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An Interview with Col. Walter J. Boyne, USAF (Ret.)

Boyne's career in flight, in print, and with the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum has been an ode to joy



Written by: [Jan Tegler](#) on June 7, 2012

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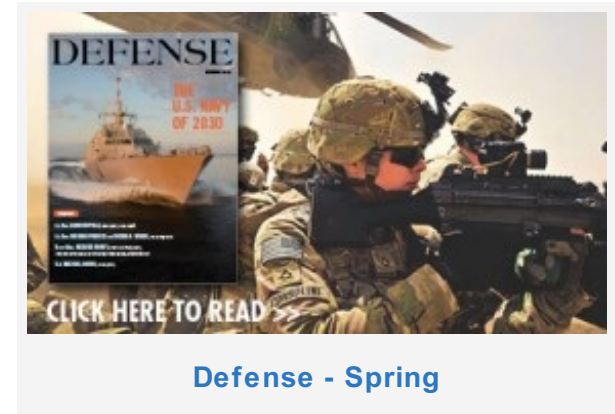
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We took off and flew out over the gunnery range at Point Mugu, opened the bomb bay doors

and jettisoned the ammunition. The gunners got 100 percent for the flight without a round fired. That was the way it was. The bombardier would lead the radar observer in on the bomb runs visually and vice versa. If they heard another crew making a bomb run, they'd turn our bomb signal on so the other crew's run would be screwed up.

It really was a flying club. I loved the flying and I liked the people. They were a great bunch. And at that point, I just thought that was the way things were. I didn't have any aspirations to change anything. It really wasn't professional. It was just a "we're having a good time" attitude. There was also an undercurrent because at the same time there were guys flying in Korea in B-29s.

“But one day the squadron commander was fired, the wing commander was fired, the ops officer was gone. All the principal people were out and everything changed. What had happened was that the LeMay team [SAC commander, Gen. Curtis LeMay] hit the field. From that point on, there was no cheating. You flew the missions exactly as designed and believe me, it was much better for everybody.”

Really, the inspections became so routine that you didn't count them and you weren't surprised when an inspection or a spot flight check or anything came up. You knew things had to be done right. It wasn't intimidating and certainly gave you a standard to fly to. You saw everybody else having to meet that standard too and I really felt that if war came, we'd just go over and clean their clock with our B-47s and the war would be over in about six days maybe. I felt we wouldn't have a lot of losses because we had such an overwhelming superiority. By that time, we probably had 800 or 900 B-47s in the fleet. We eventually had about 1,500.

What was it like being part of such a massive force?

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A formation of B-47Es of the 306th Bombardment Wing. Boyne served in Strategic Air Command's massive bomber force during the peak of its power. U.S. Air Force photo taken from B-47 Stratojet: Boeing's Brilliant Bomber, by Jan Tegler.

It was incredible. I remember so well having what were called “unit simulated combat missions.” We would launch all of the B-47s in the wing’s squadrons. There were three squadrons with 15 airplanes each. There were aborts occasionally but usually everyone got launched. The black smoke from takeoffs would literally layer the runway and there was the smell of it too. As absurd as it may sound, it smelled good to me.

The KC-135 tankers would also launch. I remember one instance when we had a tanker launch fairly early in the cycle and it crashed. It was burning off the end of the runway. The rest of the aircraft, most of

the 45 B-47s and all of the KC-135s took off through the smoke. There was no hesitation, no question that you were still going. It was another era, a time before the long-overdue era of safety.

In my files, I've got a listing of B-47 crashes for 1957 that someone sent me and there were something like 28 fatal B-47 crashes in that one year. You can imagine what would occur today if you lost two airplanes, much less that many.

What was your impression of flying the nuclear mission with which the B-47 and B-52 were tasked?

Interestingly, I'm writing an article on “Operation Dominic” right now. Operation Dominic was a series of more than 100 nuclear weapons tests authorized in 1962 by President John F. Kennedy following the resumption of atmospheric nuclear weapons testing by the Soviet Union, breaking a three-year moratorium. The 50th anniversary of the operation is 2012. It's funny to see the ops orders. As a crew member for the tests, you were described not by name but by crew position. I was “back-up pilot,” “assistant ops officer,” “interim PIO [public

information officer] officer,” etc.

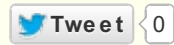
The 4925th Test Group (Nuclear) was a funny squadron. We were based at [Kirtland Air Force Base](#) [AFB] near Albuquerque, N.M. The unit was a nuclear test outfit and that’s how we made our living. We dropped simulated nuclear weapons, spiked runway penetration bombs, and a lot of what they called “shapes.” They were the actual shape and dimensions of a thermo-nuclear weapon but inert, of course. The Air Force sent me back to college in 1957 to the [University of California at Berkeley](#). When I finished, I was expecting orders to go back into SAC. But I got orders to go to Albuquerque to join the 4925th.

I was quite pleased by that because the unit offered a different kind of opportunity than I’d had in SAC. I only realized later that I had to be picked specially for it because it was an elite unit. I had no idea that was the case. I was the worst career manager out there. I just never really thought about it. I used to argue that the best thing that could happen to the Air Force at that time when they had a lot of excess people would be to take the flight pay away and leave it to the guys who really wanted to fly. I really felt that way and would have understood if they had elected to do that.

We had two B-52s that were going to fly out of Christmas Island originally but were diverted to Barbers Point Naval Air Station [West Oahu, Hawaii]. I don’t think they had any idea we were coming – they just accommodated us and treated us royally. We had our two crews and one that came from SAC, the 4138th Strategic Wing out of Turner [AFB, Albany, Ga.].

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Laurie Nichols

7:41 PM June 11, 2012

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Laurie Nichols OM3

Troy Maine 04987



Chuck Oldham (Editor)

8:35 PM June 11, 2012

Congratulations! What a great honor and truly a once in a lifetime opportunity. It will be a privilege just to see the Constitution under sail.

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