**Army Special Activities Detachment One & the Navy EA3B Skywarrior**

This is a tale about a very small Army group that officially didn’t exist for several years. The story is the best that I can piece together from many sources and may have some errors but I believe is essentially accurate. In some cases I have had to read between the lines to figure out what was really or probably going on. It has only been in the last couple of years with recent books and the Internet that my research has been possible.

Background

I have heard from several sources that in the late 1950’s there was a small Army group flying with Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadron (VQ-1). I don’t know what their mission was but understand that they flew in P4M’s. I had contact with a Navy guy who indicated they flew out of Shemya Alaska. In the early 1960’s there was intense interest by our government in Soviet missile development. At that time, the Air Force had primary focus on Air to Air and Air to Ground missiles. The Navy’s primary responsibility was to study Ship to Ship missiles and likewise the Army had the primary mission to study Ground to Ground Missiles.

“The Soviet ICBM test project involved launching missiles from Plesetsk (1), Kapustin Yar (2) and Tyuratam / Baikonur (3). When the missile's re-entry vehicle (RV) entered the atmosphere and streaked toward the Klyuchi test range(4) on Kamchatka the peninsula on the Far Eastern edge of the Soviet Union. [1]” Someone had to be there to watch.”

The U.S. ICBM program was just being deployed, over flight reconnaissance was severely restricted with the successful introduction of Soviet Surface to Air missiles (SAM), and our early surveillance satellites could not loiter over a particular area. The Russian ICBM project was of particular interest to the United States. The Army needed a high altitude platform to collect optical and telemetry information. A jurisdictional disagreement between the Army and Air Force resulted in the Army teaming up with the Navy. The Navy agreed to provide, maintain and fly a high altitude platform while the Army would provide the Intelligence gathering, analysis, equipment and back end crew. The chosen platform was the A3D-2Q Skywarrior later redesignated the EA3B.

(EA3B PR-9 later redesignated PR-16 and PR-10 of Navy Squadron VQ-1)

The EA3B was an unarmed ECM/reconnaissance variant of the A3D carrier based nuclear bomber. A total of 24 of the variant were built.

The Mission from 1961-1964

In 1961, a Navy flight crew from Fleet Air Reconnaissance Squadron One (VQ-1) flew PR-9 to the States for installation of Army optical and telemetry gathering equipment. It became a one-of-a-kind bird. The first Army group assigned to the project flew missions in 1961 & 1962. They flew out of Shemya Air Force Base in the Aleutian Islands. I joined the group in 1963 as part of the 2nd group to work the mission. By then a second aircraft (PR-10) had been fitted with optical and telemetry gathering equipment although without the sophisticated antenna array as on PR-9. Our two aircraft were known as Sun-1 (PR-9 BuNo 146449) and Sun-2 (PR-10 BuNo 144854). During the spring of 1964 our Army group was formally identified as Special Activities Detachment One (SAD 1). Prior to that we did not have a formal name and I did not know our chain of command beyond our Army Captain. A second Army group identified as SAD-2 flew in a similar Army/Navy arrangement with VQ-2 in Turkey. The back end crew consisted of 4 enlisted Army men who included an analyst, two radio intercept operators and an optical recording operator. Sometimes a position would be manned by our Army Captain or Lieutenant.

The optical equipment consisted of an ultra sensitive TV camera that was aimed by the Navy plane captain who sat behind the pilot. A conventional film movie camera that was pointed at a video display then recorded the closed circuit TV system. You can see the film canister in the background of the interior picture above

The Navy navigator did the actual navigation while we were traveling at 500+ knots. Without radar and in radio silence this was a challenging assignment given the state of navigational aids of the era. We had a Nikon 35mm camera with motor drive taking star pictures during the event. The Naval Observatory would later figure out where we actually had been. At times they came back with a report that we were not where we thought we had been.

In the winter of 1964 we received one of the first airborne Loran receivers available which was installed at the analyst position. I was sent to the Loran school at the Pearl Harbor Submarine base. There were many very nice and very curious submariners in my class. On our first flight with it, I noted that we made an inappropriate turn and accidentally flew over an island with a known Russian SAM site. The navigator didn’t appreciate my pointing that out since he was still using the much more primitive methods.

The nature of the mission required us to be scramble ready much of the time. We had very short notice to be on station off the Kamchatka Peninsula. Inevitable last minute ICBM launch delays often required in-flight refueling on our part. We flew summer missions out of Shemya AFB at the end of the Aleutian Islands. The weather and cross winds precluded working there in the winter. The EA3B was designed for carrier landings and with the large tail plus the narrow main landing gear it was limited to cross winds of less than 25 kts. The standard Navy response was to turn the runway into the wind. We couldn’t get the Air Force to rotate their runway to meet our needs.

At times the winds would exceed the landing parameters while we were out on station. The nearest alternate landing site was 300 miles away at Adak. Additionally, we might not always have enough fuel to go on that far. We positioned a destroyer anchor chain down each side of the only runway and connected them with a cable. When needed, the cable could be propped up on a couple of old tires that had been cut in half and we would catch it with the tail hook. We would stop in very short order while making a spectacular show of sparks at night. The Air Force was really not too keen on that arrangement. I think they were really jealous that they couldn’t use it.

The seas around Shemya are so bad that there were no boats of any kind on the island. If we happened to go down off the end of the runway, there was no way to get to us so we just flew in light cotton summer flying suits. I understand that the guys after us had to follow regulations and get into cold weather “poopy suits”. I don’t think it would have done them much good since the nearest rescue plane was a Navy amphibious Albatross that would have had to lumber out from Adak. By the time it would have gotten to them the cold water would have taken its toll.

At the end of each mission, I took the tapes to the Army Air Force Joint Operations Group (AAFJOG) for post analysis. The guys there were always very helpful while also questioning our sanity as they had watched the mission with their “over the horizon” radar. A special Air Force plane was sent to carry the tapes and films to the NSA for further analysis after each of our flights.

I recently received the following from one of the guys that worked in AAFJOG on Shemya.

Knowing the survival potential in a ditching situation (or worse) for a Bering Sea or North Pacific region...having jumped into freezing water myself (once was more than enough to have a thousand needles almost stop your heart)...it takes tremendous courage to volunteer to fly that "then, potentially hostile" area off Kamchatka, and to do the hard take-off and landings dictated by that airfield on that speck of an island. I remember the alarms going off for the air crew alerts while sitting in the Mess Hall at Shemya, and laughing at the guys tripping over chairs and each other to get out the door for the ride to the air strip. Never appreciated at that age what was really being asked of those guys. We should have stood and saluted them, or cheered them on. They must have thought we were idiot "ground pounders." REMFs[2], to say the least. I learned a saying later, "You gotta love it." Several years later, we started modifying that saying to, "You don't gotta love it, you just gotta do it."

In the winter we flew missions out of Barber’s Point NAS in Hawaii and Midway Island to cover the Russian Pacific missile range. Ground based listening stations in Europe and Asia would alert us as to when to fly.

We maintained complete radio silence from takeoff to landing. I attended the Navy Radio Code School in Yokohama, Japan to learn the first 10 letters of Morse code. Again, confused and curious sailors were very nice to me. I received the coded instruction giving us mission instructions, which kept me busy the entire flight.

During this early period, the Air Force was developing their RC-135 aircraft known as Rivet Ball. I had a chance to tour it while on Shemya and it was very impressive. From what I can determine, as soon as they solved initial video calibration and tracking problems, they took over the optical portion of our mission. Rivet Ball had 10 cameras that looked through optically clear windows. That had to be much better than our single camera looking through a Plexiglas cockpit window. Their all officer crew was shocked when one night at the chow hall, they realized that very junior Army enlisted men were crewing in the back of the A3’s.

In 1965 the optical equipment was removed from PR-9. Updated telemetry receiving equipment was installed. The project then took on the name of Seabrine. As time passed, 1st SAD crewmembers were awarded Army & Navy aircrew wings, some even earned membership in the Navy Tailhook Society for landing and launching off of carriers. They continued the mission until 1972 with service in the Pacific and Indian oceans. In 1969, the Air Force RC 135 aircraft disappeared on a flight from Shemya AFB to Eielson AFB. The following comment is from the Air Force Rivet Ball web site and confirms the importance of the mission and the Army/Navy involvement.

“The loss of Rivet Ball, Rivet Amber and 19 crewmembers in 1969 was devastating for all concerned. It was also a severe setback to our intelligence network and its ability to monitor the Soviet missile threat. The need for a replacement was of the highest priority. The Air Force worked 24/7 on two replacement aircraft (RC-135S) named Cobra Ball I and Cobra Ball II. While Cobra Ball was under construction the Army (SAD-I) and Navy (VQ-I) returned with their EA-3B Skywarrior ("The Whale") to help cover the gap until Cobra Ball was up and running.”[4]

None of this story would have been possible without the dedication of hundreds of the very best and dedicated Navy enlisted ground crews. They kept our birds flying while stationed thousands of miles from their squadron support and worked in cold and windy conditions at all hours of the day and night. The Navy pilots were absolutely first class senior officers, with hundreds of hours. They always brought us back safely. I am humbled at the amount of support that was required to get a plane with 4 Army personnel safely into position to accomplish the mission.



(Back row) Dennis Nowicki, Terry O’Brien, Frank Rodman, Bill Crane. (Front row) Jim Metz, Billy Green, Gene Thomas

These are the guys I spent most of my time with.

Bill Crane