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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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I flew one of the missions as a back-up pilot, the "Hickory" mission. I've seen various reports

on it. I believe the yield on the drop was 7.3 megatons. You flew at 45,000 feet and 450 knots. All of our flights used parachute-retarded bombs. On some of the SAC flights, they did break-away maneuvers, but we used the parachute-retarded bombs so that you overflew the drop. We didn't have to use goggles or put up window-screens because we had gone past the detonation.

We would make several approaches to our bomb run. At the same time on the live bomb run, there were probably in the area 130 airplanes of various kinds – B-47s, B-57s, KC-135s – all flying their own orbits to be at a particular point at the time of detonation to get the particular readings they were instrumented for. It was a massive clockwork operation. You can imagine that if you had to abort it for any reason it really was a massive screw-up for a lot of people.



**Walter J. Boyne (back row, fourth from left) was a member of the 4925th Test Group (Nuclear) at Kirtland Air Force Base in New Mexico. In addition to two B-47s (not pictured), the group's fleet included two Boeing B-52s (one is pictured in the rear) and three fighters — from left, a Lockheed F-104, a Fiat G-91, and a North American F-100. U.S. Air Force photo**

On this mission, the radar observer was a guy named Blake White, one of the crustiest of the crusty. He came up to the cockpit and stood behind the pilots because he had time to shut down his instruments before the blast. There was a 45- to 50-second interval between the parachute release and the detonation of the bomb. The first thing that you saw was the Mach meter move a bit as the pressure wave from the blast went by.

The mission was taking place at night, by the way, and it was pitch black. Then all of a sudden it was daylight from horizon to horizon! It was unbelievable. There was brilliant white light just like daytime. And it wasn't just a flash. The light came and it stayed like that and stayed like that and stayed like that. It was the damnedest thing you've ever seen and eventually dwindled



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### First F-35C Night Flight



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down back to blackness. Old Blake White, who was anything but a philosopher, said, “Every head of state should see this.”

He was exactly right. All the heads of state had ever seen at that time were TV or film presentations. They had no idea what they were really playing with. It was just mind-boggling.

**When you began your career writing about military aviation, did you feel that what you were doing was somewhat unique?**

I feel there was a unique band of guys doing it – Peter Bowers, Birch Matthews, Dusty Carter, and Harry Gann. We were geographically separated and we didn’t have anything like email in those days, but I think we felt we were doing something that needed to be done. We felt we were actually breaking some ground. For example, the worst publication probably turned out to be *Air Classics* because of the way they treated everybody. Nevertheless, they still had elevated the aviation magazine because there was no comparable history publication at the time.

When Joe Mizrahi broke from *Air Classics*, I can remember him calling me. I was in my office and he said he was going to start a new magazine, would I help him? We started *Wings* and *Airpower* magazines [first published in 1971] and I felt very proud of the people developed under his auspices. He was encouraging, he paid nominal amounts, and they were venues where you could find good articles. I was proud of what was being done, and while it might be a stretch to say you could develop a fan base with them, you did have a number of people that were working with you and reading your pieces become aware of your writing over a period of time. It was very satisfying.

**People know what a prolific author you are, but have been less aware of your contributions to the format of the modern aviation magazine with publications like *Wings* and *Airpower* and *Air & Space*, which you founded in 1986. How do you feel about that?**

“That’s true. At the time, *Aviation Week* was a much bigger magazine than it is today – physically and every other way. I liked it very well but it was exactly the wrong kind of magazine for a museum to put out. I specified to our original editor, George Larson, exactly what I wanted in it and how it be addressed, how people were to respond to it, and what percentage content would be. They’ve held pretty well to it. I like it today still.

I think it has maintained an appeal to people who might otherwise not know about or like airplanes. That was the reason for the magazine. It was not going to be written for the buffs – there was plenty for them already. What we needed was something that would appeal to families across the board.

### **How do you feel your writing has changed over time?**

The first book I wrote was a small book on flying for [McGraw-Hill](#). I actually just wrote what I liked about flying. It didn’t quite go into a second publication. It sold out and they debated reprinting but ultimately didn’t. I was pleased by it.



The next series of books I did were non-fiction, but the first one that proved to be engaging fun for me and not a job – a catharsis really – was *The Wild Blue* [*The Novel of the U.S. Air Force*, 1986, co-authored with Steven Thompson became a best-seller on *The New York Times*’ non-fiction list]. I was very fortunate with that, and one reason was that one of the executives with the publisher happened to

Walter Boyne, Chairman of the National Aeronautic Association (NAA) presents the Wright Memorial Trophy to actor Harrison Ford at the 2010 Wright Memorial Dinner. Aero Club of Washington photo

be a pilot and liked airplanes. He made the decision that this was going to be a best-seller. He did what was necessary and spent enough money promoting it that that actually came true.

I was grateful to have had the opportunity to do the book. It wasn't 100 percent autobiographical, but there certainly were many elements of my experience in it. The one thing about [it] I didn't know at the time – I would have given anything to know actually – was that it had been banned at the Air Force Academy. I didn't know it until 2004.

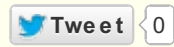
### What was the reasoning behind the ban?

Well, I portrayed generals in the way generals really behaved. Every character in the book was inspired by real people. I guess it was just a knee-jerk reaction at the Academy. Had I known about the ban that would have been the greatest gift of publicity I could have received!

*This interview was first published in Defense: Spring 2012 Edition.*

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**Laurie Nichols**

7:41 PM June 11, 2012

In 1961 as i went into the Navy,i also got a flat hat[ 1961],never had it on,well just this last week and a half i found out that i was picked to make the turn around cruse on old Ironsides July 4th of 2012. So,i still have my flat hat and my whites,so i will be wearing the whites and the flat hat.,i was told the flat had could only be put on in the Boston area..

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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