

Presentation of the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award to the 46th Reconnaissance Squadron

By General Michael Kudlacz, Cmdr. 55th Strategic Wing
at the SAC Reconnaissance Reunion Banquet, Omaha, 7 Sept 1996

"And now we'd like to honor a very special group of people, who because of the once-highly classified nature of their mission, have waited far too long for the recognition they deserve, the 46th Reconnaissance Squadron.

"Prior to June 1946, only two flights had ever been flown over the North Pole. Polar maps or charts were unavailable from any source and navigation aids were nonexistent in the Arctic. Despite this, from June 1946 until October 1947, the members of the 46th Reconnaissance Squadron under the command of Major Maynard E. White conducted over one hundred extremely hazardous reconnaissance missions over the North Pole from Ladd Field, Fairbanks, Alaska. They did this in their converted B-29 aircraft. The 46th, the first operational unit of the then-infant Strategic Air Command, was tasked to fly long-range reconnaissance flights over the polar ice cap to assess the Soviet threat in that area. The code name for this operation was "Project Nanook."

"Every flight was dangerous, not only because of the lack of charts and navigation aids, but also because there was slim hope of rescue if a plane was forced down in one of the harshest, most isolated regions of the world. To successfully perform their assigned mission, Major White's crews had to first devise an effective means of navigation in the northern latitudes using their existing equipment. Beginning with hand-drawn maps on meat-wrapping paper, the 46th subsequently developed and perfected what is now universally known as the Grid System of Navigation. Despite all the technological advances since 1946, the Grid System is still being used today by both civil and military aviators as a means for navigating transpolar routes. In fact, our RC-135 crews still train in this method and use the same grid procedures developed by the 46th while performing their worldwide operational reconnaissance missions.

"The polar navigation procedures and techniques perfected by the 46th were later passed on to engineers at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base to help develop early versions of our inertial navigation systems that now enable world aviation to fly the transpolar routes. The 46th was largely responsible for the attainment of the global navigation capability that has been cited as one of the ten greatest accomplishments of the United States within the last fifty years.

"The crews and maintenance personnel of the 46th also had to overcome numerous unforeseen problems caused by the extreme cold of the Alaskan winter. Temperatures of 55-degrees below zero were not uncommon and dense ice fog was a frequent hazard. Procedures routinely used by pilots and ground crews in the lower 48 to prevent engine and hydraulic problems would often worsen or create more problems in the extreme cold. Once again up to the task, the 46th identified potential problem areas and developed new procedures to assure the safety and success of cold weather flight operations. A number of their procedures are still being used today for flight operations in extremely cold climates.

"Because of their unique expertise, the 46th was designated by the Air Force as the official source of all information on polar operations. Unfortunately, performing long-range operations in the harsh environment of the north took its toll. During the operation, the 46th suffered the loss of (four) aircraft and (five) crewmembers. Despite the hardship and losses, the crews of the 46th successfully mapped the entire five and one half million square miles of the Arctic using a combination of photo and radar photography. Although primarily used to assess the Soviet threat, the products of the missions were also used to develop the first accurate charts and maps of the northern frontier.

"The 46th crews became extremely proficient in flying over the polar regions. Recognizing their skills, SAC began sending select crews from various stateside bomb groups to Alaska for polar flight training. Once certified in polar operations, these crews returned to their bases and trained the remainder of the crews back home. The overall result of the 46th polar training program was the expansion of SAC's bomber strike capability from the mid-latitudes to the true global strike capability we possess today. Few singular accomplishments have had as great an impact on the United States and the world as the aerial conquering of the arctic frontier.

"After nearly a half a century of being classified top secret, it's time the impressive and pioneering effort of the 46th Reconnaissance Squadron be given the recognition it deserves. Tonight it is truly an honor and a privilege to present the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award to the 46th Reconnaissance Squadron for their dedication, professionalism and the courage they displayed during "Project Nanook." Will Colonel Maynard White and the members of the 46th Reconnaissance Squadron please join me up front for the presentation of your award. Ladies and gentlemen, would you please stand for the reading of the citation.

(Citation read, streamer attached to 46th flag, members congratulated, ribbons and lapel pins presented to each attending member by General Kudlacz).

"Ladies and gentlemen please join me in a toast: To the unsung heroes of the 46th Reconnaissance Squadron."

Audience: "Hear Hear."