B-57G Redbirds at Ubon RTAFG, Thailand

R.K. Markle with Mike Thorn

R. K. Markle

Michael Thorn

The Mission

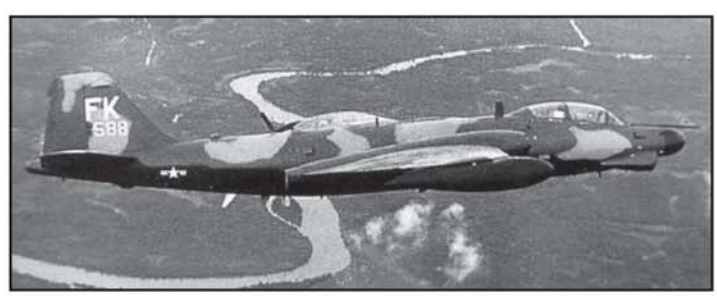
I was not one of the original members deploying with the B-57Gs of the 13th Bomb Squadron to Ubon RTAFB, Thailand. I did not arrive there until January 1971. The originals arrived September 1970. By the time I arrived, the squadron had lost the only aircraft they were going to lose during their deployment (in December 1970). Ironically, the crew of the downed aircraft was the squadron commander and the lead navigator, Lt. Col. Pitt and Lt. Col. Buschette, respectively. Otherwise, the squadron had a remarkable survival rate.

The B-57G was designed to bring effective night interdiction of the enemy supply train to the Vietnam theater in essentially the same manner B-26 squadrons operated in Korea. Although it was the Vietnam War, the B-57G beat was primarily Laos with forays into Cambodia to work with Forward Air Controllers (FACs) during the rainy season. My recollection is that we were prohibited from flying over Vietnam unless we received specific authorization. During my tour, I had only one flight into Vietnam – to support a FAC who had some unfriendlies he wished to annoy – and we received a specific directive to help him out. In Laos, our targets were trucks, boats, other targets of opportunity, as well as, when called upon, support of the FACs.

B-57G to Ubon via Kadena. Paul Pitts photo via Mikesh

The Aircraft and Operations

The B-57G was equipped with a forward looking radar, forward looking infrared detector (FLIR), low light level television, moving target indicator, Doppler navigator, electronic countermeasure fire control radar detector, and a laser for ranging and bomb direction. The standard bomb load was two laser guided 500 pound bombs on the wings and four cluster bombs in the bay. It had a two man crew. Although the pilot had a degree of access to them, the sensor operator really handled all of the electronic gear. At the time, it was the only aircraft in the theater which could both drop and guide its own laser guided bombs. (The F-4s flying out of Ubon also dropped laser guide bombs (LGBs). Theirs were 2000 pounders. Since they had only forward looking sensors, their operation required one aircraft to deliver the bomb and another to stand off to guide it.)



B-57G from Laurin Button

To carry the various sensors, the B-57G was considerably modified from its original aerodynamic configuration. It was given more powerful engines, but even with these, increased drag from the huge radome considerably reduced its flight performance. Compared to its unmodified predecessors, it was a dog. The recce altitude of 5000 feet was considerably lower than optimum for fuel consumption. It had no in-flight refueling capability, so mission time (and, consequently, time on target) was severely limited. Our missions normally were two to three hours with about an hour in the target area. The sensor range was limited. Often, by the time a target was spotted, we were past bomb release point, and I could

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not find the target when we returned. The moving target indicator was a dead loss. The ECM gear was nice, but unnecessary. If there were any radar directed weapons in the parts of Laos we patrolled, none of them ever lined up on any of aircraft in which I flew. I was told sensor maintenance was difficult. But, other than the MTI, in 140 missions, I never had a sensor fail, never came to the aircraft to find it was not ready because of an aircraft or equipment problem. Further, I was told the laser guided bombs had a failure rate of three percent. I bettered that average. Every bomb I dropped guided successfully. Our ground crews were absolutely fantastic. Whatever shortcomings our equipment had, those people were up to taking care of it.

B-57G from Robert Mikesh

Combining both dropping and guiding the bomb required some doing. The problem we had was that the bomb lagged the aircraft and, in level flight, the sensors could not look back far enough to follow it to impact. This precluded holding the laser on target to complete the strike. Our normal recce altitude was 5000 feet at airspeed of about 200 knots. (The combination of low altitude and airspeed created an interesting dynamic when under ground fire – a not uncommon event in some areas. To avoid taking a hit, it was often necessary to dive into the fire to have sufficient speed and flight authority to take evasive action.) To be effectively guided, the bomb's control surfaces required release at a speed greater than 250 knots. The solution was for the sensor operator to acquire the target and notify the pilot, who would then shove the power forward to reach an airspeed above 250 knots. At bombs away, he would yank back the power and the stick, creating a climb and inevitable stall. When the aircraft pitched nose down, the sensors could look far enough to the rear long enough to guide and follow the bomb drop through impact while maintaining laser direction during stall recovery. Not elegant, but it worked!

Teamwork with the AC-130

The AC-130 Specter aircraft preceded the B-57G into the theater. The Specters were also based at Ubon and had the same sensors as the B-57G. A major difference between the two aircraft was that the Specters had one crew member assigned to each sensor – that is, they had a Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) operator, a radar man, a low light television guy, an Old Crow (ECM) operator, and a navigator. In addition, they had a tape recorder aboard taping the outputs of all these things, also with its own operator. Another difference, where the B-57G ordnance was bombs, the Specs had side firing 20 and 40mm cannons, effective weapons, but not so destructive as the 500 pound bombs the B-57G toted. The Specs also had a 105mm howitzer on board, but it suffered from a lack of accuracy. They also had a laser ranger which could be used for bomb guidance. As opposed to the B-57Gs, the Specs had five to seven guys aboard doing what the one guy in the back seat of the B-57G handled by himself. You could make the argument that, with their additional sets of eyes they might very well do a better job of finding targets. They flew higher (9000 feet), and slower than the B-57. (Some suggested that the reason for the higher altitude was the Air Force was a bit more concerned about ground fire they might receive at a lower level where they would be even less able to take evasive action than we could in the B-57G.) When they found a target, they could circle it and keep it in sight rather than overfly and possibly lose it when they returned.

C-130 Spectre Gunship

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While he may not have been the first to whom the idea occurred that perhaps the Specs and the Red Birds (Red Bird was the call sign of the B-57Gs of the squadron) could usefully team up, the Birds supplying the bombs and the Specs the guidance, Mike Thorn, the junior pilot in the squadron, was the first to take any action to do something about it. The AC-130s carried an ultraviolet light generator, which emitted a light that was, presumably, invisible to folks on the ground but lit up the countryside pretty well for the low light sensors aboard the aircraft. It also showed up well on the low light scopes of the B-57G. Mike figured there might be a way to use it for Spec-Red Bird truck bombing. He and I discussed it. I was interested, so I got myself scheduled to fly with the Specs to see how they operated. (To Lt. Col. Strain, our ops officer, flying with the Specs was like "practicing giving blood"!) My sortie with them convinced me there were no obstacles to crew cooperation. We all talked the same language and had the same goals.

Mike also flew with the Specs on several occasions to get the pilot's point of view, but did not enjoy it very much. Being a typical jet pilot, he was not accustomed to the thrumming and throbbing of the four propellers on the AC-130 and, to make matters worse, could not see outside the aircraft. So, to avoid being airsick, he joined the young airman hanging out the back of the aircraft to get some fresh air. The airman's job was to watch for ground fire; Mike's aim was to just avoid losing his lunch. He did pretty well at that until he realized that he was hanging out over open space but was not tied in any manner to the aircraft!!! The second time he flew with the Specs, he fared no better in the area of airsickness, but made sure he was tied to the aircraft. Unfortunately, the metal container on which he was leaning was a flare box, a fact he did not realize until flares went shooting out of his armpit!!! He decided that two rides had provided all the information and experience he needed to know.)

Mike worked out a routine he thought would work. We discussed it, and he coordinated it with a Spec buddy of his. So, one night, although he and I were not a designated crew, I found myself flying with him over Laos. Through some witchery (or Mike's devious finagling with the schedulers) Mike's buddy was flying a Spec that same night in the same general area. He called us to say he had a hard target, wanted some help, and gave us coordinates. I slapped them into the Doppler, and we headed in.

Approaching the point we asked Spec to "sparkle." Sure enough, a huge bright spot appeared on my low light screen. At the same time, the Spec fired 20mm tracer rounds at the target, providing a visual reference for the pilot. Mike shoved the power forward; I lined up the cross hairs on the middle of the light spot, set the bomb switches, and gave Spec a count down to bombs away. I never saw the target. It was that simple. Mike and I then went back to normal road watching. Later, the next day, Mike went to the Spec debrief. They showed him the tape playback of the destruction of a road grader with a bomb – so far as we knew, a first for the Spectres. This was the only time I know of that the Specs and Red Birds cooperated while I was there, and I returned stateside shortly thereafter, but Mike successfully followed up with it on several other occasions.

In summary, the B-57Gs at Ubon RTAFB in Thailand carried on the proud tradition of the 13th Bomb Squadron, laying the ground work for the operations in Iraq about which we see on the news today. I hope this brief narrative serves to fill some of the holes in the squadron history – I know I enjoyed relating them.
