

SHOOTING BLANKS

TOP-SECRET COLD WAR RECCE MISSIONS



Col. LaVerne Griffin's old
recce helmet. (Photo cour-
tesy of James P. Busha)

BY COL. LAVERNE H. GRIFFIN, USAF, RETIRED, AS TOLD TO AND WRITTEN BY JAMES P. BUSHA

Right after the war ended, I learned to fly in a Piper Cub before I went into the Air Force. I started out in Stearmans, even though they were phasing them out. They just lined us up according to height, and the shortest one-third of the guys got into Stearmans. I was happy because I wanted to fly the Stearman, and we got a lot more acrobatics than the guys in the AT-6 did. I eventually flew the P-51s at Williams Field in Phoenix, Arizona. I was 19 years old and just having a ball, and it only got better from there because they had the F-80 Shooting Stars at Williams Field. I was selected to go into a reconnaissance squadron and flew the RF-80, which was a reconnaissance version of the F-80, out at March Field in California. I actually liked recon work better than the fighters because we were flying all over the United States taking pictures. The poor fighter boys would just go to the gunnery range, shoot into the sand, and head back.

The F-86 Sabre is well known as the Korean game changer for the United States, but it is less known for the long-range recon flights it accomplished. (Photo by John Dibbs/planepicture.com)



Pilots of the March 1954 overflight missions to Vladivostok, USSR: (standing, left to right) Lt. Sam Dickens; Lt. Pete Garrison; Maj. LaVerne Griffin, commander of the 15th TRS; Maj. George Saylor; Lt. Bill Bissett; and Lt. Larry Garrison. (Photo courtesy of James P. Busha)

Learning to Fly a Blowtorch and Shoot a Camera

We didn't have a T-33 dual trainer to get us ready for the F-80, so they just gave us a blindfold cockpit check. You had to know where every switch was in that F-80, then they helped you fire it up and then said, "Go." And of course, it had a 15-to-1 boost through the hydraulic system, which we weren't used to. Comparatively speaking, the P-51 is pretty heavy on the controls, and everybody that took off wobbled on takeoff for about five minutes and then you slowly got used to it. We flew photography missions around California, assigned to make a mosaic of a certain area. Clyde East (WW II recce P-51 ace) was a flight commander, and I was a second lieutenant when I came into the squadron. I liked him, and we called him "Hundred Percent East." If you were on his wing on takeoff, you better not be lagging because you wouldn't catch him. Most leads would give you a couple percent in order to play with as a wingman, but Clyde was full up on the throttle. By 1952, I had almost 400 hours

of recce time flying around taking pictures. And then in 1953, I went to Korea where I received my baptism by fire.

In April of 1953, I was stationed at Kimpo, K-14, home of the 15th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, "The Cotton Pickers," flying RF-80s and RF-86s. We shared our base with Aussies, flying Meteors, and the 4th Fighter Group, flying F-86s.

My early missions were at the controls of a RF-80, flying down railroad tracks to see if the bridges were intact or destroyed and all sorts of other targets. We usually had a wingman beside us because MiGs would come down from the north, and you had to have somebody looking out for you. Other times, when we went way up to the Yalu River, I'd have four F-86s escorting me. Our squadron call sign was "North Cape," and I recall one mission where they called, "North Cape 14, you're about to be bounced." I put the RF-80 into a hard turn for home base and poured the coals to it. The wings start shaking, and all of a sudden, my wingman goes



MiG-17 below! One of the "lucky shots" Col. Griffin captured on his Haymaker flights. (Photo courtesy of James P. Busha)

zooming right by me. He said, "Let's get going." I countered and said, "You get back there, and keep your eye out for MiGs!" Thankfully, they never showed up.

"Honeybucket" and "Ashtray"

As recce pilots, we were not too happy going up north in the RF-80s because the MiGs could catch us quickly. We couldn't get away from them, but an F-86 could outrun them all day long. Before I got to Korea, the recce guys got permission to go over to the base junkyard, and they pulled an F-86A fuselage out. After careful examination and some ingenuity, they realized that it was feasible to install a camera in the gun bay by removing the lower pair of right-hand machine guns and ammunition containers. The camera was installed horizontally, and the only way to take photos was to shoot down through the nose using a mounted 45-degree-angled mirror. The recce guys dubbed this new creation the "Honeybucket." The Air Force eventually accepted the ad hoc field modification and directed North American Aviation to modify several Sabres, removing all guns. The new

RF-86s were built under the program code name of "Ashtray." In order for our unarmed Sabres to blend in, the ground crews painted gun ports on the nose to fool enemy MiGs.

We had three Ashtray Sabres in the squadron, and man, they were great compared to the RF-80—obviously, a lot faster, and at 38,000 feet, you push over, point it straight down, and you're going through the barrier. I loved the F-86; it was a real Cadillac. But the missions we flew with them were another story. We called the new contraption a "dicing camera" because, during World War II, the recce units came up with the name "dicing mission." You flew straight down at a target—whether a train, airfield, or flak site—and because the camera's in the nose, you get a good picture...if you survived. They used to shake dice to see who would go out on these missions because nobody wanted to raise their hand. In Korea, I flew several of these dicing missions, one of them diving right down into the bowels of the dam on the Yalu River to see if the generators were still working. And of course, the flak was tremendous around those generators. Right before the end of the war, Vice President Nixon visited our base, and I briefed him on the capabilities of the RF-86. I think he understood my point when I told him the 86 was the only thing that could out run the MiGs.

Uninvited Guest

On the last day of the war, I flew an RF-86 mission at 10:00 in the morning. This was a top-secret mission, and according to the terms of the armistice, there could not be any new airplanes introduced into Korea after the armistice by either side. So we didn't know what kind of airplanes the North Koreans had and where they had them. The plan was to send us into Manchuria, north of the Yalu River, to find out what the Chinese had at the bases up there. And my mission was to photograph a place called Harbin and Kirin.

For protection, they sent me a guy from the 4th Fighter Group to be my wingman. When I met him, I found out he's got four MiGs to his credit and he wants one more really bad. I called him "Wannabe" because he wanted to be an ace really bad. He's got guns and I have a camera, and he said, "Now, Griff, if we get up there and get into a problem, don't worry. I'll take care of you." And I said, "Wannabe, if we get into trouble, I'm heading out at the speed of light because I don't have any guns." And I know I can get away from them because the RFs are faster than the F-86 because they are lighter and cleaner.

So we take off, with four drop tanks strapped to our wings: two 200-gallon ones and two 120-gallon tanks. As we climbed out, we



An RF-4 Phantom was one of the last recon types flown by Col. Griffin. (Photo courtesy of James P. Busha)

Pilots sharing a laugh after their overflight: (left to right) LaVerne Griffin, Maj. George Saylor (on wing), and Lt. Pete Garrison. (Photo courtesy of James P. Busha)

encountered an eight-tenths-broken cloud deck. I got that E6B [circular slide rule] out trying to navigate, while flying 300 miles to the border at 40,000 feet, looking for the Yalu River. There's a distinctive bend in the river where I am supposed to cross, and I was just a little bit to the right of the river—not bad, easily correctable. We dropped our 200-gallon tanks because we don't want to leave any calling cards in Manchuria that say "Made in Cleveland, Ohio." It finally cleared up as we crossed into Manchuria, and I began taking photos. I got my targets—airfields and power plants—and thankfully, no MiGs on my tail as we turned

back into Korea, climbing through 47,000 feet. All of a sudden, I can't breathe, and I find out my oxygen is gone!

I made a huge mistake early on in the flight and left the switch on 100 percent oxygen. So I grabbed my bailout bottle, which is a little bottle with 1,900 pounds of compressed oxygen in there. I figure I'm going to save and sip that oxygen until I get back because I'm 300 miles from home, 47,000 feet, with no oxygen. At high altitude, that airplane is very sensitive, and I'm wiggling around all over the sky, flying with my knees while sipping mouthfuls of oxygen. We were at radio silence for security reasons, but my wingman came on and said, "What's the problem?" I said, "Well, I've got a problem with oxygen. I've got it taken care of." So I'm letting down and I got to 11,000 feet, but I don't want to go down too fast because I don't have a lot of gas. When we got to the base, we had less than 1,000 pounds of fuel, which is minimum in an F-86. They put me in for the Silver Star. I read the copy of it, but you can't say much about a top-secret mission on paper. Well, the paperwork got lost, and I never got even an air medal for that mission, which was the longest recon mission of a single-engine airplane during the Korean War. That was my 25th combat mission.

"Haymaker"

They sent me down to Pohang, K-3, by the sea to be on exchange duty with the Marines, where Ted Williams had been flying out of. I flew a F2H-2P Banshee, which is a very nice airplane. But six months later, I got called back to the Air Force, so my happy days with the Marines—and great food—were over. I moved to Nagoya Komaki,



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Japan, because we were going to get the new RF-86 “Haymaker” airplanes. At the time, President Eisenhower wanted flight missions into Russia and China to see if their Tu-4 “Bull” bombers (the Soviet B-29 clone) had the capabilities of delivering nuclear weapons against NATO forces or the United States on a one-way mission. We even had our own cover story: “We got lost.” It was a weak excuse at best, especially when you’re so far away from Japan and wearing survival “poopie suits” that kept you alive for 30 minutes longer in cold water. Although it’s a weak cover story, when you’re 24 or 25 years old, you believe it. You’re willing to take chances, and other people in the squadron were fighting to get these missions.

The new RF-86 Haymaker models had a bulge on the side of the fuselage where the guns normally were because the cameras were big: K-22 40-inch-focal-length cameras. In order to mount them vertically, they had to put a little bulge on the side of the airplane. The gun ports were



LaVerne Griffin (second from left) during his days as a cadet. (Photo courtesy of James P. Busha)

Painted on again and on the 22nd of March, 1954, I flew the first Haymaker mission over Russia.

We plotted our course and knew how far it was going to be, so we went up and we trained in and around Japan, duplicating the same length to see how it would work out. The actual estimated mission time would be two hours and forty minutes, with some fuel to spare. Satisfied we could do it, we flew into Korea. Of course, we weren’t supposed to be in Korea because we had these different airplanes that weren’t there when the war was going on. So we snuck into Korea the night before with six RF-86 Sabres. Only four would go on the mission, with two spares tagging along until we hit the Sea of Japan. We put our jets in the hanger overnight, keeping them out of sight from any United Nations inspectors and fueled them up to the maximum extent. We rolled them out in the morning, taxied out to the runway, and with radios silent, we waited for a green light to launch. We took off from K-55, which was a 9,000-foot runway in Korea, and headed out over the Sea of Japan. By the time, we hit the 38th Parallel, we were supposed to be above 40,000 because they told us the Russian radar couldn’t see us above 38,000 feet. Did I believe it? Did then, don’t now. But at any rate, we believed it. So we climbed out



Above: A RF-86F cockpit. The RF-86 had no gunsight because it had no guns. (Photo by Brian Silcox)
Below: Pilots of the 15th TRS pose in front of an Ashtray, RF-86 Sabre. Note the painted-on gun ports. (Photo courtesy of James P. Busha)





The P-51 Mustang was a just a stepping-stone for Col. Griffin as he moved into F-80s and F-86 jets. (Photo courtesy of James P. Busha)

and dropped our 200-gallon tanks. The two spares diverted and went back to Japan as the four of us on radio silence headed for our targets around Vladivostok.

Ten minutes before we got to Vladivostok, we split up with two guys going 50 miles in a different direction over Russia to a distinctive target as my

wingman and I headed for Vladivostok. The planners predicted there'd be no contrails, and obviously, if the weather prediction was for contrails, we wouldn't go. We had code words for this flight if we ran into problems. The other two Sabres used "Alabama," and mine was "California." If you saw contrails, one of use would yell "Alabama"

or "California." Within 10 minutes of Vladivostok, still out over the Sea of Japan, my radio silence was broken with "Alabama." My heart stopped, as I looked out to see if my guy's pulling contrails, and he wasn't. So I know I'm OK, but the other two guys must be pulling cons, so they aborted their flight. We took our pictures and headed over to our base at Misawa, Japan. And of course, there's this big contingent of brass waiting for us there because this was the first mission. These guys are all worried, I'm sure. So they meet us with a C-47, and they took the film out our airplanes and flew it down to Tokyo to be developed.

The next morning, Gen. Otto P. Weyland, commander of the Far East Air Forces, called us into his office. We were still in our flying suits, and when we walked in, he was sitting at a desk bigger than a dining-room table. He stood up, smiled, and said, "Boys, that was a good job." He came out and pinned a DFC [Distinguished Flying Cross] right on our flying suits. And then he said, "I'll take care of the paperwork later." I think he was more relieved that we didn't create any international incidents than he was of us getting the pictures.

I went back again on the 3rd of April and then flew my last Haymaker on



Col. Griffin in front of an RF-4C in Thailand. (Photo courtesy of James P. Busha)

AND THEN IT HIT ME: IN THE PICTURE, THERE WERE TWO MIGS. THEY WERE FLYING TACTICAL FORMATION, SO I DIDN'T SEE THE ONE THAT WAS RIGHT UNDER ME. I ONLY SAW THE ONE THAT WAS DOWN TO THE LEFT. HAD THEY SEEN ME, I DOUBT I WOULD BE HERE TELLING YOU THIS STORY.

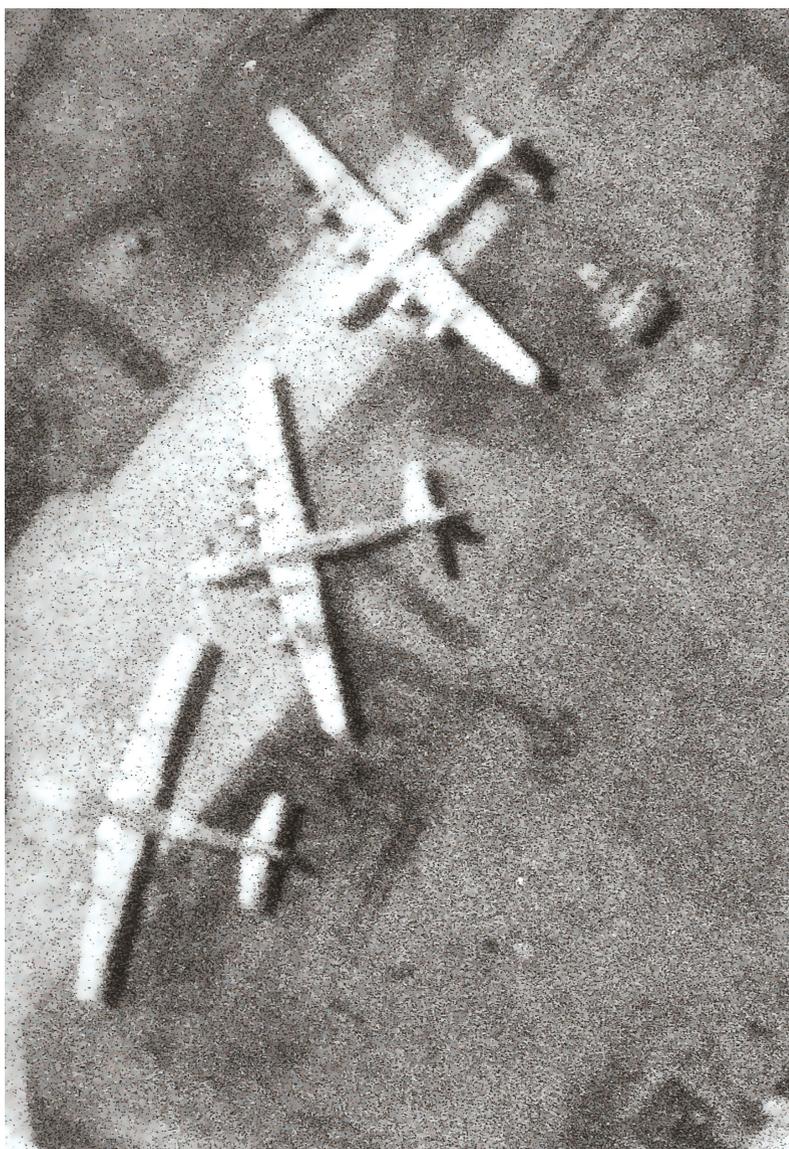


LaVerne Griffin (right) confers with Vice President Richard Nixon about the capabilities of the Ashtray, RF-86 Sabre. (Photo courtesy of James P. Busha)

the 22nd of April, going back to the same area once again. And this time, as I'm coming out of Vladivostok at 42,000 feet headed for Misawa, I saw a MiG 5,000 feet below me. I thought, "I wonder if he's after me?" We were kind of limited with these RF-86 Haymakers because the North American Aviation guys weren't sure what would happen with these bulges on the side if we hit Mach. It hadn't been tested and approved yet. I got a little nervous about that, especially if a guy was on your tail because you're going to become a test pilot if he does.

I watched this MiG below me for a while, and he's just going along in the same direction, like he's on a Sunday drive. So I flick over the top of him and hit that extra-picture switch—the one on the trigger. I bug out and head for home, and when I get down to Johnson Air Base, the photo interpreter comes out and says, "You know what you got there?" And I said, "Well, I got my pictures, I hope." He said, "You got the pictures, but the MiG..." I said, "Oh, a MiG-15 flew under me. I took his picture." He said, "That was no MiG-15. That was a MiG-17." We didn't even know they had those east of the Ural Mountains, which are way back in Russia somewhere—Siberia, I guess. So I got what we called a "happy snap," and it became a big intelligence find. The problem was that MiG-17 has an afterburner. And then it hit me like a cold slap: In the picture, there were two MiGs. They were flying tactical formation, so I didn't see the one that was right under me. I only saw the one that was down to the left. Had they seen me, I doubt I would be here telling you this story. That was my last Haymaker mission and then I rotated back to the States. ✈

Col. Griffin continued to fly recce missions, including ones in Vietnam, where he flew 152 day and night combat missions in the RF-4C Phantoms as commander of the 14th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron in Udorn, Thailand. He retired from active duty in May 1974.



Above: Enlarged view of Russian Tu-4 "Bull" bombers (reverse-engineered B-29s) taken from a Haymaker flight. Below: Col. Griffin, wearing his original helmet, reunites himself with an old friend. (Photos courtesy of James P. Busha)

