

B-36: Six Churning and Four Burning

Part III

By James V. Edmundson

One mission flown by the 92nd Wing while I was there is still fresh in my mind. The operation was planned by SAC Headquarters but I can not recall its name. To appreciate this mission, one needs to remember the utter realism with which General LeMay evaluated the units under his command.

I launched in the lead plane in a 15 ship effort at 4:00AM, climbed to altitude and headed for Davis-Monthan AFB in Tucson, Arizona. I picked up a block clearance from FAA and we established a bomber stream, using radar station keeping with each B-36 tracking the airplane ahead of him and staying about 100 feet above him and about half a mile behind. When we arrived in the Tucson area, I checked in with approach control and the tower for landing permission for the flight at Davis-Monthan and closed out our flight plan with FAA. We set up a pattern to bring the flight in to land at 3 minute intervals. As each B-36 coming in on his final approach reached 500 feet, they retracted the flaps, sucked up the gear, poured on some power and headed for Mexico at 500 feet altitude. We were on radio silence for the rest of the mission. As far as FAA knew, we were on the ground at D.M. SAC had placed a trusted agent in the tower at D.M. who knew what was going on. Sneaky bunch that we were, we were on our way.

We flew about 300 miles into Mexico to avoid ADC (Air Defense Command) radar and then headed north, still in a bomber stream and flying at 1,000 feet. We headed northerly all day long and about 10:00 that night we were off the coast of Vancouver Island. At that point, we lit up the jets, turned southeast toward the United States and began a max climb to 40,000 feet. We assumed a spread formation, with radar station keeping, remained under radio silence and turned off our running lights.

When we began showing up on the ADC radar screens, they were sure the Russians were coming. SAC had also placed a trusted agent in the ADC Command Post, who announced, "These are not Russians, they are B-36s. Go see what you can do about it". When we hit our pre-IP, each of the B-36s went after his assigned target. We hit Seattle, Bremerton, Renton, Tacoma, Portland, and a lot of other places. Our lead crew bombed Hanford and after bombs away, I went on the radio, told everyone to turn on their lights and contacted FAA for

descent clearance for the flight back to Fairchild.

It was a pretty good mission. We hit all of our targets and nobody laid a glove on us. ADC was mad as hell, but I'm sure General LeMay was chuckling. He'd found out what he wanted to know about one of his units.

Operation "Big Stick" was one of the most unusual missions we flew in 92nd. In August, 1953, negotiations were underway for the ending of the Korean War and nobody trusted the North Koreans. It was decided to send 20 B-36s to the Far East with atomic weapons on board, to be sitting on the alert on Okinawa, in case they were needed. "Big Stick" was an appropriate name for the operation.

I took off with 17 airplanes for Eielson AFB in Alaska. We were not loaded with complete atomic weapons, but only the outside shell, or the "shape". Nuclear inserts could be added later. There were not the correct shapes available at Fairchild for the three airplanes and the plan was for them to join us enroute. We took off from Eielson with 17 B-36s late the next afternoon and headed for Attu at the end of the Aleutian chain, where we were to rendezvous with the three planes taking off from Fairchild. When we made radio contact with them I found that there were six ships instead of three, so we had some airborne spares. We were all milling around over Attu at staggered altitudes in the middle of a black night and I had to decide which 20 were going on to Okinawa and which 3 were going on back to Fairchild. I called on the radio, "This is Big Stick One. Check in by the numbers with your fuel state and mechanical status, and don't give me any of that six churning and four burning business. I know your jets are shut down and I want to know how many fans you have feathered and why." It was like pulling teeth to get what I wanted to know, but eventually we decided on the three losers and pointed them toward home. The remaining 20 of us quit circling and headed for Okinawa.

I was flying with Lt. Col. Granville (Granny) Wright and his crew and we were the first to land on Kadena Air Base on Okinawa. General Walter C. (Cam) Sweeney, Commander of the 15th Air Force and "Big Stick" Task Force Commander, was there to meet us. We watched together as the rest of my 20-ship flight arrived, one at a time, made a low pass over the field and circled into a landing pattern. Nearly everyone buzzed in with at least one prop feathered, which concerned General Sweeney, and when one came in with three feathered, the General

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became quite upset. I said, "General, I've been in radio contact with all of them ever since we left Attu. Nobody has any serious problems. Most of the engines are shut down because of low oil. That last guy was just showing off. You noticed that his jets were at idle, just in case he needed them. When he pulls up and comes in to land, he'll have six churning and four burning." General Sweeney looked at me kind of funny for a minute. Then he broke into a smile and said, "Eddie, you B-36 guys are all a little bit crazy – but I love you anyway."

We sat on the alert on Okinawa for about 10 days in all our atomic splendor. The peace treaty got signed successfully up in Korea, "Big Stick" was declared concluded and we took off for Fairchild like a flight of ten engined geese. The 92nd was later given the Outstanding Unit Award for "Big Stick". It was a one-of-a-kind operation.

In March of 1954, General Dave Wade was transferred to Topeka and I assumed command of the 57th Air Division. It wasn't as much fun as running the 92nd, but I had an opportunity to fly with the 99th Reconnaissance Wing quite a bit and I acquired a world of respect for the tremendous photographic and electronic reconnaissance capability of this outfit. Early in 1955, General Sweeney called me on the phone and said "Eddie, you've had it too good up there with all those engines and those big crews to take care of you. I'm going to send you to the B-47 Air Division at Tucson and see if you can cut it

with only six throttles and three man crews." This brought to an end a wonderful three years with some magnificent airplanes and a bunch of the finest people on earth.

When I was first assigned to the 92nd, I realized that I had 30 crews of 14 guys each that I had to know in a hurry. Having just left the 22nd where I knew everybody, the task of getting to know all my new crews seemed awesome. I made a big chart that covered one whole wall of my office, scheduled all the crews through the photo lab and had their pictures mounted on my wall chart. Whenever I had a spare moment, I studied those pictures. It didn't take long. Today, I still remember most of them.

Twenty-two years ago, I hung up my blue suite and we retired to Longboat Key, a lovely little island off the West Coast of Florida. It takes some adjustments, but we kept busy and made a lot of friends. I even served a tour as mayor. This is the kind of a place where people greet each other warmly when they run into each other. As I get around, I often hear, "Hi General Jim. How are you doing this lovely day?" Not often, but every once in a while, I will slip up and answer, "Six churning and four burning," before I can stop myself. I'm sure people think that the old geezer has spent too many hours at altitude breathing through an oxygen mask, but so it goes. As I said at the beginning, those amazing B-36s left their mark on the guys who were lucky enough to fly them.