

CANNON AFB & 609th TCS MEMORIES

by MSgt Harvey Hartman, TxANG

I was assigned to the 609th TCS right out of Radar Maintenance Tech School (Keesler AFB) and I arrived at Cannon AFB in October 1972. At that time, the 609th was still fairly new to the base (it had arrived during the summer of '69) and it was set up on the back perimeter of Cannon, mostly in portable Quonset huts. Radar Maintenance had the only permanent building and it housed our workshop, office, and T2/T4 Ops training consoles. Additionally, it had the only bathroom for the entire compound so, for a squadron of 150+ men, our shop saw a lot of traffic. The 609th was a typical TAC CRC and had the usual AN/TPS-43 Radar System, "Rubber Duckie" Operations complex, Tech Control van, TRC-97 Microwave vans and antennas everywhere, a handful of S-280 shelters that were scattered around and used as deployable workshops, and a littering of noisy AE24U-8 turbine generators, fuel cells, M35A2-6X6 trucks, etc. My first impression was that of a rag-tag traveling circus and the more familiar I became with the mission and people of the 609th, the more I realized that my initial impression was pretty accurate.

Shortly after reporting to the 609th, I learned that Cannon was hit by a small tornado (or large dust devil) during July of 72 and that our original radar antenna was destroyed. To get us back into operation, SMAMA in Sacramento (Electronics Depot for the west coast) sent us TPS-43 ser no 2 which was Westinghouse's demo unit. This radar was pretty demo'd out but the antenna was still in good shape so we married it up with our -43 radar van, ser no 19. I remember the radar van #2 quite clearly though. It was my first day on the site and quite a snowstorm was blowing. (I'm from Houston and that kind of weather was quite new to me back then!) Well, since the -43 was still new to the USAF (in fact, the first TPS-43 questions didn't show up in WAPS tests until sometime in 1975) none of it was taught or even mentioned while I was at Keesler. Imagine my surprise when, after learning radar principles on the massive FPS-20 radar at tech school, I was led through a blinding snow storm to this TINY little aluminum box and was introduced to my radar! I didn't know it at that moment, but this was actually radar van ser no 2 and was dummy loaded since its antenna was attached to radar van no 19, quietly rotating a little farther away. However, Sacramento's instructions to us were to troubleshoot it in our spare time so it could be shipped back to Depot and used as a spare unit.

Now, for those of you who never had the privilege of cutting your teeth on the first model of the TPS-43, the Synchronizer (which developed all of the system timing signals) occupied most of the right wall of the van and was housed in a card rack approximately 3 feet wide by 6 feet tall. This rack was filled with no less than 39,603,340,583,381,830 2 inch by 3 inch plug-in circuit boards! (By comparison, the TPS-43E model that came out several years later produced all of its system timing on just two 8 inch by 12 inch boards!) Well, all of the circuit boards for #2's synchronizer were dumped loosely in a big cardboard box on the floor of the van! Okay, so this wasn't exactly an ORGANIZED traveling circus! It wasn't until I went off to TPS-43 school at McClellan AFB (Sacramento) in January 73 that I learned what all of those friggin boards did.

I arrived back at Cannon after -43 School in April of 73. While I was gone, radar van ser no 2 had been shipped back to Depot (I have no idea if it was ever made operational) and construction had been started on the 609th's permanent building. As it turned out, the small building that radar maintenance occupied was the cornerstone of the eventual larger building. This building (typical US Government concrete block construction with no windows) was finished during the summer of 73 and most of the portable Quonset huts were packed away. While this new building gave the members of the 609th a sense of permanence, we were still treated by everyone else on Cannon as if we were red-headed step children. And really, who could blame them? We were located on the back of the base and very few people on "main base" really knew what we did. All they really knew was that their car radios buzzed whenever they drove by our site when the radar antenna was turning. Plus we were different than the usual run-of-the-mill USAF in that we bloused our boots (which nobody else did back then) PLUS we wore those really cool blue "bippies" with our fatigues once each month. I suppose this "red-headed stepchild feeling" was probably common with all of the TAC Control Squadrons scattered throughout the US because all of us were located on the back 40s of our bases.

During my assignment to the 609th at Cannon, we participated in almost every TAC war game west of the Mississippi and many of those on the east side as well. Since the Viet Nam war was still going strong, the military budget was fat and money was readily available for training deployments. We must have participated in 6 or more deployments per year until the budget was severely cut back in 1975.

I re-enlisted in March of 75 and, as was typical of radar maintenance and ops personnel back then, I received orders to a remote radar site in Alaska almost before the ink had dried on my re-enlistment papers. I left the 609th, and lots of friends, on May 5th, 1975. While I was gone, the 609th was moved to Germany and the 81st TCF was moved into the old 609th's building at Cannon. Upon leaving Alaska in September 1977, I was reassigned to Cannon and the 81st moved right back into the same buildings that I had left 2-1/2 years earlier!

I joined the Texas Air National Guard in 1990 and was sent TDY to, of all places, back to Cannon AFB in 1992 to install some airfield equipment. By coincidence, the place that we used as a temporary workshop for that 2-week job was the old Wideband/Ground Radio shop in the old 609th/81st building! The building was not used by a TAC radar unit any more and it functioned mostly as a storage building for the main base Comm Squadron. However, in an ironic twist of fate, the old Commander's and First Shirt's offices, and Orderly Room had been converted into the Veterinarian's Office for Cannon's Security Police's military working dogs. How appropriate!

During the 11 years that I had been away from Cannon, quite a few changes had occurred. Almost all of the old WWII era wooden buildings had been replaced with modern brick buildings. While the new buildings looked good and were much more modern, they lacked the class and character of the old WWII wood buildings. A new

Base Exchange complex was built at Cannon while I was assigned to the 81st but many of the "auxiliary BX functions" (Garden Center, Clothing Sales, etc) were still housed in old wooden buildings scattered around the base. However, by my return in '92, all of these stores were either moved into the Main BX complex, or were housed in new brick buildings of their own. In fact, Cannon's appearance had changed tremendously since I first set foot on it in October 1972 and many of the locations that I had memories of were either now in new buildings or gone entirely. Time marches on I guess.

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