

4472 TACTICAL SUPPORT SQUADRON

MISSION

LINEAGE

4472 Tactical Support Squadron

STATIONS

ASSIGNMENTS

COMMANDERS

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

OPERATIONS

As NA/NCs came off the San Diego assembly lines they were sent to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base for the 4472nd Tactical Support Squadron. In August 1968, the drones were placed on a contractor-operation 72-hour alert under a 30-day contract, ready to deploy overseas on a moment's notice.

Proficiency training flights were staged out of Ft. Huachuca, Arizona, and some out of Eglin with good success devoid of serious operational problems.

By the time the squadron was qualified and ready to be moved overseas several months had passed; then, starting November 1, 1968, President Johnson called a bombing halt above the DMZ in North Vietnam. At that point the panic effort to build a drone jamming capability lost its cause. Again, as Red Smith explained, "it did show us a way to respond to a national need to build a set of hardware in 90 days that would fly and do the job."

The Ryan group was asked to continue its alert status and training flights out of Davis-Monthan under a series of 30-day contracts which continued for 17 months through the end of December 1969. For Ryan personnel with families it was no 'cup of tea.' Not knowing from one month to the next whether the program would be terminated or extended didn't make for a stable family situation.

Two veterans of Air Force operation of drones at Bien Hoa were by this time retired and working as civilians in location support for Ryan. Bill Forehand was in charge and his former deputy, Buck Lee, was Ryan's base manager for Combat Angel.

Lee was not exactly happy with the Air Force's attitude early in 1969 when he visited several TAC installations. "I am utterly amazed," he wrote Forehand, "at the lack of knowledge, lack of interest, lack of support, and lack of planning for a program that has been operational for seven months now."

Much of the problem, of course, was that they were on indefinite standby alert with no clear mission in sight since there were no bombing operations in North Vietnam requiring the decoy tactics of the Combat Angel group.

Still 52 of 53 training missions had been launched satisfactorily in the first year of standby alert, with total effectiveness after launch rated at 89 percent.

Nat Summers, one of the Ryan electronic warfare technicians who had been at Bien Hoa in the spring of 1967, monitored the NA/NC program.

"In January 1970, the military 'blue suit' personnel took over the program," he recalled, "although the TAC operation was not actually formalized until February 1971, when the Tactical Air Command began funding the activity. Up until that time the birds were Air Force assets, as were the DC-130 launch aircraft. Actually they got old beat-up '496' and '497' which were the launch planes which first deployed with 147s to Okinawa seven years earlier.

The Combat Angel squadron deployed to Pt. Mugu in June 1969 to conduct an unusual exercise. Was it feasible to have one ARCO (airborne remote control operator) direct launch of three SPAs on fully programmed missions, monitor their operation and, if necessary, assume control of the 147NC birds at any time? If drones were to do an effective chaff dispensing job, the more drones which could be put in the air at one time, the better.

The two DC-130s, each carrying two SPAs, flew into Pt. Mugu from Davis-Monthan. Work began shortly after midnight and by six a.m. the two launch aircraft and their birds were in the air. Ground rules were that no control corrections were to be commanded from ground stations except in the interest of safety, the ARCO being responsible for all functions before and during the corridor run.

The first drone, NC-4 was launched at 6:12 a.m. Within eight minutes NC-2 and NC-3 were also airborne.

Each SPA flew its designated programmed course with minimum correction from the ARCO. At the end of the corridor runs, each SPA was turned over to its respective ground station and vectored to the recovery area for MARS retrieval.

After 38 minutes flight, the first drone launched, NC-4, was caught in mid-air by the recovery helicopter and returned to station. There the helicopter was re-rigged and returned to catch NC-2 after its 80 minute flight.

Parachutes of the number three drone, NC-3, blossomed prematurely after an hour and three minutes flying time due to a lost carrier signal, which initiates the automatic recovery sequence. The drone was 98 nautical miles from station and search aircraft were unable to locate it.

The drone had fuel remaining for 70 minutes of flight. Had it not been for the loss of carrier, the helicopter would undoubtedly have recovered this bird too and established a 'three in succession' record.

Buck Lee was able to report a highly successful mission to his superiors in San Diego. Each of the three drones was turned onto the 'hot leg' of its run within 30 seconds of the planned turn point.

In the early days at OL-8 (Okinawa) and OL-20 (South Vietnam) the blue suiters were not up to speed when they took over in January 1970," recalled Summers. Except for a few people with the SAC program who were sprinkled through the new outfit, most of the people were new and inexperienced.

"Five months after they assumed command, the TAC unit was asked to conduct an Operational Test and Evaluation at Pt. Mugu. The multiple-launch tests there had to be suspended due to drone operational losses mainly attributed to complex flight profiles and range restrictions.

"In October, TAC completed the OT&E at the Tactical Air Warfare Center (TAWC), Eglin Air Force Base, Florida. Although the drones were outstanding as far as their operation was concerned, the DC-130s were a real problem. More often than not, the primary launch aircraft would have to abort a mission and the back-up DC-130 launch the mission. Even so, all missions got off on schedule.

"Since the entire weapons system — launch planes and drones — was being rated, the OT&E was declared unsatisfactory because of poor overall reliability, maintainability and performance.

"Some minor drone modifications were suggested, but the reliability record of the NA/NC birds was unusually good during the three years following their assignment to Davis-Monthan. Of 258 drones launched, only 16 were lost during training and OT&E tests under both contractor and military operation.

"Although the OT&E left much to be desired, one general summed up the advantages of the NA/NC birds when he pointed out their value as a confusion factor. His concept was to continually congest the combat area with drones, feeling the enemy would be hesitant to expend missiles on them. Since drones could be made to look like fighters on radar screens, many actual fighter aircraft would not be fired on and could penetrate enemy defenses with much less danger. "Had the squadron deployed on schedule as planned, the manpower and support equipment problems would have worked themselves out as they had before and we would have had a very creditable ECM operation going for us.

"Twice a year, TAC conducts its 'Coronet Organ' exercise. They fly everything they have and stage their own war games. General William W. Momyer, Commander of TAC, relaxes things, gives his people a free hand, and lets them plan a war, attack simulated targets, and then evaluate the whole operation.

"Our drones first participated in Coronet Organ exercises in March 1970 on the Fallon, Nevada, Naval Test Range. Two NCs were launched within 30 seconds of each other to fly chaff dispensing missions with a 4000 foot altitude separation. The first SPA was controlled from a ground station, the second from the launch aircraft. "Operational results of such war games are hard to come by but we understood that neither drone was 'shot down' by the 'enemy' and that whenever the enemy radars were about to lock on the drones another burst of chaff would cause them to lose lock and have to search again.

"It was pretty substantial proof that the drones could degrade the efficiency of enemy radars and perform the ECM mission satisfactorily. In November the drones participated in Coronet Organ III, then again in Coronet Organ IV in April 1971. In ECM missions, the work of the NA/NCs was outstanding."

During Coronet Organ IV at Tyndall AFB in April 1971, four birds carrying chaff in external pods were launched from '497.' It was a good mission and all four SPAs were launched on time and each was successfully ground recovered. Two days later the mission was repeated with the four drones launched at 15 minute intervals flying at altitude separations of one thousand feet while dispensing chaff.

In July 1971, the 4472 Tactical Support Unit was replaced by the 11 Tactical Drone Squadron.

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Sources
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