

“No one knows about Operation Drill Press except those of us who were there! Even the 6994th people knew nothing about who we were or what we did. Nothing was documented. Everyone knows about ARDF, but us ‘permanent TDY’ers’ of Drill Press got no press. Oh well, at least WE know!” – George Hollis

Operation Drill Press By George Hollis

The project was Operation Drill Press (later renamed Sentinel Sara) with two “non-ARDF” EC-47s, tail numbers 680 and 254. The EC-47s were configured for three 292X1s and one 203. While I was at Phu Bai, one of the “old” USAFSS airborne radio maintenance guys happened to mention that the two EC-47s we were flying were the ones that flew “Bluesky” in Korea in the 1950s.

When I arrived at the 6994th in June 1967, I had three days to clear in at Tan Son Nhut and then got TDY orders to Drill Press at Phu Bai. I caught the first IRAN flight to Phu Bai and was essentially TDY my whole tour. I replaced TSgt Fred Sebers (A202) who was borrowed from 6994th SS, Det.1, at Cam Ranh Bay. He went back to “peaceful” Cam Ranh Bay and got critically wounded in a sapper attack at the NCO Club, then died on the Med Evac on the way to Travis AFB.

TSgt Lemuel (Lem) McCullough, an A202, went with me to Phu Bai. He gave me one OJT/orientation flight, and then I was on my own. There were few airborne analysts (A202s) in USAFSS, which made us the “lucky” ones, the few with wings and Air Medals and such. I worked for MSgt “Lefty” Groves, and we all worked for SMSgt Carroll “Chief” Miller who ran the operation out of Than Son Nhut.

The project was a bastard group from the 360th TEWS and the 6994th Security Squadron at Tan Son Nhut. I say “bastard” group because Drill Press, although remotely located, had no designator such as Operational Location, Detachment, or anything. We took off and landed at Hue/Phu Bai and all mission “take” was processed by the Army Security Agency’s (USASA) 509th Radio Research Unit (RRU) at Trai Bac Station, across Highway 1 from the airport. Trai Bac means “Northern-most” in Vietnamese, and when the site was originally built, it was the Northern-Most U.S. Base. We received tech support from the 509th RRU, and we provided direct support to the Marines along the DMZ via secure KY-8.

Most of the 6994th guys were “permanent TDY’ers” and we flew damn near every day. Since the 6994th had no 203s, we got them from the 6988th at Yokota and later the 6990th at Kadena. The 360 Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron (TEWS) front-end flyers (pilot, co-pilot, & flight mech.) usually rotated every 30 days or so (they stayed just long enough to get 20 missions and an Air Medal). One exception was pilot Maj. Roy Gentry. He was also a “permanent TDY’er” for most of his tour and was the Air Force senior ranking officer at Phu Bai. Good guy, too!

When I first got to Phu Bai, we lived on the northern edge just east of the NCO Club. Then we were moved to an abandoned warehouse in the middle of the base. The Army was nice enough to

add a latrine – one urinal, one commode, one sink and one shower (cold water only) for about 36 Air Force pukers. Sucked! In the club one night, we were talking to an Army supply guy and he couldn't believe we didn't have hot water. He said that they had plenty of water heaters and he would get one installed ASAP. Well, time went by and nothing happened. I saw him later and he apologized. As he was in the process of gathering materials, his boss asked him what was up. When he explained what he was doing, the boss said, "F..k 'em, they're Air Force." So occasionally we would get a 6X truck and go to the Sea Bee camp and take "mass" hot showers.

Although the 360th TEWS ARDF navigators had Cat II SCI clearances, Drill Press had no front-enders with clearances. You would think they could figure out what we were up to, but it made for at least one humorous incident. One of the pilots, on his way to the piss tube, was squeezing behind SSgt J.C. McKee (X1) when J.C. was copying some low-level, slow-sending VC op. The pilot looked at me and said, "He sure types slow." It was hard not to bust a gut laughing!

Another not-so-humorous incident happened with a brand new pilot (a Captain) who obviously didn't have a clue as to what we were doing. As the AMS, I had the leeway of extending the mission up to an hour, if necessary. That day, we were scheduled to come off orbit at 1800 hours, but the X1s were busy copying the last sked of the day. The A/C called back and asked if we were ready to go home – to which I replied, "No Sir, not yet. I'll let you know."

Well, five minutes later, he said, "Let's go home." Again I told him we were busy and I would let him know. Shortly, the X1s looked at me and said all the signals were fading out. I looked out the window and, sure enough, we were heading south along the coast to Phu Bai. I called the A/C and asked, "WTFO?!?!?" I reminded him that I had the authority to extend the mission up to an hour, to which he replied, "I don't give a f..k if you're listening to Ho Chi Minh himself, we're going home! If "they" wanted us to stay longer, they would have fraged us to orbit longer!"

When we landed, my normal routine was to get off at ops with the briefcase full of mission stuff, brief the ASA troops who were processing it, then walk to the mess hall. Well, that day I asked one of the X1s to take the briefcase in for me, and I stayed on the crew truck that would take the pilots to the BOQ. When I didn't get out at the mess hall, the captain asked where I was headed. I told him I was going to talk to Maj. Gentry and he was welcome to come along if he wanted.

When I told Maj. Gentry what the captain had said about "not giving a f..k if you're listening to Ho Chi Minh," the major exploded! He turned to the captain and asked him if he had actually said that. The captain shrugged and admitted that, well yeah, he said it. Gentry turned to me, thanked me, and said, "I'll take it from here!"

The next day, the captain apologized profusely, admitted he had had no idea how important what we were doing could be, and turned out to be one of the best pilots we had. I have no idea what Gentry said, but I would have liked to have been a fly on the wall!

Another "true" incident that happened and needs to be mentioned involved the Marine Corp Director of Intelligence in I Corps, a full Colonel whose name escapes me. Our direct liaison with the Marines was a Mustang (prior enlisted) Captain Wayne Mason. Damn good troop! One

day we weather-aborted and Captain Mason invited us over to meet his boss – the Colonel. We walked in and Mason introduced us to the Colonel by name, who shook all our hands. Mason then said, “These are our Drill Press guys.” Well, the Colonel jumped up and said, “Why didn’t you tell me they were Drill Press?” He then shook our hands again, and said, “Guys, we get a good 90% of our usable intelligence from Drill Press!!”

Sometime later, the Colonel asked Captain Mason to invite SMSgt “Chief” Miller up to Phu Bai because he had been told by Capt. Mason that Miller ran the operation. The Colonel told Miller that he had tried to put Drill Press in for a Navy Outstanding Unit Award but since we weren’t a “unit” per se, he would have to put the award in for the whole 6994th SS. He then asked Miller how he felt about that. Miller said words to the effect, “Screw ‘em! They haven’t done a damn thing for Drill Press! How about you just buy us a beer some time?”

I’ve often wondered what the USAFSS command hierarchy would have done to “Chief” Miller if they found out that he turned down the Navy Outstanding Unit Award for the 6994th singlehandedly!

We stayed at sunny Phu Bai until January/February 1968 after Tet ‘68. We then relocated to Pleiku AB because of the lack of security for the aircraft on the ground at Phu Bai. From Pleiku, we flew the same mission, same orbits, but we made ops stops at Phu Bai to drop off the mission “take” for processing by the Army.

As I understand it, after I left in June of 1968, the two Drill Press aircraft were reconfigured and the actual collection mission was incorporated into the ARDF mission. Also, I heard that the A202 Airborne Mission Supervisors (AMS) were faded out and AMS duties were taken over by A292X1s. I can maybe understand A292s taking over as AMSs from the A202s. We had good relations on Drill Press, but when I did fly ARDF there was always a feeling of resentment. Not the everyday ops guys, but the ones in charge.

The Air Force and Vietnam were good for me. In the Air Force I retired at 20 years, 1 month, and 23 days. I went in with High School Diploma, came out with a Master’s Degree, a monthly check, and numerous benefits, and was able to be successful using my education and experience to continue as a systems analyst for 27 more years. Vietnam, thanks to being an Airborne Analyst on flying status, gave me enough awards and decorations and experience to “fast track” promotions to SMSgt (E-8) in 17 years. And Vietnam continues to shower me with benefits. Texas has Military Meritorious Award vehicle license plates and for my awards (DFC & Air Medals) I get free registration and free parking! Life is Great!!!

I’ve said many times, the worst assignment in my Air Force career was Key West, Florida, and the best was Phu Bai, Vietnam!!! And that ain’t no bull shit!!!!

When folks thank me for my service and sacrifice, I tell them, “Please! There was no sacrifice! It was 20 years of fun and adventure, and I’d do it again in a heartbeat – and wish I could!!”