"Will Travel" Long-distance Evaluation Exercise

"Will Travel," an 18-hour simulated F-4C evaluation long-distance flight was accomplished 2 December 1964 by 12 TFW aircrews at MacDill AFB. The mission label is derived from the popular 1950’s television series “Have Gun, Will Travel.” The flight was accomplished to evaluate the physiological and psychological effects on the crews as well as to evaluate the capabilities of the F-4Cs J79 engine endurance during sustained flight.

The 10,000 mile flight is the distance from New York to Sydney, Australia, and comparable to a roundtrip flight from New York to Moscow. The previous record was 6,710 miles in 14 hours, set by three F-100 Super Sabers that flew from Blackwell, England, to Los Angeles, CA, in 1957.

The pre-flight routine required 558th TFS crew members to stay within their normal environment about a week before the flight to avoid exposure to any new virus. Seventy-two hours before the flight, they were put on a low residue diet to slow bodily functions. The day before takeoff, the men were placed in a quiet controlled atmosphere for undisturbed rest (sleep).

The aircraft were configured with the two 370-gallon wing fuel tanks and the 600-gallon centerline tank. All other pylons were removed. The 558 TFS formation departed MacDill AFB at 2300 hours Tuesday, 1 December and flew from Tampa to Puerto Rico for the first night refueling from Strategic Air Command KC-135 tanker aircraft.

Maxey Phillips recalls that, “The flight was planned with two airborne spares and two ground spares. The ground spares were not used and the airborne spares would continue through the first refueling, and when coasting in from Bermuda, return to MacDill. The flight was led by LtCol. Herbert McGowan, 558 TFS Commander. The first refueling at night occurred in the vicinity of Puerto Rico. LtCol. McGowan’s aircraft developed problems during refueling. So he diverted into Ramey Airfield, PR, taking his wingman with him. Arnie Weber then became flight lead and the two airborne spares became primary and went the distance. Howie Bear and I were #2 airborne spare, and became #4 in the flight.”

And according to McGowan’s WSO, David Skartvedt, "Unfortunately, the tanker developed a hydraulic leak that smeared McGowan’s canopy with fluid, obscuring his hook-up. Our wingman escorted us to Ramey AFB, Puerto Rico."

The four crews who continued onward were: (Lead) Capt. Arnold F. Weber/Capt. Edward F. Kramer (Flight Surgeon); Capt. Don W. Tillotson/Lt. Francis Sabo; (third element lead) Capt. Manfred A. Schalk/Lt. Wayne R. Top; and Lt. Howard J. Bear/Lt. Maxey J. Phillips. The aircraft serial numbers were: 63-7558, 63-7511, 63-7537 and 63-7488.

From Puerto Rico the formation continued north to Bermuda, then over Jacksonville, FL, to refuel. The first nine hours were flown in darkness requiring two night refuelings. The formation travelled across the continent to Los Angeles for a daytime refueling. They flew between 10,000 and 33,000 feet at about 650 miles an hour, except when slowed for refueling. The Phantoms then flew up the West Coast to Pendleton, OR, east to Glasgow, MT, and across the Dakotas. The flight rendezvoused with a KC-135 tanker aircraft in the Midwest and flew together, refueling two or three times, while zigzagging southward. After Des Moines, IA, they proceeded to Indianapolis, IN, south to Birmingham, AL; then Atlanta, GA, and back to MacDill for a touchdown at 1700 hours on Wednesday, 2 December after 18 hours and 5 minutes.
According to Maxey Phillips, *An interesting side note: Sometime early in the flight, after the lead element aborted into Ramey, the stab aug (stability augmentation) on our aircraft (Bear/Phillips) began malfunctioning -- the rudder was kicking side to side, caused by a problem in the yaw axis. Turning the stab aug switch off solved the problem, but without that system engaged, the F-4 was extremely sensitive to fly. Pitch was especially delicate. Later the system was modified to have three separate switches, one for each axis (pitch/yaw/roll), but at that time all were controlled by one switch, so it was all or nothing. Of course we took turns flying the aircraft, and both Howie and I became pretty proficient in flying an overly sensitive Phantom, even successfully completing all remaining refuelings and flying the slot position in a diamond-ship formation fly-by on arrival back at MacDill.*

The pilots’ physical condition prior to, during and following the mission was carefully examined. Aircrews felt that any mission could be performed satisfactorily after one night’s sleep. During the flight the men ate two special in-flight lunches containing candy mints, cheese, peanut butter sandwiches, but no liquids. Although a low residue diet, crew rest, cockpit comfort and proper use of Dexedrine--the crewmen took no more than two “alert” pills during the flight—were considered important factors, the presence of two pilots in the aircraft proved the most significant feature in making this long-distance flight feasible.

All the aircrews received the Air Medal, presented by Lt. General Bruce K. Holloway, Deputy Commander of US Strike Command, headquartered at MacDill at the time. “This flight shows we can go from here to anywhere--the farthest point in the world--in daylight hours,” he said after the Phantoms had landed. The following Sunday select members of the flight appeared as guests on the Ed Sullivan television show.

Following this long-distance, non-stop endurance exercise, the wing deployed 18 F-4Cs from MacDill to Naha AB, Okinawa. The 555th TFS began the 19-hour flight on the morning of 8 December 1964 to assume the first Far East 90-day Air Defense Rotational commitment for the Ryukyu Islands, attached to 51st Fighter Interceptor Wing. USAF determined assigning TDY F-4 units as more efficient and cost effective than operating aging F-102 units in this role.

Questions: For historical accuracy, who are the aircrew that accompanied LtCol. McGowan and Lt. Skartvedt to Ramey AFB, Puerto Rico? Also, who are the airmen that appeared as audience guests on the Ed Sullivan television show to mark the Will Travel event?
A crew photo taken in the 559th TFS operations room (note 559th TFS plaque on the wall) show the young 558 TFS members of the flight. They are, left to right: Capt. Edward F. Kramer (flight surgeon), Capt. Manfred A. Schalk, Capt. Arnold F. Weber (Lead), Lt. Francis Sabo, Capt. Don W. Tillotson, Lt. Maxey J. Phillips, Lt. Howard J. Bear and Lt. Wayne R. Topp.

Al Schalk provided an in-flight picture showing participating F-4Cs off his wing.

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i Maxey Phillips, email.
ii David A. Skartvedt, email.
iii Al Schalk, email.
iv McDonnell Aircraft Corporation newsletter, Airscoop, Volume XXIII, NO. 11, December, 1964