

303rd TACTICAL RECONNAISSANCE SQUADRON



MISSION

LINEAGE

303rd Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron constituted, 15 Nov 1952

Activated, 1 Jan 1953

Inactivated, 20 Jun 1959

STATIONS

Shaw AFB, SC, 1 Jan 1953-25 Jun 1953

Sembach AB, Germany, 7 Jul 1953-31 Aug 1958

Laon-Couvron Air Base, France, 10 Jul 1958 – 20 Jun 1959

ASSIGNMENTS

66th Tactical Reconnaissance Group, 1 Jan 1953

66th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing, 8 Dec 1957 - 20 Jun 1959

WEAPON SYSTEMS

RF-51D

RF-80A

RF-84F

COMMANDERS

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

NICKNAME

CALL SIGN

OPERATIONS

The 303d Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron was activated on 1 January 1953 as part of the 66th Tactical Reconnaissance Group at Shaw AFB, South Carolina. It was initially equipped with second-line RF-51D Mustangs and trained in tactical air reconnaissance. Its parent organization was programmed for deployment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In mid-1953 it was equipped with RF-80A Shooting Star jet aircraft that had returned to the United States from use in the Korean War.

The 303d deployed to Sembach Air Base, West Germany, where it became part of United States Air Forces in Europe's Seventeenth Air Force during the summer of 1953. It performed reconnaissance training at Sembach, and was upgraded to the new Republic RF-84F Thunderflash in 1955. The squadron trained with NATO forces in Europe during the summer months. However, due to poor weather conditions in central Europe during the winter months, the unit deployed frequently to Wheelus Air Base, Libya and Nouasseur Air Base, Morocco for training.

The squadron moved to Laon-Couvron Air Base, France in mid-1958 due to severe problems with the Sembach runway, but it operated from Phalsbourg Air Base until September while improvements were made to the Laon runway.

In early 1959 it was announced that the RF-84 equipped squadrons assigned to the 66th TRW were to be inactivated and their places in the 66th taken by McDonnell RF-101C Voodoo equipped squadrons being deployed from Shaw. These new squadrons arrived at Laon in May 1959 and the 303d was inactivated in late June.

On 7 July 1953, the 66th TRW was reassigned from TAC to USAFE and its subordinate 66th ABG took control of the base. The next day, the wing's first aircraft arrived, RB-26s of the 30th TRS, followed by RF-80s and T-33s of the 302d and 303d TRSs. Air Rescue Service established a tenure at Sembach with the arrival of the 12th ARG and the subordinate 81st ARS on 25 September 1953. The 11th TMS, the first Matador missile squadron at Sembach, arrived on 1 July 1956. The 587th TMG activated on 15 September 1956 and became the 11th TMS's higher headquarters.

On the 19th July 1953, Colonel G.H. Fulcher landed at Sembach in Germany in a Lockheed T-33. He was accompanied by thirty-two Lockheed RF-80As, four T-33s and eighteen Douglas RB-26 Invaders. The 66th TRW had arrived! The wing had been activated at Shaw AFB, South Carolina, on the 1st January 1953; replacing the 118th TRW the title of which reverted to the Tennessee Air Guard. The 66th had three operational squadrons: the 30th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron (TRS), Night Photo; and the 302nd and 303rd TRS', Photo Jet. The 30th flew the RB-26, and the Jet Photo squadrons flew the RF-80A. Just prior to the move to Europe, in February 1953, the 302nd and 303rd had relinquished the RF-51 Mustang for the RF-80A-10. Prior to the move to Europe these aircraft were being rotated or changed for the RF-80A-15 models modified with the J-33A-35 engine and 230 gallon centreline wing tip fuel tanks. There was no ejection seat in these aircraft; but there was an improved canopy emergency removal system; something that had been problematic in the early RF-80s.

The movement from the States to Germany took place without incident for the wing. In fact, apart from the inevitable delays for bad weather at Keflavik, the exercise was the most successful ever accomplished over the Northern Route. The order of flight was the T-33s followed in their turn by the 302nd TRS, the 303rd TRS and the 30th TRS. The 303rd TRS departed Shaw for Maine on the 5th July, 1953. On arrival at Sembach all aircraft were reported to be in commission and operational. In similar fashion the Atlantic voyage of wing personnel was without significant problems. The ocean remained calm and the men and women arrived at Bremerhaven on the USS Leroy Eltings feeling refreshed and eager to settle in to their new homes.

The RF-80A pilots of the 302nd and 303rd TRS' were amongst the most experienced tac recce drivers in the USAF. For example of the 20 pilots assigned to the 303rd TRS, twelve, possibly more, had seen action in Korea. The commander of the squadron, Maj. Jean Woodyard had been one of the three pilots who had flown the first ever combat air refuelling mission into North Korea. Approximately eight of the pilots had flown the RF-80 in combat with the 8th/15th TRS out of K14. Two others had flown RF-51 Mustangs with the 45th TRS and two had flown the LT-6 Mosquitoes. Bob Sweet of the 302nd TRS had flown all three aircraft in Korea.

The RF-80As flown by the 66th were the final versions of this aircraft. Powered by the higher thrust J-33A-35 engine they also carried the 230 gal Fletcher wing tip tanks. Thus were range and altitude performance enhanced. The 302nd aircraft differed from the 303rd in the radios they carried. The 302nd had 15 channel VHF sets and the 303rd the later UHF sets. The latter would normally have been the preferred option; but many areas in Europe did not have the UHF capability and the 303rd was limited in the operations it could undertake.

By late 1954 the 303rd TRS was able to pick up more of the choice missions as more areas became UHF capable. Ed Stoltz, a Korean combat veteran in the RF-80A flew with the 303rd TRS and remembers: " Bob Sweet never missed an opportunity to dig me about the restrictions placed on UHF equipped aircraft on our arrival in Europe. By late 1954 the numbers of UHF capability had improved across most of Europe and the 303rd joined on the choice mission assignments to Copenhagen and Madrid. Both RF-80 squadrons kept the choice missions going on as long as

possible. I saw my first and last bullfight in Madrid. And I visited the Tuborg brewery in Copenhagen on more than one occasion. We also flew the UHF equipped planes to Italy and North Africa”

The 66th TRW was not the only tactical reconnaissance dedicated unit of USAFE at this time. The 10th TRW, based at Toul Rosiere had arrived in the theatre in 1952. Having two similarly equipped wings at their disposal did pose problems for USAFE command: how to avoid mission and operations duplication. In September it was decided to confine the 10th TRW to operations in the allied zones of Germany; and the 66th would work in the allied zones of Austria. As part of this arrangement, on September 2nd, the 30th TRS with its RB-26s was tasked with the long-term mission of mapping all the British, American and French zones of Austria. The 303rd was requested to undertake a mosaic mapping of the Austrian Alps. This latter mission had to be completed with some urgency before the agreement with the Soviets necessitated the removal of all occupation forces from Austrian soil and resulted in the banning of overflights of that country.

In both of the above exercises the 302nd and 303rd TRS' fared marginally better than the 30th; but all the missions had to be undertaken at low level. Exacerbating the situation for the 66th TRW was the fact that there was no approved instrument let down system at Sembach. For this reason four RF-80s of the 303rd TRS deployed to Neubiberg for Operation Mudlark. The weather played havoc with not only the aircraft but also the cameras. RF-80 cameras had to be rotated to ensure that each spent one day per week in the hot box to thoroughly dry it out. Excessive condensation between the lenses, because of the extremes of temperature had the potential of creating a fungal growth which forced the lenses apart and impaired the cameras effectiveness.

For the six months from December 1953 to June 1954 the 66th was unique in that it was the only jet equipped unit in USAFE to remain accident free. 1954 was also the year when, not only the 30th TRS was to convert to a new aircraft, but the 302nd and 303rd TRS' were scheduled to receive the Republic RF-84F Thunderflash. Pilots from these squadrons attended courses at the Mobile Training detachment (MTD) at Spangdahlem in Germany; headquarters of the 10th TRW, two of whose squadrons were also to convert to the 'Flash.

Operations during 1954 were adversely affected by the weather in the early part; but by Spring the conditions had improved sufficiently to allow a relatively high number of successful missions to be flown. By June the 30th TRS had completed 65% of its Austrian mission. The 302nd TRS took part in Exercise Blue Danube that involved 28 sorties being flown. The 303rd TRS took part in a 5 day exercise commencing on the 6th May. For the purpose of this mission the squadron deployed to Giebelstadt; and in addition to photographing some 21 army required targets and 15 weather reconnaissance missions; the unit was given the task of taking oblique pin-point photographs of castles and other places of interest in Germany for publicity purposes. The taking of these 'happy snaps', sometimes clandestinely, was something which was a welcome relief from the run of the mill targets.

In the latter part of 1954 the weather played havoc with mission rate. In addition to this

serviceability of the RF-80s was becoming a problem. The 303rd TRS took part in Exercise West Wind and was reduced to a primary task of visual reconnaissance; in this instance spotting the 280mm cannons used by both the friendly and aggressor forces. In an unofficial competition Captain Edwin D. Stoltz located six cannons of the twelve spotted by the squadron. He remembers the occasion: "Comments on the Army's 280mm cannons: These were the first designed to fire an atomic shell. Twelve of the 280s were deployed to Europe and as I recall there were six on the friendly and six on the aggressor side during Exercise West Wind. The 66th TRG CO, Col. Harvey Henderson, was flying my wing when the six aggressor weapons were located. What was not reported is that we also located four of the friendly weapons as well. The huge 280mm cannon was very heavy and very difficult for the army to manoeuvre and hide. Off road they left deep ruts and were easy to track across the fields. Although Col. Henderson was impressed by the sightings I should point out that had there been AAA in the area locating the weapons would have been hazardous and far more difficult."

Early 1955 saw the RB-57 and RF-84 MTDs set up at the base; usefully, because, yet again the weather had severely restricted flying; and the opportunity for ground training of all kinds was a welcome one. March produced uncharacteristically fine weather and the 66th squadrons flew a high number of missions. The 302nd and 303rd TRS' broke all previous records for missions flown.

In June, 1955 there occurred one of the largest exercises ever staged by the NATO powers. Exercise Carte Blanche took place between the 20th and the 27th June and was designed to test the latest concepts in dispersal, tactical air control and execution of alert plans in the event of an atomic war. For the purposes of this exercise the 12th Air Force and the 4th Allied Tactical Air Force (ATAF) of NATO were pitted against the forces of the 2nd ATAF. The 66th TRW was tasked with providing reconnaissance on behalf of the former antagonist.

Condition Alpha was called on the 20th June. The simulated posturing and threats were enough to put all squadrons on immediate alert. The 303rd TRS deployed to Echterdingen near Stuttgart; while the 302nd remained at Sembach. In these initial days the function of all these units was picket duty. The RB-26s and RF-80s patrolled an arbitrary bomb line and reported all aircraft crossing that line. In the early morning of 23rd June Condition Coco was declared. Hostilities had broken out at precisely 0450 hours! Within minutes the first reconnaissance missions were being flown. Throughout the exercise the squadrons of the 66th flew a total of 613 missions. The 303rd flew 242 of these; 94 photo and 148 visual. The benefits of this exercise in terms of experience were profound in tactical terms. One of the most significant of these underlined just how much needed was the eagerly awaited RF-84 by the RF-80 squadrons. Throughout Carte Blanche the RF-80s were frequently and fatally intercepted by the Venoms and Meteors of the 2nd ATAF; and, on the pilots own admission, some fourteen of their aircraft could have been shot down. The intercepting flights usually attacked in pairs or fours; and the single ship reconnaissance flights were clearly doomed in the face of such opposition. Also, because the RF-80s often had to work at a considerable distance from home, significant fuel for any significant evasive manoeuvring was not available. Running for home was often the only tactic available to the hard pressed pilot, with its attendant and extremely risky consequences.

The practice of sending unarmed reconnaissance aircraft to photograph or visually report on the status of enemy airfields was called into question as a result of the experiences of Carte Blanche. Ordering a pilot to fly over or alongside a heavily defended airfield was tantamount to ordering his death.

As a result of the exercise the 303rd TRS made certain recommendations regarding the RF-80. In light of the fact that the arrival of the RF-84F was imminent these may sound superfluous; but it must be remembered that at this time of high tension the squadrons may have had to go to war in their Shooting Stars. The RF-80, it was recommended, should have a total combat radius of 400 miles. This would guarantee sufficient fuel reserves to enable a reasonable degree of evasive action to be taken in the event of interception. The reconnaissance should always be taken in pairs, thus enabling a satisfactory sky searching for enemy aircraft to be accomplished by both pilots, each looking out for the other. Finally it was considered vitally necessary for some aggressive training in evasion tactics to take place with pilots as a matter of urgency.

Significantly, in the event of a real war having been fought the 303rd would have been in no position to make any recommendations. On the 24th June, enemy reconnaissance flew over Echterdingen and with their departure came the likelihood of an atomic strike. The squadron commander immediately dispatched a message to HQ, 66th TRW announcing his intention to move the entire squadron to an autobahn strip south of Stuttgart. In a simulated exercise the aircraft would fly along the autobahn until a suitable dispersal site was found; and the vehicles would follow by driving along the route until they found the aircraft. According to the timing the last RF-80 would have been airborne when the expected A Bomb struck. The umpires, while congratulating the ingenuity of the commander, declared the squadron annihilated!

Other exercises later in the year intensified the frustrations felt by the RF-80 squadrons concerning the shortcomings of their aircraft. In September was an exercise testing the air defences of the United Kingdom. The RF-80s were hopelessly outclassed by the defending Royal Air Force interceptors which wreaked havoc amongst the aging Photo jets. The long awaited RF-84F Thunderflash began to arrive at Sembach from August, 1955 onwards. One pilot from each of the squadrons was sent to Shaw AFB to the 363rd TRW for checkout on the aircraft and they would be the IPs (Instructor Pilots) for their respective squadrons on their return. Bob Sweet was the 302nd TRS pilot and Ed Stoltz was the 303rd. They both spent most of March and the beginning of April flying the RF-84F. Back at Sembach in April both Bob and Ed were back flying the RF-80 when the RF-84 delivery dates began to slip. On June 16th they were both sent to England to maintain currency by flying the F-84F. By the end of that year the 66th TRW had received four RF-84Fs; two for the 303rd TRS and two for the 302nd. The 10th TRW at Spangdahlem was also converting two of its squadrons to the RF-84 at this time. Conversion to the RB-57A was moving slightly faster. The 30th TRS had fully converted to the type by the end of 1955. In addition to receiving the RB-57A the 30th also received the B-57C dual trainer.

Of the new aircraft only the RB-57 was to see operational flying during 1955. The aircraft took part in Operation Fox Paw from the 1st to the 4th October acquitting themselves well in the night reconnaissance missions. The RF-84 pilots contented themselves with transition sorties of

familiarisation, navigation and instrument training flights.

October, 1956 saw the first of what was to become a regular annual event for the 66th TRW. The Royal Flush reconnaissance competitions were inaugurated. Royal Flush was a NATO exercise which brought together recce units from both the 2nd Allied tactical Air Force (ATAF) and the 4th ATAF. The 1956 event was staged at Lahr in Germany from the 17th to the 19th October. USAFE was represented by the 30th and the 303rd Tactical Reconnaissance Squadrons flying for the 4th ATAF. The 303rd TRS' RF-84F flown by 1st Lt. John Robertson won the low level competition; and 1st Lt. Ronald A. Krzan from the 30th TRS came second in the high level competition flying a RB-57A. The 4th ATAF was the overall winner. John Robertson, "Robbie" was later shot down over Vietnam flying an F-4C and remains missing in action.

France, Cazeaux was a regular venue for all tactical day squadrons of the USAFE. The range was the principle one used for gunnery practise. The 302nd and 303rd TRS had been in December, 1956 and repeated the exercise in 1957. All units underwent a basic familiarization course in ground strafing against mesh nylon targets. The RF-84F was the last recce plane to be fitted with internal guns; ostensibly for the purposes of target designation for fighters or artillery. The reasons for abandoning them in later aircraft is conjectured by Paul Hodges: ".....later arguments in the air force went something like, if you put guns in a recce aircraft the pilot is going to look for something to shoot rather than take pictures, guns being more fun than cameras. (Quite true) In addition, it costs more, complicates training, increases aircraft weight, and recce aircraft are supposed to be light, fast and dedicated. So who needs guns?"

In January of 1958 the announcement was made that the 32nd and 38th TRS were to receive the McDonnell RF-101C Voodoo. The 66th HQ and the 302nd and 303rd squadrons were to move to Laon where they would displace the 38th Bombardment Wing. Early in 1958 the conscious decision was made to utilise the North African base of Nouasseur, Morocco to its limits in detachments of USAFE aircraft. Indeed it became debatable whether there was more time spent at the North African base than at home. The troublesome winter weather had really played such havoc with the training schedules. At Nouasseur all training missions were accomplished as required. The very favourable North African weather provided the ideal environment in which new pilots could be transitioned on to the squadron aircraft in the minimum of time. The 38th TRS, later in the year, used Nouasseur to transition all its pilots onto the RF-101C.

The 302nd TRS deployed eight RF-84s and fifteen pilots to Nouasseur for six weeks on the 16th January. The reconnaissance training undertaken on this detachment was even higher than anticipated. Specific tasks included low level navigation, all phases of photography. Instrument flying, formation, aerobatic and evasive tactics and night flying. Every air station and every port in Morocco was photographed by the 302nd at this time. The squadron returned to Sembach on the 27th February. During March and April the 303rd TRS spent 30 days in Morocco overlapping with the 38th TRS which deployed there for 45 days on the 1st march. The 32nd detached in January and June.

Although able to accomplish a very efficient mission rate the North European weather did not

entirely relinquish its influence over events. Bad weather at Phalsbourg and Sembach often interfered with the inspection cycle when the RF-84s were routinely returned to their parent bases. Bad weather regularly prevented the aircraft from gaining access to the base, and, furthermore, often delayed their return to Nouasseur. When the 303rd returned to Sembach from one sojourn in April they were prevented from making a grand entrance by a heavy fall of snow at the German base. The RF-84s were compelled to divert to Phalsbourg. The pilots left their aircraft at this base and were smuggled to Sembach to celebrate their return over the weekend; returning to Phalsbourg to retrieve their Thunderflashes on the Monday. Deployments to Morocco from Phalsbourg refuelled at Zaragoza in Spain; whereas those from Sembach paused at Chateauroux in France.

In July 1958, following the deactivation of the 38th Bombardment Wing , the 66th HQ and the 302nd and 303rd TRS' moved from Sembach to Laon in France. This move was in accordance with USAFEs plan to realign the posture of various bases in anticipation of aircraft conversion. The 66th was to convert to the RF-101 Voodoo. Paul Hodges was involved in this move: "The runway at Sembach was designed by a Roller Coaster engineer, barely okay for the RF-84, absolutely unsuitable for the higher performance Voodoo."

Considerable construction was necessary at Laon before and during the transition phase; in particular the preparation of runway overruns. In August and September respectively the 302nd and 303rd TRS' moved from Sembach to their new base. Just prior to the move, in a public relations exercise, the 302nd engaged in some large scale oblique photo coverage of all towns and cities within a 30 mile radius of Laon. The processed photos were presented to the various town and city officials as a means of introducing the newcomers to the community.

1959 was heralded by the not unexpected news that the 302nd and 303rd TRS were to be deactivated and their places in the 66th taken by the 17th and 18th TRS from Shaw AFB. These two units arrived at Laon in May, 1959, with the 302nd and 303rd officially deactivated on the 20th June. All the RF-84s were ferried to the IRAN facility at Naples for eventual distribution to NATO forces. Many of the pilots of both these squadrons were transferred to the new Voodoo squadrons; converting at Nouasseur.

52-7287 - Crashed, bad landing, Sembach AB, W. Germany, 57/58, no fatalities.

52-7289 - Crashed, bad landing on Phalsbourg AB, FR, SEP 58, fatalities unknown.

52-7348 - Crashed, bad landing, on Laon AB, France 15 OCT 58, 1 fatality.

52-7349 - Crashed, take-off, fuel fire, 2nm N of Nouasseur AB, Morocco, 21 AUG 58, 1 fatality.

52-7368 - Crashed, landing/weather, on Phalsbourg AB, France, 10 APR 58, no fatalities.

52-7369 - Crashed, landing at night/weather, on Phalsbourg AB, France, 9 JUL 58, 1 fatality.

Air Force Order of Battle

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Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.