

Remembering Vietnam 4: After Dark with Patricia Lynn

BY DR. GARY E. WEIR, OFFICE OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

On the 50th anniversary of the first direct American military involvement in Vietnam, the Department of Defense has called upon U.S. citizens to remember with respect and gratitude those who served in Southeast Asia. This series of six articles—of which this is the fourth—illuminates the significant role played in Southeast Asia by people in the tradecraft communities that now comprise the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.

Sometimes the platforms made all the difference. In early May 1963, two Martin RB-57E reconnaissance aircraft arrived at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon, South Vietnam, to join Detachment 1 of the 33rd Tactical Group. General Dynamics had recently modified these RB-57E's, which were primarily known as target-towing craft. The changes included a completely redesigned nose, which now housed a 36-inch KA-1 forward oblique camera and a KA-56 panoramic camera. The bomb bay now carried a KA-1 vertical camera, a K-477 night and day camera, an infrared scanner and a KA-1 left oblique camera. The RB-57E's also had a viewer in the rear cockpit permitting the crew member seated there the same view as that of the infrared scanner.

The RB-57E started life as the Canberra bomber produced by the English Electric Company and was offered to the U.S. Air Force as a possible replacement in 1951 for its Martin B-26, which was rapidly reaching the end of its useful service life. The Air Force needed an aircraft capable of attacking the North Korean supply lines, which were very active at night due to daytime U.S. reconnaissance. The B-26 proved very vulnerable to ground fire, and a ready-made, night-capable replacement would help disrupt the North Korean logistics system. Even with the engine nacelles (cover housing) reworked to accommodate the Wright YJ65-W-1 jet engine, the aircraft failed to fulfill its promise, and the production run of the B-57A, conducted under license from the British, ceased after eight aircraft. Instead of discarding the licensed design, the Air Force revised its thinking with regard to this airframe, recasting it as the RB-57E and producing 67 copies that served well into the period of United States involvement in Vietnam. When Martin Marietta Aircraft produced the RB-57E variant, they also provided the aircraft with the rotating bomb bay characteristic of their experimental XB-51.

When the first two RB-57E's arrived in 1963, U.S. forces immediately put them to use, conducting reconnaissance over both North and South Vietnam. This was the force's first use of an effective, although limited, night reconnaissance capability. Their very regular sorties went under the unusual code name "Patricia Lynn."

According to Vietnam air-war chronicler Douglas Gordon, the Patricia Lynn pilots flew regularly through 1963 and 1964, and Detachment 1 of the 33rd Tactical Group at Tan Son Nhut received two additional aircraft, with each of them returning to the United States on an irregular basis for upgrades to the reconnaissance systems as the demands of the war increased.

By 1967, the Air Force drafted the Patricia Lynn aircraft into the effort to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail, especially in the vicinity of the Mu Ghia and Tchepone Passes and the Ashua Valley. The program, called Combat Skyspot, focused on guiding bombers to truck assembly points on the trail and then conducting bomb

damage assessment afterward. For a number of previous nights the RB-57E's would conduct reconnaissance flights. Then they would help guide the bombers to the target, returning almost immediately to collect bomb damage imagery. The Air Force wanted to assess the effectiveness of the attack before the North Vietnamese had a chance to clear the evidence of the raid. Used at night, the infrared sensors on the RB-57E's provided the best intelligence on their Ho Chi Minh Trail results. Very often the RB-57E's would have to negotiate a curtain of anti-aircraft and small arms fire on their way back by the target to collect imagery for the assessment. This experience prepared the Air Force for the repeated sorties they would soon have to make over Khe Sanh in support of the Marines in their extraordinary stand against the North Vietnamese in 1968. Reincarnated, the RB-57E helped illuminate the night in Vietnam, a surprising use encountered many miles and years after its World War II-era design. ✨