

A Kiss for a Habu

First, a definition of “Habu” is in order:

HABU: (pronounced "hah-BOO"): A poisonous snake found in southeast Asia (Japan, Philippines, Taiwan, southeast China). Habus are pit vipers, more closely related to the adder than to any species of North American snake. The actual "habu" (*Trimeresurus flavoviridis*) is relatively small, not usually getting longer than 5 feet. They are not typically aggressive but will bite if provoked. They are not as deadly as cobras or mambas, but are more much more dangerous than most North American venomous snakes.



Quasi-Official SR-71 Patch



SR-71 Blackbird aka Habu

By way of explanation:

When the A-12s (later called the SR-71s) were first flown to their new remote base at **Kadena AFB** in Okinawa, the local people thought that this strange and somewhat wicked-looking airplane was shaped like the Habu snake. They started calling it the Habu airplane, and later just **Habu**. Crews who flew the airplane were also called Habu, and the name came to be recognized as synonymous with the blackbird program and was even incorporated into the insignia worn by the crews on their uniforms (see the patch above).

Now on to the story:

I had just come from 2 ½ years in a graduate program in Ordnance Engineering at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School at Monterey, California, and had thus been away from the FMF (Fleet Marine Force) and any updates to our supporting aircraft. I had never been closely associated with the air arm, except for troop haulers and jump aircraft. The aircraft I had been most familiar with at the time were, “Puff the Magic Dragon” (a much modified C-47 [the AC-47] packing multiple mini-guns in 7.62 mm), the C-130 transport (and later converted to a more powerful version of Puff the Magic Dragon, usually nicknamed “Spooky”), the F-4 Phantom, the A-4 Skyhawk, , the CH-53 Helicopter and of course the ubiquitous CH-46 troop hauler. The H-34 Helicopter was on its last legs and would soon disappear from the tactical scene. Of course, virtually everyone knew of the capabilities of the Huey (HU1E and improvements), and the Huey Gunships. Rumor had it that a more sleek version of the Huey Gunship had come on the scene and was now known as the Cobra.

Spy planes were not in my lexicon of expertise, nor since they were not a close support aircraft, had they been of any personal interest. The U-2 was well known of course, most especially since Francis Gary Powers had been shot down in one during the Cuban Missile Crisis. I was not aware that the U-2 had been since overshadowed by an aircraft that flew over 2000-mph and had a service ceiling that put it out of sight and detection of any but the most sophisticated gear. Little did I know that one of these squadrons was then based out of Kadena on “The Rock” (Okinawa).

I had been kissed on both cheeks by the Navy Postgraduate School, and given a piece of paper that indicated that I was now a part of the “Star Wars Crowd” (a term that wouldn’t come into its own for several years). Mercifully, I was sent back to the Fleet to renew my acquaintance with the M1A1 Mud Marine. Quite frankly I was thrilled. While I have always had a predilection for ordnance of all kinds, I am much more at home employing such gear than sitting behind a desk designing such.

I came to the 3rd Marine Division with high hopes of being assigned to an Infantry Battalion, but alas, my first assignment was as the Company Commander of Headquarters Company of the Division. This meant that from a practical standpoint, I was the Company Commander of the Division Commander himself (in that I had custody of his record book), but it was not the sort of job that warmed the cockles of a good Infantryman’s heart. Basically, I was a paper pusher and I was NOT a happy camper. Every moment of every day was occupied in searching out a good infantry assignment for a wayfaring Marine Major with an aptitude for mayhem!

To add insult to injury, this was during our first gas crisis (early 1973), and to save fuel, the Marine Corps had placed virtually every organizational vehicle on what was known as “organizational (administrative) deadline” and only to be used in the event of extreme emergency. We had a single vehicle assigned to the 3rd Marine Division Headquarters be used for administrative purposes. Only the Headquarters Battalion Commander had a legally functioning staff car, and he kept tight control over his wheels. Our Battalion Commander (of Headquarters Battalion of the Division) was a character known as “Hot Dog Pat” Carothers who had been in the old 1st Force Reconnaissance Company back in the late 1950s/early 1960s. We were pretty well acquainted, but Colonel Carothers was not overly sympathetic to my preference for the Infantry since he too was stuck at Division Headquarters. To say that I was bored to tears was an understatement.

Coming back to the office following noon chow one day, I happened on one of my young L/Cpl. clerk typists who was engaged in what appeared to be donning a pair of panty hose! What in the hell was this? Panty hose? Dear Allah? “Say it ain’t so Joe” to paraphrase the old story of the kid accosting *Shoeless Joe Jackson* after the notorious Black Sox Scandal in Chicago in 1919! A MALE Marine putting on “Panty Hose?”... Arrrggggg... Here we’re speaking of the elements of a court martial for homosexual behavior – don’t forget, this was well before the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” evolution in the U.S. Military.

I got hold of the legal section at Division Headquarters, and we decided to process this clown for a semi-immediate court martial, or at the very least an unsuitability discharge for homosexual tendencies. We simply didn’t put up with such behavior in those days. Normally, we would have put this idiot in the Bastille¹ (buzz word for Brig) awaiting trial both for his own safety (lest he be physically pummeled by his fellow Marines), or to keep him from molesting the lads who were of the “straight bent”... The only fly in the ointment was our lack of available fuel dead-lining our unit vehicles. The brig² was some miles from the Division

Headquarters, so we worked out a compromise. Since the lad hadn't (yet) attempted to foist his attentions onto any of his barracks mates, and *seemed* harmless, we decided to restrict him to quarters awaiting the results of our investigation. Murphy of course had other plans...

It seems that our suspected sexual deviate managed to slip past the gate security and headed to the town of Kadena, Okinawa for a little weekend liberty.

For those who haven't spent any time on Okinawa, I will give a short course on Kadena. The "ville" of Kadena (as opposed to the Air Force Base) had a number of hotels that had been home to the stewardesses flying in and out of "The Rock"³ on the "Freedom Birds"⁴ hauling the fortunate escapees from Vietnam back to the Land of the Big PX. By 1973, the commercial Airline Traffic had begun to slack off, but there were still many meeting rooms available in the various hotels, and they tended to attract parties and social gatherings.

Back to the Habus:

As mentioned before, the SR-71 aka Habu was a super secret aircraft assigned to fly spy mission over the territory of our perceived enemies. Personnel of the Habu Squadron had been subjected to so many security checks, that they were considered squeaky clean, and the slightest suspicion of any wrong doing was grounds for transfer if not incarceration in Leavenworth. Well, squeaky clean or not, even Habu Squadrons get the urge to let off a little steam occasionally, and so it was that weekend in the early spring of 1973. The SR-71 Squadron had decided to throw an unannounced "bash" in one of the Kadena Hotels. Needless to say, this was not a highly publicized party, and no signs adorned the doors announcing the identity of the attendees. Since everyone was wearing civilian clothes, and no one was wearing identifying patches, this outfit was not clearly not identifiable as a gathering of spooks!

As luck would have it, our suspected deviate Marine was wandering through the Hotel when he detected the sounds of mirth and merry-making, punctuated with the clink of glasses. ...and out of pure curiosity he stuck his head in the door. There standing in the center of the room talking to some of his buddies, was the most handsome male-being our apprentice "corksocker"⁵ had ever seen. Apparently overcome by his hormones, he simply couldn't resist, and proceeded over to the perceived object of his affections and planted a big sloppy kiss on the unfortunate lad's mouth, complete with a far-reaching tongue! Yetch... It turns out that the "kissee" was one of the most experienced SR-71 Pilots in the squadron, and was absolutely flabbergasted by this unsolicited show of affection by a Marine who had apparently decided to emerge from the closet!

This idiot couldn't have stirred up any more trouble if he had thrown a live hand grenade into the party. The pilot didn't know what to say or do, and of course all of his buddies began eyeballing him like he had the plague! Both individuals were immediately restrained, and the Pilot was under immediate suspicion for being a closet homosexual – which as mentioned before would have exposed him to the immediate threat of blackmail. We got a tremendous amount of command attention at Headquarters Company for allowing this deviate out of our sight, and an immediate investigation ensued both from the Marine Corps community, and both the Air Force and Spook community. Some idiot came into the company office yelling that our "wayward-one" had just kissed a Habu pilot. My first question was "What the hell is a Habu Pilot?" as I had never even heard of a Habu at that point except as the descriptive term of an Okinawan Snake. It would be several months before I actually got a gander at a "genuine Habu" taking off from the Kadena runway.

It had become a damned if you do, and damned if you don't situation. Had we decided to waste precious fuel taking a guy to the brig for doing nothing more evil than donning a pair of panty hose, the Colonel would have been outraged. In retrospect of course, the Colonel was outraged that we had *NOT* wasted the gas and thus prevented the little deviate from initiating an investigation that damn near shook the entire SR-71 Program.

While this comes close to being hilariously funny in retrospect, it was anything *but* funny at the time. I continued looking for a deploying Infantry Battalion, except at a much increased pace hoping to exit Okinawa in general, and the Kadena area in particular.

My wish was granted, and I was assigned as the Operations Officer of the 1st Battalion of the 4th Marine Regiment. In our wanderings Ray Findlay (the XO of 1/4) and I got into even more hilarious situations in such places as the Philippines, Cambodia and NKP Thailand, but those will have to wait for another time, and other sea-stories. I have always wondered if they turned every nut in the entire Marine Corps loose in the Far East in the 1973-74 time frame...? Of course there was the time that we kept the Air America plane waiting on the runway attempting to escape from Phnom Phen Airstrip while it was loaded with BUFES, MUFES, and LUFES - (Big Ugly F++king Elephants – you fill in the letters on the others, but they have to do with size). The Air America types were more than just a little nervous since the airstrip was being shelled! And of course that was the same evolution when Ray got “a-head” from the Cambodian National Museum (heh, heh, heh...), and then Reggie Ponsford left his dog tags in an NKP steam house and then threatened to punch out the Air Force Security Cops on the gate at NKP for attempting to incarcerate a few wayward Marine Officers for being out past Curfew (who in hell had ever heard of a curfew in a combat zone?). As I said, I think they had emptied the entire Marine Corps “nuthatch” into the Far East in those long ago days! Sigh...

Semper Fi,

ROC

End Notes:

¹ Bastille was the notorious prison in France during the French Revolution. Often used as an alternative term for Brig in the Naval Service.

² Brig is a naval term for “slam” or military lockup. This is derived from the old term Brigantine (a type of ship) often used to confine prisoners during the days of sailing ships.

³ The Rock is a slang term for Okinawa.

⁴ Freedom Birds had reference to the Commercial Airlines under contract to the Government for taking the returning veterans from Vietnam back to the United States.

⁵ Corksocker is of course, a deliberate misspelling to avoid grossing out our more genteel readers.