# Project Home Run Operations

*George A. Brown*

At Lockbourne Air Force Base, Ohio, in the late winter of 1956, the RB–47E-equipped 10th Squadron of the 26th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing was alerted to prepare for a reconnaissance project nicknamed "Home Run." In addition to the 26th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing, the mission would also involve the 26th Air Refueling Squadron and a detachment of four RB–47H's, plus one spare RB–47H, from the 343rd Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron (electronic), part of the 55th Reconnaissance Wing based at Forbes Air Force Base in Topeka, Kansas. The operational station was Thule Air Base, Greenland.

Thus in February 1956, as part of an advance survey party, I flew to Thule Air Base as a passenger in a C–124. At Thule we were to coordinate project operations, maintenance, and communications, arrange for quarters, and all other support aspects for aircrews. It was, of course, dark when we arrived, and what a reception we got from the weather. We stepped out of the aircraft into a temperature of minus 42 degrees Fahrenheit and a wind blowing at 40 knots. I quickly concluded that I wouldn't much relish the prospect of spending a couple of months in this inhospitable place. We completed our business within 24 hours and hurried back to the C–24 to depart as quickly as possible. It was dark again, as it had been 24 hours per day, except for a couple of hours of faint sunlight on the horizon during the afternoon of our visit.

As we sat shivering in the aircraft—we were desperately cold in spite of our heavy winter flying suits, gloves, and boots—we were very anxious to get the engines started, which would get some heat in the cabin. But shortly after the engines started, they were shut down again, and we were informed that the aircraft wings would again have to be deiced with isopropyl. Although they had been sprayed with isopropyl just before we arrived at the aircraft, the rotating propellers had created enough airflow to cause more ice to form on the wings. The de-icing took what seemed an interminable time, but after 30 minutes or so, the pilot again started the engines. The same thing then happened again. And again the engines were shut down and the wings de-iced. Meanwhile, all of us sat immobile in the numbing cold, with limbs shaking and teeth chattering. But for another hour the de-icing cycle was repeated twice, without effect, until finally, and

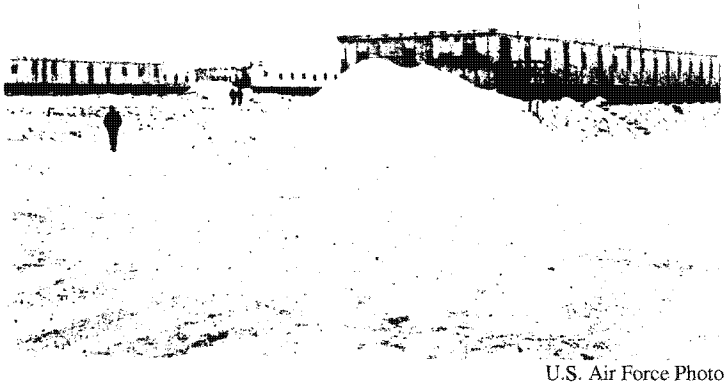
untold gallons of isopropyl later, it was deemed safe to takeoff. Even after we were airborne we could feel no heat in the passenger compartment for a long time, and it must have been two hours before we began to feel halfway normal.

On 21 March 1956 we deployed sixteen photoreconnaissance RB–47Es to Thule for Project Home Run. I flew there in a training RB–47, which we would use for instrument and annual proficiency checks for several aircraft commanders, including myself. At least, I mused, after I had landed and taxied to a parking space far from base operations, we shouldn't have to wait around in that blasted cold very long. Captain Dodson, a copilot, had been sent ahead with a small advance party. One of his duties was to insure that transportation met each aircraft within ten minutes after landing. But after we shut down engines, completed our flight forms, and unloaded our equipment and baggage, we waited. After we had waited for over 20 minutes in 35 degree below zero temperature, I flagged down a passing truck and directed the driver to take us and our baggage, plus another crew that had been waiting for over half an hour, to base operations. As we finished unloading our baggage, an irate colonel confronted me and demanded to know what I thought I was doing commandeering "his" truck. I was in no mood for diplomacy and reminded him that we had just completed a seven and a half hour deployment flight, that it was 35 degrees below zero, and that we had been assured that transportation would be at each aircraft immediately after we had parked. Although he let me know that he was a colonel and the SAC liaison officer on station, I did not back off one inch. After some more hard-eyed discussion, he left, but I knew I had not made a friend at Thule.

Photo courtesy of Nicholas Yanuzzi

**SAC air crews after Home Run mission transported to living quarters at Thule AB, April 1956.**

We were quartered in long metal structures that closely resembled walk-in meat freezers, including the hardware on the doors and heavy Plexiglas windows. These buildings were heavily



U.S. Air Force Photo

**Living quarters at Thule, ca Spring 1956.**

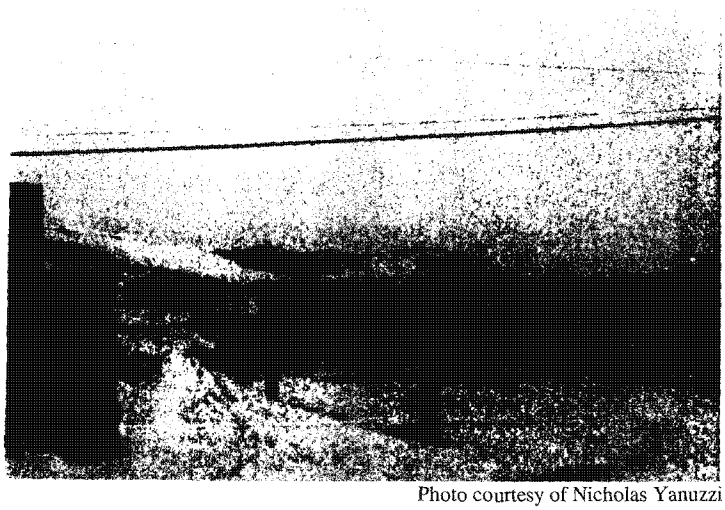


Photo courtesy of Nicholas Yanuzzi

**Living quarters, another view, April 1956.**

insulated, self-contained, individual units. They were satisfactory, if small, living quarters for two men per room, each having bath facilities and warmth. Each unit also contained a room full of cases of emergency rations, emergency water containers, and other supplies. It was a punishable offense to open any case of emergency rations, emergency water, or other items in normal circumstances. We soon found out why. For about three months in winter, from early December through February, it was completely dark at Thule. At the time of our visit, the sun had just begun to appear for a short time daily. When our project aircraft and personnel arrived on 21 March, at the vernal equinox, a larger sliver of sun could be seen and the "daylight" already was three to four hours long, and quickly became longer each day thereafter. All of the aircrews, maintenance crews, and support personnel of the temporary duty RB–47 and KC–97 units were quartered in the "meat freezer" refrigerator cars, which even featured levered door handles. The toilets operated on a hand pump flush system. All aircrew members, after receiving suitable arctic clothing, spent the first week after arrival receiving winter survival training, which was made as realistic as possible and included remaining out of doors overnight with standard arctic survival gear for protection, day and night. This requirement was received with mixed reactions.

But the greatest danger lay in "whiteouts" that occurred two or three times per winter on

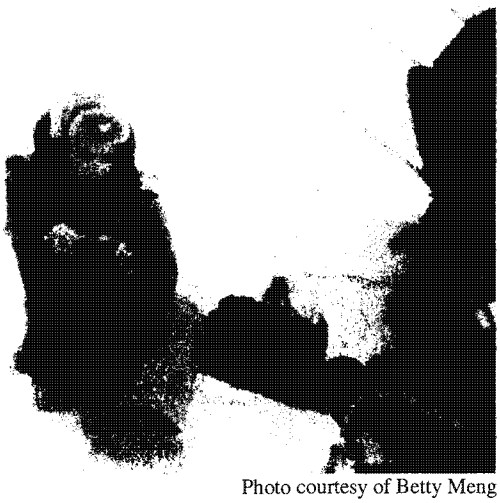


Photo courtesy of Betty Meng

**Col. William Meng beside an igloo, Arctic training at Thule, late March 1956.**

average. Driven by 60 to 70 knot winds, surface snow blew horizontally and visibility dropped to zero. These were killers that might last two to three days or more. For this reason, small, heavily-insulated huts stocked with food, clothing, a heating supplement and survival equipment, were placed about the airfield to provide a survival shelter and sustenance to anyone caught in the sudden onslaught of such a storm. The story was told of a heavy equipment operator who had been out on the airfield when a whiteout struck during the previous winter. In his powerful vehicle, with its heated cab, he tried to make it back to the main base area. But his engine stalled, could not be restarted, and he froze to death less than a mile from the main building area and only a hundred yards from a survival hut. We were impressed. When a near "whiteout" actually struck Thule during April 1956, everyone stayed put wherever they were—throughout interminable bridge and poker games, with only air police and emergency vehicles allowed to operate during the roughly three days of the storm. There was little snow in that part of Greenland, or at least nothing like the ten or twelve-foot depths commonly experienced in Labrador. But the frequent storms just blew back and forth whatever snow there was, quite fiercely. We ate a lot of emergency rations.

The chain of command for our temporary duty detachment was as follows: overall operational supervision was provided by U.S. Air Force headquarters, represented by Brig. Gen. Hewitt T. "Shorty" Wheless who commanded the 801st Air Division. Col. William J. Meng, commanded the 26th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing, and Maj. Lloyd F. Fields commanded the 10th Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron. The planners for all photoreconnaissance missions were Maj. George A. Brown, Headquarters (Operations), 26th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing, and Lt. Col. Glenn E. "Buck" Rogers, Headquarters (Navigation), 26th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing,

with Capts. Hyko Gayikian, from SAC headquarters, and Otto Jenista (serving on temporary duty in the United Kingdom), in charge of meteorological forecasting. Gayikian and I briefed all of the aircrews at Thule on the weather conditions from Greenland over the pole to tanker rendezvous, and Jenista, via another channel, furnished weather data from the North Pole over each of the penetration routes into the Soviet Union. I provided Jenista's information, separately and independently, to each penetrating RB–47E/H aircrew along with its planned route, list of known sites to be surveyed, and expected air defenses, if any. Thus compartmented, each aircrew knew only its own mission in the Soviet Union, and nothing of any other overflight activity that might be taking place elsewhere, simultaneously.

Buck Rogers and I had little chance to explore the base upon arrival. We were almost immediately installed in a secure vault where Buck, as the navigation planner, and I, as the operations planner, could, and often did, work up to 18 hours a day at mission planning. We had a great deal of work to do and spent the next two and a half weeks in virtual isolation, coordinating not only with U.S. Air Force headquarters, our wing commander, Col. Meng, SAC intelligence experts, and the squadron commanders of the RB–47E and RB–47H units, as well as the tanker squadron commander, plus key members of the Thule Air Base staff. We also spent a good deal of time

**Thule Air Base imaged during a practice overflight, 31 March 1956.**

**Enlargement showing some of the RB–47Es, F–89s, and a C–54, on the snow-covered tarmac at Thule.**

discussing upper air conditions, especially contrail conditions, with our resident weather specialist, Hyko Gayikian,* and examining other factors that might affect mission success.

Buck and I must have averaged about four hours of sleep nightly and maybe a meal and a half a day. It wore me down. Just after we had completed the planning phase, in early April, I came down with the flu, or something like it. The next morning I was so sick I couldn't get out of the sack, and the flight surgeon made a "house call" to administer to me. The doctor had only been gone a few minutes when I had a visit from Col. Meng, who told me that the execution order had just arrived from Air Force headquarters, and that we were cleared to begin flying operational missions immediately. When he discovered how sick I was, he sent Maj. Fields, a long-time friend, over to see me and be briefed sufficiently to take over at least the combined aircrew briefings as necessary. After trying for about half an hour to acquaint Lloyd with the needed background while recumbent in a sickbed, I gave up. "To hell with it," I said, as I threw back the covers. "This isn't going very well. I might as well get up and give it a go myself." I went to work. About eight hours later Buck and I were satisfied that we were ready to brief and launch our first mission. It was then that I realized I was no longer ill. I had gotten so involved with what I was doing that the effort had cured whatever was wrong with me.

Our first mission on 5 April was a complete flop. The four RB–47E reconnaissance aircraft and two RB–47H electronic intercept aircraft got off on schedule and were at the air refueling rendezvous point on time. But only two KC–97 tanker aircraft were there. Five or six others were very late for takeoff or had aborted for one reason or another. It was pointless to continue, as two tankers could not provide even half the fuel that had to be off-loaded, so all came back to Thule. General Wheless and Col.

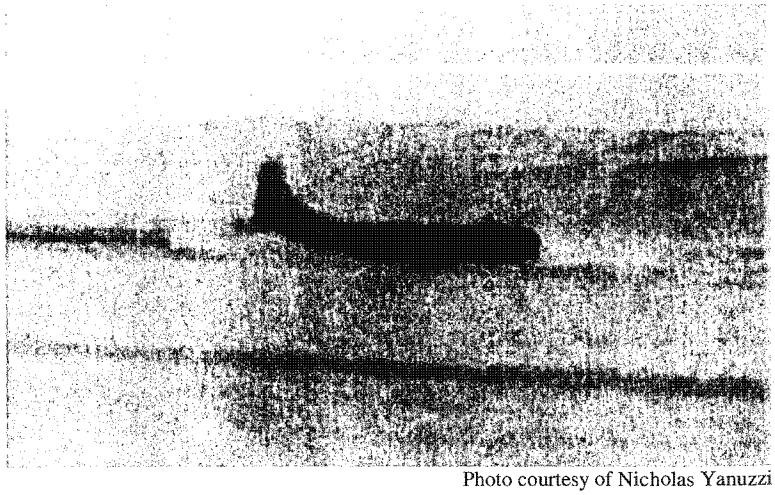


Photo courtesy of Nicholas Yanuzzi

**A Home Run KC–97 preparing for take-off from Thule Air Base, April 1956.**

* See Hyko Gayikian's memoir "Meteorology for Project Home Run and Other Special Operations" in this volume. Ed.

Meng were decidedly upset with the air refueling squadron's performance. After they had cooled a bit, following a rather terse session with the air refueling squadron commander, I told them what I thought was wrong in the first place. A couple of air refueling crews had not attended the general briefing at all, and other individual crew members had been absent, and I felt these absences had a lot to do with the sub par performance. I requested, and received, authority to refuse to conduct future briefings unless I had 100 percent attendance by all aircrew members, commanders, and operations officers.

The mission was rescheduled and another was laid on a day or two later. At the specified briefing time there were again two or three air refueling crews absent. When I asked after them, I was told that they had too much work to do to get ready for the mission and couldn't take the time to attend the briefing. I directed their operations officer to get them to the briefing on the double, as I would not proceed without them. At this juncture Col. Meng walked in, and I informed him of what I had directed. Meng immediately supported my action. Although he said little, his eyes and tightly compressed lips indicated that some fireworks could soon be expected. He didn't disappoint. When the erstwhile tanker crews arrived, he lit into them fiercely. He made it quite clear that no one involved in the mission would be exempt, for any reason, from attendance on time at any future mission briefing.

After the briefing, I went to the control tower to observe the tanker takeoffs. The tanker squadron commander, already present, looked as though a colonel or general had just taken a big bite out of his derriere. When one tanker aborted its takeoff, he almost wilted. But after coming to a shuddering stop near the takeoff end of the runway, the tanker commander taxied back and, deciding that his aircraft was operational, took off within the time span allotted. When the last of the eight tankers had taken off, the air reconnaissance squadron commander mopped his brow,

U.S. Air Force Photo

**Control Tower at Thule Air Base, mid-1950s.**

said "Whew" and looked at me. "Feel better now?" I asked. Then said, "Now all you have to do is hope none of them abort." "Yeah," he said, "I've never sweated anything out so much in my life."

The overflight mission went well. All tankers were at the rendezvous point over the North Pole on time, radio silence was maintained, all air refuelings were 100 percent successful, and the RB–47 mission results for both E and H aircraft were outstanding. We had one emergency landing field available to aircrews, consisting mostly of scraped ice and oil drums, set up at "Nord," a Danish weather station on the northeast coast of Greenland close to the North Pole, but we never had to use it. That was just as well, as the only other alternate landing base was Goose Bay, Labrador, approximately three hours and forty-five minutes flying time away. But in spite of an occasional ice fog scare and some low fuel situations that required the rapid launch of a tanker, the whole of Project Home Run could not have gone better.

**The city of Noril'sk, behind the Ural Mountains near the Yenisey River, imaged during a Home Run mission on 14 April 1956.**

**Enlargement showing open pit mining operation at Noril'sk.**

Our missions encompassed the entire northern coast of the Soviet Union, from the area south of Novaya Zemly'a, or Banana Island as the crews jocularly referred to it and its

atomic test site, to the Chukotskiya Peninsula, and Anadyr and Providenya near the Bering Strait. Towns and military areas photographed included Dikson, Makarova, Chelyuskin, Ust-Olensk, Khorgo, Tiksi, Nordvik, Ambarchik, Tal Tumus, Anadyr, Mys Shmidta, and Wrangel Island.

Photo courtesy of Earl O'Loughlin

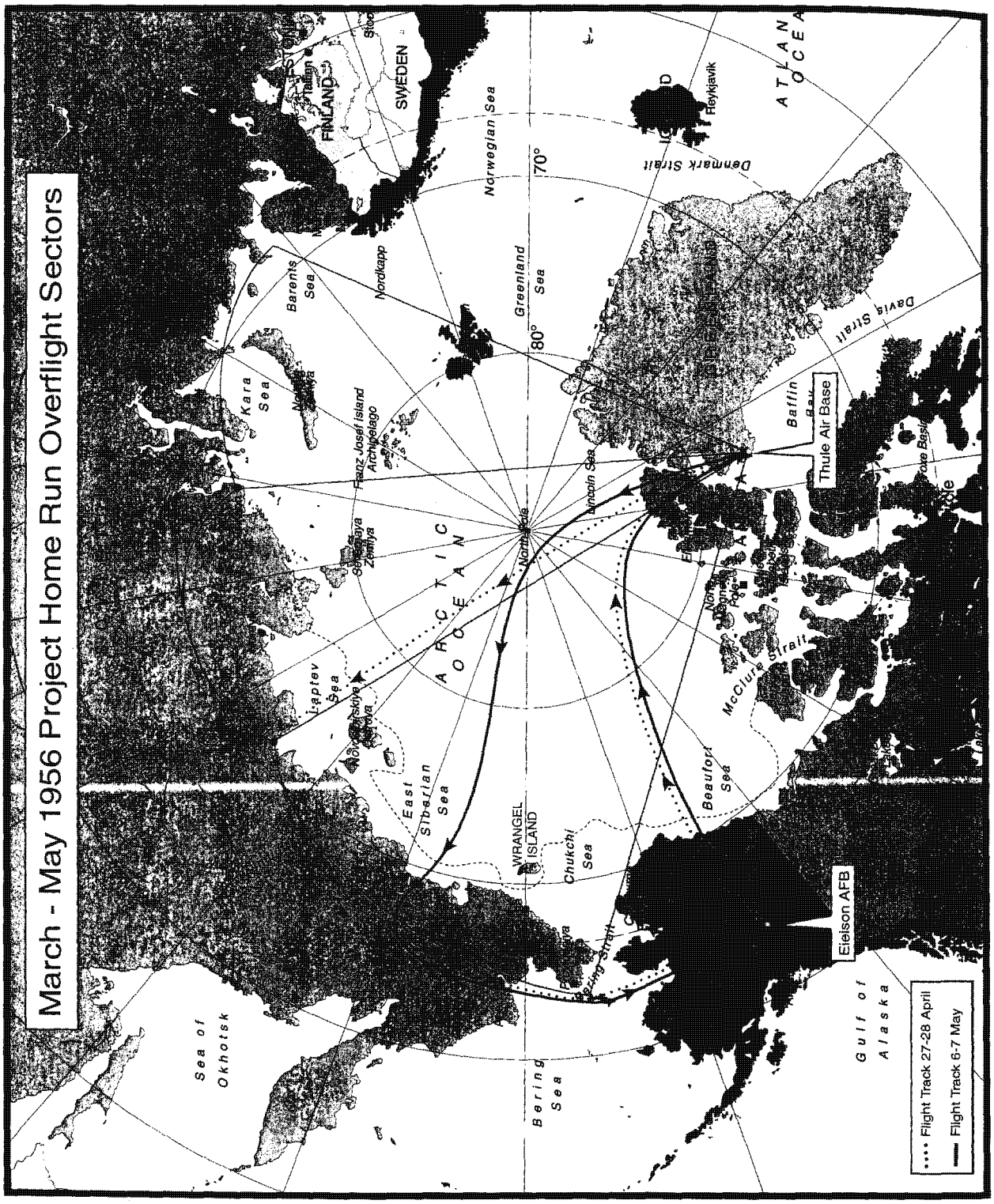
**Maj. Floyd Robinson, October 1954.**

It was my duty to schedule and brief all missions and RB–47E and KC–97 crews, assigning the toughest and longest missions to the highest ranking and most reliable aircraft commanders in the 26th SRS—men like Lt. Col. Pete Moore, Maj. Larry Brown, Maj. Floyd Robinson, Capt. Ben Harris, Capt. John Lappo, and Capt. Dan Guzowski, whom I had known well in the 301st Bombardment Group back in 1948 and 1949. All the crews did well, although Lappo was almost too aggressive and made us tear our hair out on more than one occasion. I'm not sure now how many RB–47E sorties we flew, but, operating from a single 10,000 foot runway, we flew more than 100 missions involving numerous penetrating aircraft during the project period without any near intercepts and only a few hostile sightings. Nor did we have any aborts for mechanical problems, which bespoke the extremely high quality of maintenance provided for us by our ground crews, particularly in view of the fact that they had to perform all of their maintenance outdoors in zero to sub-zero weather because there were no hangers at Thule large enough to handle B–47 aircraft. It was a remarkable example of professionalism and pride on the part of the aircraft mechanics and crew chiefs.

Photo courtesy of Earl O'Loughlin

**26th SRS Maintenance Line Chief at Thule, MSgt. R. G. Griffith.**

Normally we flew RB–47E reconnaissance missions whenever weather in the photo areas permitted, two to four aircraft per day. After the whiteout we flew almost daily, as the weather was



invariably good at Thule, except for the one day when an ice fog crept in and enveloped some of the base, and particularly the first two or three thousand feet of the only runway. The one reconnaissance aircraft of this mission, with Lt. Col. Pete Moore in command, had the option of going to the Goose Bay alternate. But his low-fuel situation and the three hours and 45 minutes required to reach the alternate field would have involved launching a tanker for a refueling in spite of the ice fog, or attempting to land in spite of the short available landing distance available, which required a bit of iron nerve. Pete elected to land at Thule. We in the tower had a few rather anxious moments when the aircraft entered the ice fog until we saw him come back out of it with the aircraft under complete control. I was especially relieved because Pete was a West Point classmate.

U.S. Air Force photo

**Maintenance crews refuel an F–94 in sub-zero temperatures at Thule Air Base, December 1953.**

The final mission of Project Home Run has been referred to as the "massed overflight."* It was conducted in early May by six RB–47Es flying roughly parallel courses over the Chukotskiya Poluostrov Peninsula, focusing on the many military and naval facilities ringing the shores of the peninsula on either side of and supporting Provideniya, and other installations in the area. This was the one mission that had the entire staff and commanders excited, as well as a bit apprehensive because of its audacity, especially when it was executed without a hitch and without a reaction from the Soviets. All of the RB–47s landed at Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska, and returned to Thule Air Base the following day without incident, to the cheers of the Thule Air Base community. It was an exciting climax to a highly successful project.

*For the reaction to this mission in Washington, D.C., see Roger Rhodarmer's memoir "Recollections of an Overflight 'Legman'" in this volume. Ed.

None of the top commanders or operations officers, I should add, were permitted to fly any of the reconnaissance missions for security reasons. General Wheless understood why, but one or two of the lower-ranking commanders felt that, as during World War II, they should have been allowed to share the hazards likely to be encountered by their crew members. U.S. Air Force headquarters had issued that directive and there was no taking issue with the security aspects of such an action. One of the senior commanders was frankly told to "forget it" by General Wheless. Having heard the exchange, I didn't even bother asking; I knew such a request would be denied.

Project Home Run concluded quickly following the final "massed flight" mission. All remaining aircraft departed Thule for the United States on 10 May 1956.

## Editorial Afterword

Based on limited information, the first account of Project Home Run appeared publicly in 1997.* It described Home Run, directed by Brig. Gen Hewitt T. Wheless and Col. William J. Meng, conducted in sub-zero temperatures with maintenance crews working on exposed aircraft and with aircrews operating from a single ice- and fog-covered runway—without a single person or airplane lost through mechanical failure, in an accident, or to Soviet action. It concluded: *"To this day, the SAC Thule [overflight] missions remain one of the most incredible demonstrations of professional aviation skill ever seen in any military organization at any time."* The participants' recollections that appear in this volume we believe underscore that initial assessment.

*R. Cargill Hall, "The Truth About Overflights," *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Spring 1997.