

Photo by SSgt Phil Schmitt



3 CONFIRMED RELEASES

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In the waning days of Strategic Air Command (SAC), just as DESERT STORM had begun, B-52 "H" model Buff units were heavily involved in fighting the Cold War and focused on the nuclear mission. As a new "mission ready" navigator in a nuclear wing, I had never flown a conventional mission in the B-52. Conventional ops were assigned as our unit's secondary mission, and we had very few crews who were mission certified much less proficient in conventional ops. When DESERT STORM began, there was a scramble to familiarize and certify all the crews. Shortly after the air war began in Iraq, our unit began to fly 12-hour round trip Red Flag missions from home station in preparation for DESERT STORM participation should the call come. It was then that I learned the harsh lesson that safety doesn't take

form, and the presence of a "by the book" mission commander in the second aircraft was bested only by a senior leader conducting a ride-along in the third aircraft.

During the mission brief the day prior, our crew planned the flight in detail and then briefed the rest of our three-



Photo by PH2 Andrew Meyers

ship cell. This brief included planning for a bomb bay check after the live releases. Checking the bomb bay consisted of one weapons qualified

Everything from crew show to the weather brief went well the following afternoon, until our arrival at our aircraft. Our first indication that we needed a change of plans was the sight of open access panels on every engine and maintainers working on the aircraft. With the rest of our cell in the green, we decided to go to the spare aircraft, and we completed the "bag drag" across the ramp to the new aircraft in record time. We briefed the forms at the nose of the aircraft and were informed that other than a few minor write-ups, our aircraft was in the green, but it didn't have a weapon loaded. The crew chief explained that a weapon wasn't loaded because it didn't make sense to load a live weapon "just in case it was needed." We knew we would lose the live weapon activity, but training was training, so we accepted the aircraft and pressed with our preflight checks. We caught up to the rest of the cell by engine start, and we completed the taxi, takeoff, and refueling without incident.

Another flight of B-52s had already entered the range and pressed on to their target when our cell arrived at the range and checked in with the Airborne Warning And Control System (AWACS) for clearance on the range. The range was busy and the radios were screaming with

threat calls and maneuvers to avoid them as our cell crossed the Initial Point (IP) of the bomb run. Our copilot called "IP inbound," and our cell was "cleared hot" on the range. Acknowledging chirps of "Two" and "Three" from our cellmates came over the radio as my radar navigator and I ran our release checklist. The bomb doors opened at 3 seconds to go and we "released our simulated weapon" on time and reformed the cell after the last aircraft completed their weapon release. The radios were still busy when our copilot requested a descent down to 10,000 feet to complete the bomb bay check. "Havoc Flight, standby" was the only response from the AWACS before being passed off to range control. A second request to descend was denied due to a conflict with other range activity taking place below us.

While waiting for clearance to descend, our crew discussed our options and a fallback plan if we couldn't complete the visual bomb bay check. SAC regulations prohibited an aircrew from opening the bomb bay doors or conducting any weapons release training without a visual bomb bay check, and also directed the crew to treat the situation as a hung/retained weapon, avoid over flight of populated areas, suspend weapon activity, and land as soon as practical. "Havoc Flight, unable to lower, climb and maintain FL 280, proceed point Hotel (our range exit point), flight planned route" came over the ra-

dio before we could run through all of our options.

Our copilot acknowledged the controller, passed the clearance back to the other planes in our cell, and we started our climb and turned toward the exit. Once established in the climb our crew informed the mission commander that without a bomb bay check, we were done for the night, and that we would provide the cell with an updated route of flight around populated areas back to home station. Clear of the range we passed our revised plan of flight to Air Route Traffic Control Center (ARTCC) and the other two aircraft, and then explained over the interplane radio that we were going to lose the last three simulated high bomb runs. It was then that a contest of wills broke out over the radio.

Suddenly the senior leader's voice came over the radio like the voice of God, "this is 'Alpha', you do not need to do a bomb bay check, I have three confirmed releases, you can still do the high bomb runs..." Our pilot started to explain our action when the mission commander cut in and calmly began to explain why the crews couldn't perform the simulated high releases, citing the paragraph and section of the applicable regulation. Alpha replied back that in his position as number three, he visually confirmed three weapons releases, followed them down and saw three distinct explosions on the target area. Upon hearing "three confirmed releases" my radar navigator and I began discussing the fact that if our airplane didn't have any weapons loaded, how could he confirm our weapons release? Suddenly hit with a moment of self-doubt, we both turned and reached for the aircraft forms package to reconfirm that our aircraft didn't have a weapon loaded.

The mission commander tactfully explained that by regulation, without a bomb bay check, we couldn't do any more weapon releases, live or simulated. Alpha reiterated that we didn't have to perform the check if the releases could be confirmed visually, and because he could confirm three releases and explosions that we could still get the high release training and suggested

that the cell complete the high bomb run training. The mission commander pointed out that the range spotters on the ground, and not aircrew, were the only people able to confirm a weapons release visually, and that the range spotters hadn't confirmed our releases. The mission commander then asked if Alpha was sure he saw the releases and followed them down considering the release altitude and the fact that it was dark.

"I confirm three good releases, three explosions in the target area, you do not need the bomb bay check, complete the high runs" came the response.

"With all due respect sir," the mission commander responded, "we fly and operate under the rules of flight and within the regulations for safety reasons, and those regulations do not permit us to perform the high bomb runs." At that point, my pilot was finally able to break into the conversation to remind everyone that our aircraft was not carrying any weapons; therefore, it wasn't possible to have seen three releases and their explosions. Several very quiet minutes passed before Alpha came over the radio to say that he concurred with the mission commander's plan to forego the high bomb runs; however, he felt that the flight could have safely performed the high bomb runs as planned, without the bomb bay check.

As lead, our crew requested a clearance directly back to base and then spent the next 4 hours discussing the evening's events and the lessons learned from it. The main lesson we took away with us was that flight regulations then and flight instructions now exist to provide guidance and direction in order to accomplish the mission and accomplish it safely, both in times of peace and war. Safety doesn't take a vacation when war breaks out, in fact, it becomes even more important and shouldn't be compromised in the interest of training. We lost valuable training that night when we missed the high bomb runs and high altitude flying experience, but the risks involved in pushing the envelope far outweighed the gain. I will never forget the safety lessons I learned that night, or the courage the mission commander displayed in being the voice of reason in an extraordinarily high pressure situation. ✈️



Photo by MSgt Cesar Rodriguez

a vacation during times of war, or when preparing for it.

My first Red Flag flight as a mission ready navigator was leading a three-ship of B-52s dropping live munitions on a night sortie. The mission profile consisted of takeoff, air refueling, and a 4-hour "drive" to the Red Flag range to drop one live 500-pound MK 82 from an altitude of 15,000 feet. Upon exiting the range, we were scheduled for three simulated high level bomb releases at three different radar scoring sites starting at Flight Level (FL) 420 at the first release and then step climbing 2,000 feet between releases, finishing with a high altitude "dash" for home at FL 460. With a war on, there was added emphasis, and pressure, to make the most of every training opportunity. As the "new guy" the pressure was always on to per-

crewmember visually checking for an empty bomb bay prior to conducting any other release activity. Crawling from the B-52 crew compartment around the main gear to the bomb bay is a tight squeeze, and it's even tougher dragging an oxygen bottle. For safety reasons, the bomb bay checks are supposed to be completed below 10,000 feet within the confines of the range to avoid the requirement for the crewmember to carry oxygen with them and to ensure that a potentially hung weapon didn't fall on an inhabited area. With a release altitude of 15,000 feet, we planned and briefed a descent down to 10,000 feet after release to perform the required bomb bay checks before exiting the range and then a climb to FL 420 for the first three simulated bomb releases.