VQ-1 1968-1971

By CAPT Doug Sherburne, USN (Ret)

In the Spring 2003 VQ News Letter, Captain Sid Wood authored a very interesting, memory jogging account of his Vietnam era recollections and experiences in VQ-1 while he was serving as Squadron Intelligence Officer from February 1965 to February 1968. This article continues the VQ-1 story based on my own 38-year-old recollections of squadron operations in the period immediately following Sid's tenure.

I arrived in Atsugi in late January 1968 as relief for Sid and served as Intelligence Officer (N2) from February of that year until July 1971 when CDR Vern Harkins relieved me, just as the squadron was making the move to NAS Agana, Guam.

I knew in advance that replacing Sid would be tough! As a LT, I had relieved him in early 1963 as the only Intelligence Specialist (1630) assigned to COMPHIBGRU ONE/CTF 76, then homeported at Subic Bay. I realized from that experience that he was always at the top of his game and was very clearly one of the front-running Intelligence Specialists of his day. Stepping into his shoes at VQ-1 would be especially difficult for me since I did not speak "electronic warfare" very well in early 1968 and had no prior experience with an aviation squadron of any kind, let alone one with the unusual culture of the VQ community. At that time there were only two squadrons - VQ-1 and sister squadron VQ-2 at Rota. Fortunately for me, LTs Tom Holt and Tom Kumpf were still on board for the initial months of my assignment and had several years experience with the squadron. They carried the load while I struggled to get up to speed, a period which seemed to take more months than it should have.

The CO at that time was CAPT Bob de Lorenzi, an A3 VAH pilot who had assumed command about one month before I arrived. The XO was CDR Marv Duke, who came out of the EC-121 WV community. My initial introduction to the squadron was eased somewhat by the fact that I had met and talked in some depth to CAPT de Lorenzi in late 1967 while he was in Washington DC on a pre-command orientation visit.

The day I walked in the door in late January, the squadron was deeply involved in the planning for potential Seventh Fleet reaction to the North Korean seizure of the USS Pueblo (AGER-2), which took place on 23 January 1968. Although no military reaction to this incident was ultimately taken by the U.S., I recall that the squadron was fully involved in numerous "what if" drills, directed contingency planning and internal planning in preparation for whatever actions might be directed by higher authority. The squadron was operating at a 110% effort from Day 1 and never seemed to slow down for the entire time I was there.

EC-121M and EA-3B operations from Danang were the focus of the squadron's Southeast Asia mission when I arrived. The EA-3B Detachments flying off various Gulf of Tonkin carriers and from NAS Cubi Point had just about ceased at that time as it seemed to be the consensus of the CVA community that the Whales took up too much deck space and maintenance effort aboard - space that was badly needed by the Attack and Fighter communities to maximize their own operations over North Vietnam.

Sherburne, Holt, and Kumpf continued the same one-in-three Det Intelligence Officer rotation to Danang for about the next year or so. As the latter two officers rotated out of the squadron, other 1350/1630/1610/1320 officers were assigned to N2 and joined into the Danang rotation, supporting multiple EC-121M and EA-3B aircraft now executing the threat warning mission. Chuck Mills, Dave Herrington, Jimmy Goldsmith, Andy McPherson, Roy Scherrer and Wes Riley are those that I remember best. EA-3B missions were also expanded to tracks over Laos, in effect, looking at North Vietnamese electronic targets in the west from a different angle than missions flown over the Gulf of Tonkin. For most of my time, 24/7 GOT coverage was the squadron goal using combinations of EC-121M and EA-3B aircraft based in Danang. The first EP-3B arrived in March 1969 and expanded the squadron's effectiveness with its higher altitude capability, longer legs and increased payload capability. Other technical and operational improvements and tweaks were made during these years but the general conduct of the Danang-based missions remained pretty much the same as they had evolved in 1966 and 1967 as described in Sid Wood's earlier article.

The 24/7 operations generated around-the-clock mission briefs, debriefs, maintenance, and all the associated activity needed to keep these old aircraft in the air as much as possible. We produced multiple EWORs (Electronic Warfare Operations Reports) per day ASAP after each mission was completed. These were often difficult and time consuming to construct for the EC-121M and EP-3B crews with their multiple SIGINT inputs. My own experience in producing such reporting at NFOIO, Ft. Meade during my prior assignment proved helpful in quickly separating out the wheat from the chaff, doing some very quick-look analysis, and getting the EWOR on the street in time to be of some benefit to CVA mission planners dealing with the next set of strike missions over North Vietnam. Rapid and accurate reporting, in the air and immediately after landing, was refined and streamlined so as to present mission results to operational forces in the most timely fashion.

As I recall, the squadron areas in Danang were hit several times during the periodic nighttime mortar/rocket attacks mounted from outside the perimeter by Viet Cong or North Vietnamese gunners. Normally 122mm rounds were used which packed a considerable explosive charge but were quite difficult to aim at a specific target. I do not recall the specific times that these attacks occurred. I do recall that one round impacted only a few feet from the small wooden Intelligence Office/NSG hut located inside the large USAF Security Service compound where we maintained communications, conducted post-mission debriefs and reporting, and generally ran the intelligence side of the squadron mission. One wall was blown off and the building itself made unusable. Fortunately no one was inside at the time and there were no injuries. Another round or two impacted near the flight line and severely damaged several aircraft. One of the damaged, unflyable EA-3Bs was later loaded aboard USNS Card for transport back to CONUS for repair. Enroute, the ship was hit by severe weather in the Bashi Channel and the EA-3B was lost over the side. Photos covering these events have now been incorporated into the VQ Association photo collection. Additionally, a round impacted near the VQ officers barracks one night. The next morning I found several pieces of shrapnel, which had pierced the plywood wall of my bunkroom and came to rest on the floor. I was luckily not in the rack at the time. Finally, multiple rockets hit the main Danang Ammo Dump one night and the resulting series of massive explosions and overpressure imploded the large USAF Butler Building in which we were then housed (after moving out of the hut). We were later required to crawl into the building on all fours to find desks and evacuate needed materials and equipment to another location. I am not sure whether these attacks all occurred completely separately or were in some way combined. My guess is that they occurred in late 1968 and early 1969.

As CAPT Wood mentioned in his earlier article, some of the strongest performers in the squadron, were the "Mustangs" who not only formed a creative core of new ideas but also acted as "mentors" for many of us who were new to EW and to the VQ community. In my opinion, the chief "Mustang" (even though he was not an official Mustang) was civilian Chuck Christman who headed up the Special Projects Shop, affectionately nicknamed the "Bicycle Shop". Elmer Akerberg, Larry Sharpe, Ralph Hudson and others ably assisted him in those days. In years past, Chuck had been responsible for most all of the major technical modifications that now comprised the EM-121M Big Look mission configuration. This small group of technical wizards, augmented often by the individual flight crew Mustangs, continually came up with improvements and new ways of getting our threat warning and intelligence collection done, efficiently and effectively. The Bicycle Shop functioned 24/7 and it was not unusual for the squadron "staff" to be invited to the shop on a Sunday morning (after reading the daily message boards) to see and discuss the latest antenna modification or black box that these work bench geniuses had created. Some of their ideas did not work, but most did - and those that did were implemented overnight into squadron mission aircraft. Chuck went on every operational test flight himself to ensure that his creations worked and were used properly to enhance mission effectiveness. There was no "higher authority" (except the CO) that he had to check with or obtain permission from. This sort of spontaneous creativity in the technical realm spilled over to the rest of us who were not so technically savvy and resulted in an aggressive, proactive culture in which "nothing was impossible to achieve". A wonderful environment to work in!

For me, the classic Mustang in the squadron in those days was LT Chuck Templin, a highly experienced and highly regarded EC-121M Senior Evaluator. Chuck had already achieved legend status by the time I arrived. But it was one particular GOT mission that achieved for Chuck a very special and everlasting place in the history of the VQ community. On that day he successfully completed, in real time, the necessary in-flight "intelligence fusion" that we all sought, which resulted in the shootdown of at least one and maybe two MIGs that had staged into the southern most North Vietnamese fighter base. I do not recall the time of this mission, but it was so successful that the CO directed that Chuck be nominated for a Distinguished Flying Cross. I was honored to do the award write-up, which was quite challenging since to the best of my recollection, no VQ flight crewmember had, up to then, ever received this prestigious airman's award for Vietnam actions. Higher authority accepted the paperwork description - it worked and Chuck was subsequently awarded his hard-earned and very well deserved DFC. I still believe that he may be the only VQ aviator to have received a DFC for Vietnam.

During those years, the squadron supported two special mission A-3's. The EA-3B Sea Brine aircraft flew special missions in the North Pacific for the national intelligence community and was unique in that the back-enders were U.S. Army. Visitors not already familiar with the mission were usually very surprised to find a small Army Security Agency Det permanently assigned to the squadron. Later, VQ-1 inherited the operation of Seventhflt's only TA-3B VIP transport. The TA-3B presented problems for the flight crews since it was usually not possible to schedule it very far in advance and only certain A-3 pilots were assigned to fly it. Nevertheless, the presence of the TA-3B provided some added measure of high-level visibility, sometimes not necessarily welcomed. I can recall one Danang Det incident when the OIC and I were on standby to meet the TA-3B arriving with CINCPACFLT aboard. The plane landed safely in hard rain but as it entered a taxiway, it slid off the pavement and one wheel got stuck in the mud. The OIC and I were in a carryall in the vicinity waiting to greet CINCPACFLT and transport him to his next destination. When we learned of the slight "accident", we very briefly thought about turning around and returning to the flight line in order to avoid what we expected would be a "4-star ass chewing". We then learned on the radio that the TA-3B had shut down and that CINCPACFLT was debarking the aircraft as it sat stuck in the mud. By the time we reached the scene he was standing next to the aircraft. Contrary to what we expected, CINCPACFLT (an aviator himself) greeted us with a warm friendly smile and words to the effect that he was pleased to be back on solid ground. We never heard another word from anyone about this incident.

As the squadron continued to expand in size, N2 also expanded. The Naval Security Group assigned a Chief Petty Officer full time. CTOC Jack Mirabelli was a very strong leader and quickly began to contribute in many ways well outside his rate. He was of great assistance when the N2 SCIF spaces were expanded and upgraded communications equipment installed. As N2's only Chief, he rode herd on the enlisted men assigned, including a permanently assigned group of CTs from NSGA Kami Seya, who manned the 24/7 communications facilities in Atsugi. This initiative greatly improved the squadron's communications support on the ground. He helped absorb and handle the added administrative workload when the "all cleared crew" concept was put into effect for EC-121M and EP-3B flight crews. YN1 Orville Johnson (YN 2505) carried a tremendous admin workload processing hundreds of SI clearances for squadron flight crew. Later, when planning began for the move to Guam, CTOC Mirabelli took the lead in developing the significantly expanded SCIF and Comm Center, which was eventually built during the spring and summer of 1971. He was a highly respected chief who sometimes flew missions and frequently acted as Squadron Intel Officer when everyone else was deployed, flying or otherwise among the missing.

BREAK POINT In April 1969, EC-121M (PR-21) was shot down by the North Koreans causing an international incident that sent the squadron into a frenzy of activity for what seemed to be six months. This ambush over international waters cost the lives of 31 crewmembers from VQ-1 and NSGA Kami Seya and happened just over one year from the time that the North Koreans seized the USS Pueblo. The details of the shootdown have been studied and reported variously over the years and have been the subject of in-depth articles, written in the wake of the event and thereafter. An article in the Naval Institute Proceedings August 2001 provides an unclassified review of the event. When a VQ-1 EP-3E was forced down by the Chinese several years ago, the 1969 shootdown received renewed media attention. Most of this reporting is readily available to those interested and will not be repeated here.

At the time of the shootdown, I was in Danang on Detachment duty. We got initial word via informal NSG back-channel communications. At first I thought that one of our closest friends who we had sponsored in the squadron, a Willie Victor EWAC, was on the mission. As time passed we received an accurate crew list and found that he was not. Several squadron members on Det, including myself, were immediately flown back to Atsugi to help out in the aftermath of the event.

What followed for the next six months or so was the simultaneous execution of a number of major efforts to which all squadron members contributed:

a. The surviving family members. A massive CACO effort aimed at taking care of the large number of dependents of those VQ flight crew lost. A similar effort was underway at NSGA. I can recall huge emotional meetings of dependents in the Briefing Room located just outside the N2 spaces where the CO/XO, CACOs, Chaplains and surviving family members would gather to deal with the personal and administrative aftermath of the loss. Each survivor family member was forced to deal with their own loss while the squadron in total was consumed by the size and complexity of this very necessary but extremely difficult task.

b. Justification. Responding to a continuing barrage of questions from higher authority, mainly from Hawaii and the Pentagon. The further away from WESTPAC the question originated, the more nonsensical the question got - it seemed to me. We were asked "why were you out there?"..."who authorized that flight"... etc. Often the questioners did not seem to understand that the mission was flown under very strict PARPRO rules, which were approved up the line all the way to the JCS Joint Reconnaissance Center. Over a period of months, I fielded many of these questions myself, either via classified message or secure telephone. My overall impression was that for a short time at least, many of the staff echelons above squadron level, particularly those in Hawaii and Washington DC, were interested in focusing responsibility for the event back down to the squadron level. It seemed to take some time for us to convince many of these distant questioners that we were not out there performing an unauthorized mission on our own.

c. Planning for retaliation. Everyone in the squadron and at NSGA that I talked to wanted the U.S. to retaliate. This same feeling seemed to be present aboard the ships and staffs that happened to be or were moved into the area - a CVBG was enroute Yokosuka for R&R from the GOT when the shootdown occurred and others were later moved into position. In the end, the U.S. decided not to retaliate. The same decision made after the Pueblo seizure, one year prior. But lots of planning and preparation did get done "just in case" some retaliatory action was ordered. The squadron was ready, as it always was, to carry out it own responsibilities if such actions were directed. I certainly understand the political "big picture" reasons at the time why the U.S. did not retaliate then, but it also occurs to me that if we had smacked them hard in the late 1960s, perhaps we would not now be dealing with the North Korean issues that make the news headlines today nearly 40 years later.

d. Return to PARPRO missions. In preparing this article, I read one Internet piece, which reported that the President ordered a return to PARPRO missions a few days after the shootdown. My own recollection is that it took many months for the impact of the event to be absorbed and evaluated by Washington and that PARPRO flights in the SOJ did not resume for many months afterwards and then at a much reduced rate. The first missions flown were escorted by a sky full of South Korea-based USAF fighters, tankers, airborne controller and SAM suppression aircraft that created a very unproductive collection environment for the VQ mission aircraft. The USAF could only sustain this massive support effort for a short period. Gradually missions returned to a more normal operational profile but this also took time. I do not think we ever did return to a pre-shootdown mission posture against the North Koreans.

All four of these major tasks, as well as numerous other related tasks, required an all hands effort and this is where the unique culture and teamwork that characterized VQ-1 in those days showed through clearly. I learned a lot about military professionalism from my squadron mates in those days in the Spring and Summer of 1969 that has stayed with me ever since.

In February 1970, CAPT Chuck Chute, relieved as Commanding Officer and remained as CO until I departed the squadron in the summer of 1971. CAPT Chute and I got along well and we have stayed in touch with he and his wife ever since. He was a golfer and encouraged his officers to play when they could to relieve the stress of the job. I did not play at the time and missed out on a lot of squadron business that was conducted in between shots on the golf links and in the 19th Hole afterwards. One Friday morning at quarters in front of the entire squadron, he presented me with a set of starter clubs and "ordered" me to learn how to use them to get out on the links once in a while.

In March 1970, EC-121M (PR-26) crashed while attempting a three-engine landing at Danang. The aircraft had conducted a PARPRO mission and RON'd in Taiwan on the way to Vietnam for a regularly scheduled deployment. As I recall, the subsequent investigation lead by CDR J D Meyer concluded that the Willie self-initiated a wave-off and was attempting to circle for another approach when it caught a wingtip on a hanger and cartwheeled into the ground. 24 crewmembers were lost in the crash but fortunately 7 survived. The details of this crash have been well documented and may be found on the Internet, including a list of those who perished and those who survived. The loss of these squadron members less than one year after the PR-21 shootdown caused a significant reaction for some in the squadron. However, professionalism quickly took over and the squadron returned to normal operations most impressively. This was my own initial experience with the loss of so many shipmates over such a short period and I was most impressed by the way these losses were absorbed and handled by all and how the squadron maintained mission focus in the aftermath of both of these tragedies.

One of the many characters I recall during those years was LCDR Tony Peltz, a senior EC-121M Evaluator, who later became CO of VQ-2 and CO of the Navy Facility on Diego Garcia. Tony was very personable and immediately upon reporting, turned his Quonset Hut bachelor quarters in Atsugi into an unofficial squadron O' Club nicknamed the Bats Nest. The Bats Nest was open 24/7 while Tony was around and anyone who needed quick refreshment or a place to talk was welcome. The many visitors we entertained from Yokosuka, Hawaii, and Washington DC were all introduced to the Bats Nest during their visits. The informality afforded by this venue provided a very useful location to conduct squadron business any time of the day or night. Many a message was drafted in the Bats Nest; many a squadron decision or policy was hashed out over drinks at the Bats Nest, and many innovative ideas were hatched and refined in this unusually "relaxed" setting where no one was hesitant to chime in with their opinions and ideas. For me, this helped to foster the total "team effort" that characterized the squadron while I was attached.

Another true character from those days was LCDR Terry Cassidy. Terry was a WWII vintage multi-engine patrol pilot who had actually received credit for one Japanese Zero shot down during the later stages of the Navy's operations heading north to Japan. He had flown for Air America in the early 60s as a civilian and then volunteered to return to active duty at an "advanced age" to fly EC-121s for the squadron. Terry was a by-the-book EWAC who was always on schedule. On one PARPRO flight when the assigned NSGA officer was late in arriving, the aircraft took off without him. In another instance, Terry took off without a COMFAIRWESTPAC Staff Officer who was late in arriving for his hitch hiking flight to Danang. After a hurried phone call was made to the squadron duty office from COMFAIRWESTPAC, Terry returned to Atsugi to pick up his passenger only after a direct order from the squadron CO. He had many thousands of flight hours under his belt and I always felt safe in the air with Terry since I knew that there was no in-flight emergency that could occur that he had not already encountered and solved during his long career in the cockpit.

Everyone who reads this article will know or have heard of J D Meyer who headed this organization for many years and who contributed so greatly to the VQ community while on active duty as well as during his post-Navy "retirement" years. When I first met J D, he was a junior LCDR who started, as I recall, as an Assistant Operations Officer. He was dual qualified in both EC-121M and EA-3B aircraft - at the time the only pilot I knew who flew both. Over and above his flying and leadership skills and his previously decorated achievement as a "Cold War" reconnaissance aircraft commander, J D used his moderated but strong and pragmatic approach to bring closer together the EC-121M and EA-3B "unions" (as Sid described them in his earlier article). I think that his presence in the squadron at that time even as a Junior Officer was responsible to a great degree for the squadron cohesion that I felt while I was there. A difficult job at best, when the squadron grew to way beyond 1,000 officers and enlisted!

During my entire time in the squadron and during Sid's tenure before that, VQ-1 worked directly for COMSEVENTHFLT, specifically the Intelligence Officer N2. CAPT Frank Hantz and later CDR Bobby Inman (I think he had that job while still an O-5) were the N2s and Sid, having moved directly to the C7F Staff from his VQ job, was the Squadron Action Officer. This made for a very smooth relationship between the squadron and C7F, as well as for me personally. Both LCDR Wood and CDR Inman had a very high degree of credibility within the C7F staff. CDR Inman's detailed knowledge of the squadron's mission, capabilities, limitations, culture and personalities helped us immensely and repeatedly in our dealings with the staff. Later I am told that VQ-1 was resubordinated under CTF 72, the WESTPAC VP Staff. This proved to be a less enjoyable experience for the squadron old-timers since in those early days, most of the CTF 72 Staff had grown up in the ASW/VP world and did not in all cases have the understanding and appreciation of the unique aspects of the VQ community as might have been desired.

During the last 6-8 months of my extended tour, much time was spent planning the move of the squadron away from the Kanto Plains (Atsugi) in reaction to political pressures from the Japanese government to reduce U.S. military presence there. For a time, we investigated moving north to the USAF Base at Misawa, Japan. But, in the final analysis, the decision was made by higher authority that we were to move back to U.S. territory on Guam, in spite of the fact that it would mean long transit flights from Guam to our operating areas and the retention of a modest size VQ-1 Det at Atsugi. We still were to occupy the same hanger and support spaces in Atsugi but with a smaller number of aircraft and men permanently stationed there. I spent much time in those final months on Guam working on the details of the relocation and in fact was located there in January 1971 when our first daughter was born at Camp Zama Army Hospital. The CO immediately sent an EA-3B to Guam to fly me back to Atsugi and I recall walking into the Maternity Ward at Zama to visit my wife and new daughter dressed in a ratty flight suit that had not been cleaned in many months, if not years. An Army Nurse quickly provided me with a fresh white smock to wear over the flight suit!

1630 CDR Vern Harkins relieved me as Intelligence Officer on Guam in July 1971 in the usual 4-5 day turnover somehow completed in the midst of the chaos of the move. As I recall, Vern's luggage did not get off the airplane with him but instead continued on to Bangkok. So the turnover was also characterized by his need to replenish his wardrobe and track his luggage during the turnover process.

All in all and in spite the trauma caused by the loss of two sets of crewmember squadron mates, my time in VQ-1 was very rewarding, enjoyable and filled with a sense of accomplishment. One of the very best tours in 29 years of active service!

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Note: CAPT J D Meyer, USN (Ret) and LCDR Jack Mirabelli, USN (Ret) contributed to this article.