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Lifestyles & SPORTS

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Catch a Falling Star

Top-secret mission 45 years ago changed the playing field

By Al Blankenship
15th Logistics Group

Forty five years ago today a group of Air Force personnel successfully completed a top-secret mission in the race to collect photo reconnaissance information by snagging the ultimate fly ball out over the Pacific Ocean.

The first successful mid-air recovery of a de-orbited film capsule from a United States spy satellite was accomplished Aug. 19, 1960, with the Discovery 14 capsule. It was the 6594th Test Group's first successful mission and their slogan was "Catch a Flying Star."

The group began operations in the fall of 1958 and on that August day a JC-119 flying boxcar aircraft was used to catch the "star" and the crew received the Mckay Trophy for the most meritorious aeronautical feat of the year

For the first mission there were a number of these JC-119 aircraft in the recovery area along with H-21 helicopters, RC-121 aircraft and numerous ships. This was the first time a photo had been taken from space and the first mid-air recovery of an object from space, all part of the Project Corona spy satellite program under the direction of the National Reconnaissance Office. Both the recovered capsule and this JC-119 aircraft reside in the National Museum of the United States Air Force at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio.

The success of this new Air Force mission resulted in the Test Group receiving 12 new JC-130B Hercules aircraft and six SH-3 helicopters. The helicopters were supported by two modified World War II Liberty Ships equipped with a landing pad and two hangars each. In 1967 the unit also received three JC-130H long-range Hercules planes to support project Senior Bowl (D-21 Drone).

Above: The 6594th Test Group used the JC-130B "Hercules" to catch the film capsules after the first successful catch was made Aug. 19, 1960, with a JC-119 "Flying Boxcar" (left) from Hickam. The capsule was part of the Corona spy satellite program. Bottom left: A JC-130B snags the canopy of a falling capsule out over the Pacific Ocean. Nearly 200 capsules were retrieved or caught by the test group during its 27 year history.

Photos & artwork courtesy of Al Blankenship

The final aircraft upgrade took place in 1974 when the unit received six CH-53C Super Jolly Green Giant helicopters and three HC-130P Hercules tankers to replace the ships and SH-3's.

The unit had four primary missions during its 27 years and supported many other projects, along with being credited with saving many lives during rescue missions for the Coast Guard. Modified cargo planes were used to make a mid-air recovery (catch) of each capsule as it descended by parachute. Also helicopters and ships were utilized to retrieve a capsule if it had to go in the water. The 6594th Test Group was the only organization in the free world that performed this important mission and the Hawaiian Islands was the only location for U.S. satellite film capsule recovery.

Because advances in digital video technology provided reconnaissance data in a timelier manner, the Test Group's mission ended and the unit was decommissioned Sept. 30, 1986.

During the year of Test Group operations 40,000 aerial recoveries were completed, nearly 200 film capsules ranging in cost from 7 to 250 million dollars each were retrieved, dozens of high altitude missile and balloon tests were supported, and more than sixty people were rescued at sea.

The base library will host three "Catch a Falling Star," presentations with slides; parachutes, hooks, etc; and video Sept. 15 (two presentations) and Sept. 17 (one presentation).

Author Bio

Al Blankenship was assigned to the 6594th Test Group from December 1969 until it closed in September 1986. His first job for three years was as an airborne telemetry operator and maintainer on the JC-130 Hercules aircraft. In 1972 when the Delta mission (large capsule) started, Mr. Blankenship began a seven-year stint maintaining the electronic and electrical equipment used for aerial and surface recovery on both the JC-130 and CH-53C aircraft.

In 1979, he moved to the Test Engineering Division as the Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge of flight-testing improvements to in-use equipment; and new equipment for both aerial and surface recovery. When the Test Group closed in 1986 Mr. Blankenship was instrumental in preparing the audio-visual presentations for both the Officer and Enlisted Aloha Parties. Since 1987, he has given this presentation hundreds of times, resulting in thousands of people, from elementary school students, to aerospace engineers, to Boy Scouts, intermediate and high school classes, and many others, learning about Hawaii's role in the Corona Project Recovery. In November 1997 he did this presentation on the local one-hour PBS program, "Kidscience Special."

Next week

The first half of the 6594th Test Group's history saw many new aerospace challenges and this unit was assigned to recover the top secret, unmanned, supersonic D-21 aircraft camera.

Summer Sizzler: A backyard killer on the loose

By Gaylen Redoble
15th Airlift Wing

If I told you that every year for the past several years a killer has taken several lives and crime-fighting authorities are powerless to prevent it, would you be outraged? Would you insist on a nationwide manhunt? Wouldn't you want to protect yourself and your loved ones against this type of horror?

The profile for this person is always the same: attacks at home, usually in the backyard, carries long instruments – sometimes sharp and is dressed like a cook. Are you surprised to learn this person may be you – the grill chef?

It is sad but true that the ever-popular backyard summer barbecue, which is a central focus of most of our warm-weather social activities, sometimes ends abruptly in tragic circumstances. But the cause is no mystery. Fatalities usually stem from two categories: fire or explosion and food poisoning. The larger question is what can you do to prevent this from happening to you?

With the widespread use of propane gas grills, the most common barbecue fatality (average 30 per year) results from a fire or an explosion. Inattention to proper procedures for grill maintenance or attaching the propane tank causes blockages or leaks to form pockets of highly flammable gas. Coupled with the immediate presence of fire, the gas flashes suddenly with catastrophic consequences.

Less common (average 8 per year), but equally fatal, is food poisoning due to improper preparation or storage. Raw food, thawing food, and marinades must all be handled properly to prevent bacteria from developing or spreading.

Carefully read up on all your food ingredients/requirements and equipment procedures before you launch your neighborhood fest. If you're using something that has no FDA-approved label or brochure for precautions, your goose may be cooked before you fire up the grill.

For more information, type "grill safety" in your Web browser and get ready to choose from over 93,000 Web pages. There is no excuse for being under-informed. Be aware and be prepared. Don't let your summer end with a bang.

Photo by Senior Airman Sarah Kinsman

Always know the safe procedure for lighting a grill, whether gas or charcoal, as they can cause serious burns or be fatal.