



Wanda Belle/Rivet Ball and Her Talisman

Dangerous and high anxiety professions bring out many primitive natures and behaviors in their participants. Among such behaviors is an active penchant for superstitious actions. Arguably, some steadfastly maintain that disregard for dangerous actions, excessive alcohol consumption, and predilection to bet and gamble are also distinctive behavioral outcomes of frequent participation in adrenaline-inducing jobs. Although "work hard, play hard" was an unofficial-but-fervently applied axiom of our aircrew members, and most of us willingly share war stories of our excesses in this arena, this short treatise will address only a very few exhibitions of superstitious behavior.

No doubt, many of our small remaining cadre have stories of strange superstitious behaviors exhibited by their colleagues. Almost everyone had, or knew somebody who had, unreasonable faith in some gadget that would make things go well; a special key ring, a family picture, a particular prayer, or even some wild object and mythology having little to do with our challenging work. Revelation of these unique actions and beliefs can bring about collective remembrances and joy that serve to meld us into an evermore cohesive friendship, a camaraderie that can not be better accomplished than by humor, disbelief, and -- sometimes -- disgust. They can aggregate the commonalities of aircrew who were otherwise separated by great physical distance, varying time frames of assignments, and disparate ranks. You get the picture; so, share those secrets!

Among the disgusting category, was one MA operator (whose initials are CN) who wore the same UNWASHED underwear for every flight! Initially, that doesn't seem so bad, but after several months, his efforts to preserve his life and safety soon became an assault on his fellow's olfactory systems. This particular superstition earned CN a gang-tackle and shower in Hangar 2 on the island of Shemya. Unfortunately, those initiating the corrective action missed the underwear, a circumstance that was later sensed (!) by the competition between the JP-4 exhaust air inside Cobra Ball 2 on a "tuna run" and the odoriferous emanations of the clean-bodied crewmen's Nomex pickle suit.

At Shemya, there were times when there was just one out-of-service aircraft. When this happened, the crew was awarded a "beer light" which authorized them to sample the frothy stuff, go to a movie, visit the Composite Building chow hall, make a run to the dump (a magical place full of the most rewarding treasures!), wander about the island (if the normally abysmal weather permitted), and even conduct archaeological digs at South Beach. (Perhaps a story on this activity is in the future.)

Inevitably, choosing to wander about the island, "just to get the hell away from the hangar," usually brought such hikers to the bones of Wanda Belle/Rivet Ball, tail number 591491, which were in an ever-degrading state, piled up at the end of the runway. On January 13th, 1969 (Happy New Year world!) she hydroplaned off the runway and was irreparably ruined. By the grace of God, AMS Gene Willard and his 17 fellow Silent Warriors were not badly injured, but because Gene did his job and reported in his Post Mission Flight Report that a crewmember burned his hands on an escape rope, all hell broke loose among the thankfully relieved head shed; consequently, ever after, we all had to wear our nomex gloves on takeoff and landing.

Every Shemya flyer knows the dangers of landing out there; it was usually a "Pucker Factor 9" landing, and our infrequent beer lights gave many of us a sobering view of what could await us. Rivet Ball's wreckage, having been cannibalized for serviceable equipment and then, later, being used for training purposes by the airfield fire department, was a gruesome reminder. (I do not forget the sad loss of six of our fellows, and the great heroism showed by some of the the survivors, in the Cobra Ball 2, tail number 612664, crash landing out there on March 15, 1981. I had retired the previous year, and CB2's story is not yet mine to tell.)



In 1976, we had a devastating earthquake at Shemya, one which picked up Cobra ball and slammed her down on the hangar floor six inches away. She was too damaged to fly, at that time, so we were given a beer light, and several of us went outside to examine the damage done to the hangar, the taxiway, etc. As you might predict, several of us ended up at the grave of Wanda Bell/Rivet Ball. (Pictured above are Brian Idzik and Weaver Kolb during that gathering visit.) While there, I spotted a melted gob of aluminum and put it my pocket. I also found a small (about 4" by 7") rectangle of wing covering sitting on the saw grass. I picked it up and took it back to the hangar with me. Those two pieces of Shemya/USAFSS history soon became part of my own contribution to Silent Warrior superstition.

I began to wear the melted Rivet Ball aluminum nugget as my own protection charm, sort of a spoof on the good luck charm mythology. My action backfired, however, when fellow crewmembers began to insist that I not forget my good luck charm. I still have it to this day, although it seems of little functional value in protecting me from harm in my recliner chair; consequently I no longer wear it on my missions dedicated to viewing YouTube, but it is a reminder of the great brotherhood I enjoyed over 45 years ago.

The small, honeycombed, aluminum patch of Rivet Ball wing took on an even more beneficial importance that lasted for several years. I took it back to the hangar and painted it with a simple two-color (green and yellow) nature scene of mountains and trees. Back at Eielson, I donated that small but important artifact to the "Chinese Auction" that was held annually to garner funds for our favorite local charities. Characteristic of the alcohol-induced frenzy that often attached itself to strange auction items, that piece of crashed RC-135 garnered several hundreds of dollars in contributions from an impromptu cadre of Operations donors who pitted themselves against a similarly constituted group of maintenance participants. It was reported that, for the next several years, the painting served as an anticipated final act at these auctions wherein the Operations-against-Maintenance bidding would earn the winning group possession of the painting and special bragging rights for an entire year.

When Amber Hall was shut down, AMS Al Moyers, who was to soon retire, was given the Rivet Ball painting to return to me with the unit's thanks. Sadly, in my many moves over the past 40+ years, that memorable good luck charm has been lost; but its purpose -- charitable funds earner and cohesiveness creator -- has not been forgotten. Clearly, some superstitious talismen still have an important place in our society.