

Freedom Through Vigilance Volume IV
USAFSS Airborne Reconnaissance, Part I
By Larry Tart

Freedom Through Vigilance, Volume IV, USAFSS Airborne Reconnaissance (Part I)

With the history of US Air Force Security Service (1948-1979) and its successor organizations covering such a vast domain—more than a hundred small to large units operating primarily in the hinterlands of Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas—Larry Tart subdivided FREEDOM THROUGH VIGILANCE into five comprehensive, standalone volumes (3,100-plus total pages):

- Volume I, USAFSS General History, USAFSS COMSEC and Women in USAFSS
- Volume II, USAFSS History in Europe and Middle East
- Volume III, USAFSS History in Far East and Alaska
- Volume IV, USAFSS Airborne SIGINT Recon, Part I
- Volume V, USAFSS Airborne SIGINT Recon, Part II.

Volumes I through III are devoted to the command's ground sites, and being too voluminous for a single volume, Air Force Security Service airborne reconnaissance history is addressed in Volumes IV and V. **Volume IV** addresses airborne SIGINT reconnaissance in World War II (Chapter 9), early USAFSS airborne reconnaissance (Chapter 10), the histories of the 6916th, 6988th, and 6985th Security Squadrons (Chapters 11, 12 and 13) and USAFSS support on missile range instrumentation ships (Chapter 14).

In **Chapter 9**, Tart begins the chronicle with the evolution of airborne reconnaissance a century ago, provides an overview of the British “Yorker Service,” and concludes with a brief history of US Army Air Forces radio squadrons mobile and Air Corps airborne voice intercept operations during the final years of WW II. The British Y Service mentored American signals intelligence personnel during the early years of the war, and the United States and the United Kingdom joined forces in the SIGINT arena with the Y Service taking the lead in breaking the German Enigma codes (ULTRA) in Europe and US SIGINT services heading up efforts against the Japanese Purple code (MAGIC) in the Far East.

Detachment D, 849th Signal Intelligence Service, which consisted of a lieutenant and four Signal Corps privates, became the first known US Army Air Corps COMINT unit in Europe when activated in Algeria in July 1943. Serving aboard Gen. Mark Clark's flagship, Detachment D supported the amphibious assault at Salerno, Italy, in September 1943. Expanding to 25 men by December, the unit supported XII Tactical Air Command as the Allies fought their way north through Italy. Elements of the detachment landed later in southern France and rapidly advanced to Hambach, Germany, where Det D, 849th SIS became Detachment A, 2nd Radio Squadron Mobile in April 1945. An overview of the nine radio squadrons mobile of WW II (1st RSM through 9th RSM) is included in this chapter.

Towards the end of the war, US Army Air Corps German linguists flying as “voice interceptors” aboard heavy bombers participated in air raids against German targets in Europe, while counterpart Nisei (2nd generation Japanese) linguists/voice interceptors flew aboard RB-24 and B-29 aircraft in reconnaissance and bombing raids against the main Japanese islands and targets in the China-Burma-India theater. In addition to conducting interviews with several of the German and Japanese WW II voice intercept operators, Larry Tart has held extended discussions with Herman Roesler, a 2nd generation German-American who may have been America's first airborne voice intercept operator—Herman flew 52 combat missions aboard B-17's staging from Italy in 1944. Several airborne voice interceptors became prisoners of war, and at least five are listed as killed in action—these and other details are elucidated in Chapter 9.

As detailed in **Chapter 10**, Air Force Security Service airborne reconnaissance had its genesis in Project 502-50. Reporting for duty at Headquarters USAFSS in late 1950 after recall to active duty, electrical engineer 1st Lt. Fred Smith was handed a folder marked Project 502-50 and directed to build a fleet of airborne communications reconnaissance platforms for the command. Creating a specification of sorts, Lt. Smith asked USAF Headquarters for four B-50 bombers, and Air Force Headquarters responded, “We’ll give you one old B-29 out of the boneyard, and if you make the airborne reconnaissance operations work, then we’ll consider the B-50’s.”

Thus began the creation of ACRP prototype RB-29A 44-62290, which USAFSS outfitted with jury-rigged intercept equipment on the flight line at Kelly AFB—full details, including exploratory COMINT reconnaissance missions in the Far East and Europe in 1952-1953, are covered in Chapter 10. The chapter also addresses Blue Sky RC-47 operations in Korea (1952-1964).

In 244 pages, **Chapter 11** describes the start-up in 1956 of the 6916th Security Squadron at Rhein-Main Air Base, Germany, local operations from Rhein-Main (1956-1973), and detached operations at Incirlik, Turkey (1960-1966), and Athens, Greece (1967-1973). The chapter also covers the relocation of the 6916th Security Squadron to Athenai Airport, Greece, in 1973 and 6916th operations from Athens, 1973 to 1990 when the unit was deactivated.

Commencing with the arrival of the first US operational airborne COMINT reconnaissance platform (RB-29A 44-62290) at Yokota Air Base, Japan, in 1954, **Chapter 12** documents the evolution of the flying contingent of the 1st RSM into the 6988th Security Squadron and addresses the history of the squadron’s RB-50 operations (1956-1961) and the history of 6988th C-130B-II activities (1961-1972). The chapter includes Vietnam War-associated operations from 1963 to 1968, when the 6988th Security Squadron handed off its combat SIGINT direct support mission to the 6990th Security Squadron.

Chapter 13 addresses the history of the 6985th Security Squadron, Eielson AFB, Alaska (1962-1992). Beginning with coverage of USAFSS linguists providing SIGINT direct support aboard RB-47’s and KC-135’s staging from Eielson during the early 1960’s (before the arrival of the new RC-135D Office Boy reconnaissance platforms), the chapter documents 6985th operations aboard the RC-135D aircraft and missile monitoring airborne platforms Nancy Rae, Rivet Amber, Cobra Ball, etc., that staged from Shemya Island in the Aleutians.

Chapter 14 records the history of our USAFSS “Navy”—a special group of USAFSS and ESC linguists and other specialists who participated in lengthy cruises aboard the USNS General H. H. Arnold and other Air Force Advanced Range Instrumentation Ships that monitored the splashdown of Soviet ICBM warheads on Kamchatka Peninsula and in the Pacific Ocean.