to the crew chiefs, but in the winter, it was a cold ride and every so often I'd hit a slick spot on the ramp or a snowbank that was a tad too deep. It was a sporty course on those short, cold winter days and long, cold winter nights. In the summer, it was a breeze.

Getting our big birds into commission was no small task and when they came into commission, we wanted to get them into the air as soon as we could and keep them there as long as possible. Flight line maintenance was an around-the-clock affair and when an airplane was programmed to be flyable, it was scheduled in a matter of hours. This meant that a training mission could be launched at any hour of the day or night. Clearances with FAA were no problem. In those days, there were no such things as commercial passenger jets. The sky above 35,000 feet belonged to SAC and FAA left us pretty much alone. The average train-

Continued from Sept. 1998 issue

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ing missions was 26 to 28 hours. In order to get the most out of a flight, one complete crew would fly and the primary members of another crew, consisting of 3 observers, 2 pilots and a flight engineer, would also be aboard. The time was spending hitting one RBS site after another, with precision navigation legs in-between.

Far too frequently, Fairchild would be socked in at recovery time and the airplane would have to land away from home. An effort was made to land at Ellsworth or Travis or somewhere where B-36 maintenance was available and if possible, they'd try to get in another 26-hour training mission on the way home. Such was life on the cutting edge of deterrence.

But training missions were child's play. Our real life revolved around the mission that was assigned to us under the SAC WAR Plan. Being located in the northwestern corner of the United States, our targets were in Asiatic Russia. Our routes took us north across Alaska and Canada, passing fairly close to the North pole and approaching Siberia from across the ice cap. Crews hitting targets in the maritime provinces could recover, post-strike, back in Fairchild. Those hitting targets in central Siberia were scheduled to recover in Okinawa, pick up a load of fuel and head for home.

Crews lived with their war-plan targets, night and day. We had a schedule which required each of our 30 crews to brief me in detail on their missions. To a man, they were confident that their low altitude approach would provide the Soviets minimum warning time, that their maximum climb to their bombing altitude of

Continued on page 14

above 40,000 feet would place them above flak and the effective operational envelope of the latest Soviet fighters and that they would be able to find and to hit their assigned target. When I briefed General LeMay, as every wing commander was required to do each year, as to how their unit would execute their part of the SAC War Plan, I reflected the confidence of my crews. My briefing would elicit one of the famous LeMay grunts, which told me quite clearly, "That sounds OK. Now get on back to your base and get to work."

Our B-36s were constantly undergoing a series of modifications, in which they would be cycled back through the Convair plant at Carswell to do the work. Two of these mod programs are memorable. One was the Crew Comfort Mod and the other was the Featherweight Mod. It had been recognized that an awful lot of crew members were being squeezed into the interiors of the B-36s for ungodly long hours and their lives should be made as comfortable as possible. The Crew Comfort Mod installed a few bunks in various places so off-duty crewmembers could actually get a little sleep. Very fancy electric johns were included, as well as an electric oven that could turn a prepackaged tray of food into a gourmet meal. The third pilot on each crew, formerly the officer in charge of in-flight lunches, was promoted to stovemaster.

In the meantime, it had been determined that if the B-36s were stripped down to the bare essentials, they

could operate at altitudes of around 50,000 feet, which would put them essentially outside of the operating envelope of the best Soviet fighter of the day, the MiG-19. These two mod programs ran concurrently and we continued to ship airplanes off to be beefed up as well as stripped down. It was suggested, in jest, that money could be saved by combining the two mod programs, adding the goodies in the first half of the mod line and stripping them out in the last half.

The highlight of 1953 for the 92nd was the SAC Bombing Competition. I selected the crews commanded by Lt. Col. Milton Green and Maj. Harvey Downs to represent the Win and we took off in high hopes for Walker AFB in New Mexico, from where the B-36s were to stage. The two crews performed superbly. When Col. Green landed from his final mission, I yelled, "How did it go, Milt?" as he climbed down the ladder. He yelled back, "Six churning and four burning, Col. Jim, and I think we maxed the course." He was precisely right. Both crews did exactly that. Besides winning the Fairchild Trophy, they won 6 out of the 8 other major awards. It took two B-36s to haul all the trophies home. Since the SAC Bombing Competition was started in 1948, this was the first time for a B-36 to win.

Almost as an afterthought, in December of 1953, we received word that my promotion to temporary brigadier general had come through. There was no question that the troops of the 22nd and the 92nd Bomb Wings had done it for me. I couldn't have been more proud – or more grateful.