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FEATURE STORY

Peninsulans get VIP treatment on Air Force tour

BY MARION SOFTKY

It could have been real. I nervously adjusted the controls to ease the giant bomber gently onto the runway.

As the B-1B touched the ground, we could see the runway stretching to the blue horizon, but couldn't feel the reassuring thump of wheels on pavement. The adjustable legs supporting the simulator were turned off.

In the co-pilot's seat, Rich Ford of Portola Valley wanted more action. He grabbed the controls and zoomed the plane back into the sky. As he launched the nation's newest working bomber into a dramatic barrel roll, the horizon spun dizzily—just like an IMAX film or next year's video game.

What were Peninsula residents doing flying a bomber simulator at Dyess Air Force Base in Abilene, Texas? We were—all 37 of us—"CDV's from San Jose" on tour. In Air Force parlance, "CDV" means "Civilian Distinguished Visitor."

In late August we were treated to a whizz-bang, three-day tour of the Air Force's most modern bombers. We saw B-1B's in Texas. We got a sales pitch for the B-2 "stealth" bomber in Palmdale. In Riverside we attended strategic briefings on why the Air Force needs B-2s to protect the United States in an increasingly unpredictable world.

Our group included 33 men and four women. Half a dozen came from South San Mateo County. They included Rich Ford, a partner in the Ford Land Co. in Menlo Park; Kings Mountain contractor Bill Butler; local developer Walter Harrington; high-tech businessman Peter Pomeroy; JoAnne DeVischer, office manager for Sierra Ventures in Menlo Park; and I, representing the League of Women Voters.

The junket cost each of us \$150 to pay for food and lodging. The Air Force took care of transportation, briefings and entertainment.

Straggling into Moffett Field at 6:30 a.m., we rode a working Air Force KC-135 tanker to Texas. The basic Boeing 707, one of the Air Force's "flying gas tanks," had no air conditioning, no soundproofing, almost no windows, and seats installed backwards in the cargo compartment.

At Dyess Air Force Base we saw a working fleet of some 30 lean, sinister-looking B-1B bombers. Here pilots and crews for the entire fleet of 97 B-1B's train, while others remain on standby—with conventional or nuclear weapons—in case of need.

In Palmdale we observed seven B-2 stealth bombers—the controversial centerpiece of the new smaller, smarter air force—under construction in Northrop's

cavernous, 1 million-square-foot assembly plant.

At March Air Force Base in Riverside we were briefed on the uncertainties of a world where the crumbling Soviet Union still has thousands of nuclear weapons, and 11 countries may have nuclear bombs by the end of the decade.

"The Soviet Union could begin to turn negative if the republics start to fight," warned Lt. Gen. Robert Beckel, commander of the 15th Air Force. "Soviet nuclear forces are in a normal state of activity."

The 15th Air Force is one of two air forces under the Strategic Air Command. It is responsible for bombers, intercontinental missiles, tankers and reconnaissance for the United States west of the Mississippi and across the Pacific Ocean.

Not least of our experiences was riding in a working Air Force tanker which had been to the Persian Gulf with the same crew aboard. During operation Desert Storm, our plane "The Cobra," and others like it carried out almost 80,000 aerial refuelings. They played a key role in keeping the air fleets of the Air Force, the Navy and our allies aloft.

On the way to Texas we refueled four F-16s. Between Texas and Palmdale we refueled a B-1B. It was a real thrill to lie on your stomach in the tail of the plane and watch a huge bomber slithering gently into place, then meeting the refueling boom steered by competent, cheerful Sergeant Joe Duarte, lying alongside.

It could hardly be a coincidence that our trip to view the awesome "flying wing" B-2 bombers was timed to coincide with the recurrent battle over their funding in Congress.

Even though we were fully conscious of a giant sales pitch, we all came away impressed. We were struck with the calibre of the people—energized by their recent successes in the Persian Gulf—the mind-boggling technology, and the serious, if ominous, purpose of what we

saw. One of our number called it "a deadly game of Atari."

We also had a wonderful time, ranging from a Texas barbecue put on by the Air Force and the Abilene Chamber of Commerce, to a visit to Sally's Alley, a favorite night spot at March Air Force

Base, personally escorted by Gen. Beckel.

None of us will forget our VIP arrival at March Air Force Base. We had just flown from Palmdale to Riverside in our trusty KC-135, which had been baking

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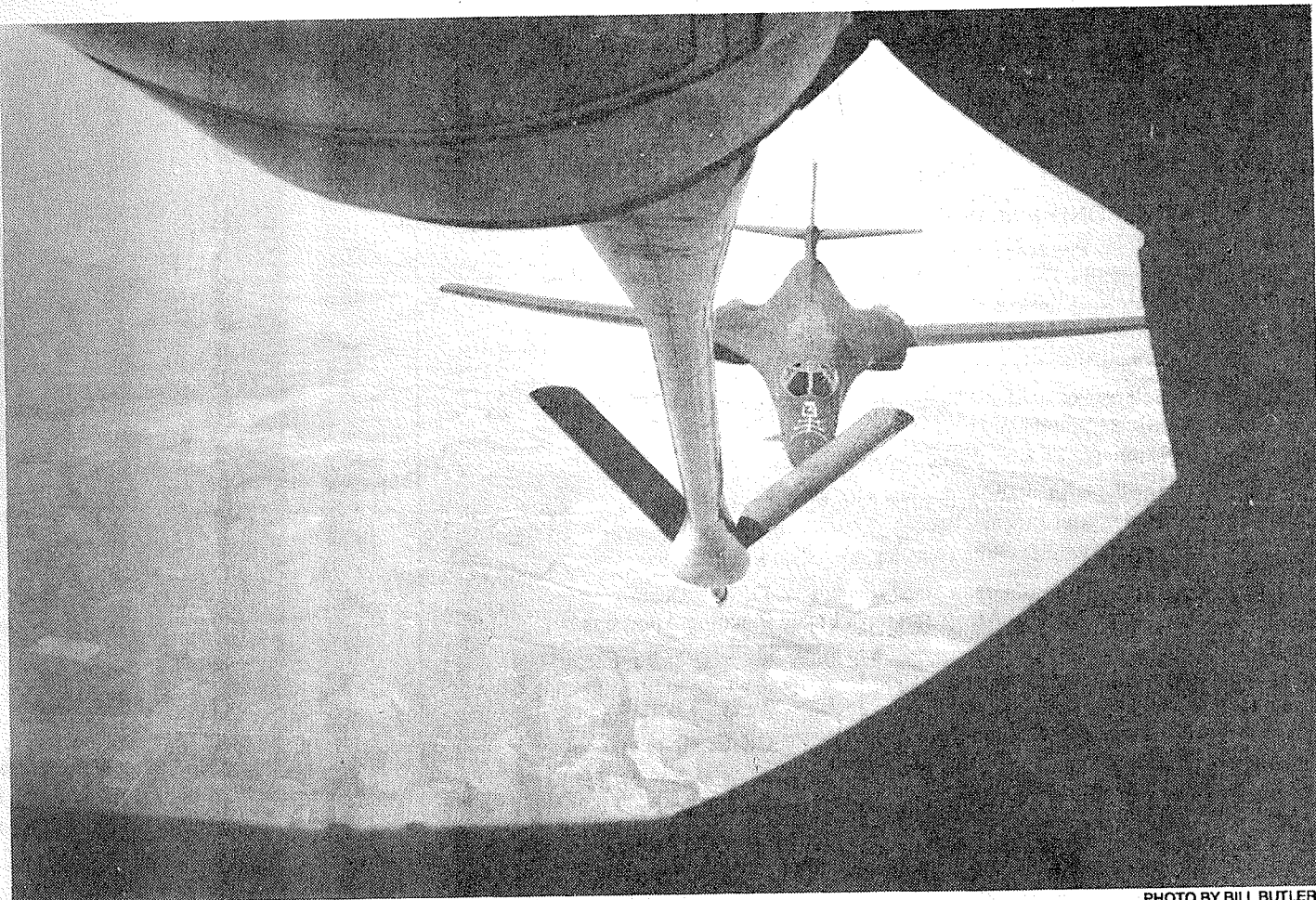


PHOTO BY BILL BUTLER

REFUELING A B-1B was one of the high points of a recent Air Force tour of new and future bombers, including a visit to the B-2 factory in Palmdale. Kings Mountain contractor Bill Butler was lying on his stomach in the bottom of a KC-135 tanker when he caught this picture.

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On bright, sunny wash days, you could find Grandma spreading her white linens and white garments out on the lawn. The sun would beat down on them, and she hoped it would

brighten them and help bleach out some of the more stubborn stains. Today, many of our bright white linens and garments have been treated with optical brighteners. These are usually fluorescent dyes. If we were to follow in Grandma's footsteps and lay them out to dry in the sun, many of them would turn yellow.

Maybe you have had the experience when you have washed your new, white, cotton sweater. The instructions say to lay flat to dry. So being a city dweller, and not having the lawn Grandma had, you prepare a place by spreading a towel on a table on your deck. You then carefully lay out your sweater. After a couple of hours, you go out to retrieve it. To your dismay, you find one side of your white sweater is bright white and the other side has a yellowish cast. The side facing the sun has yellowed. You wash it again thinking something must have gotten on it—only to find it does not change.

With the new fabrics and dyes out today, we need to follow care instructions very carefully. Dry a white garment in the shade or indoors to prevent discoloration or damage to an optical brightener. Be safe, not sorry.

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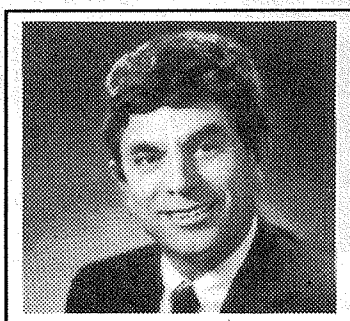
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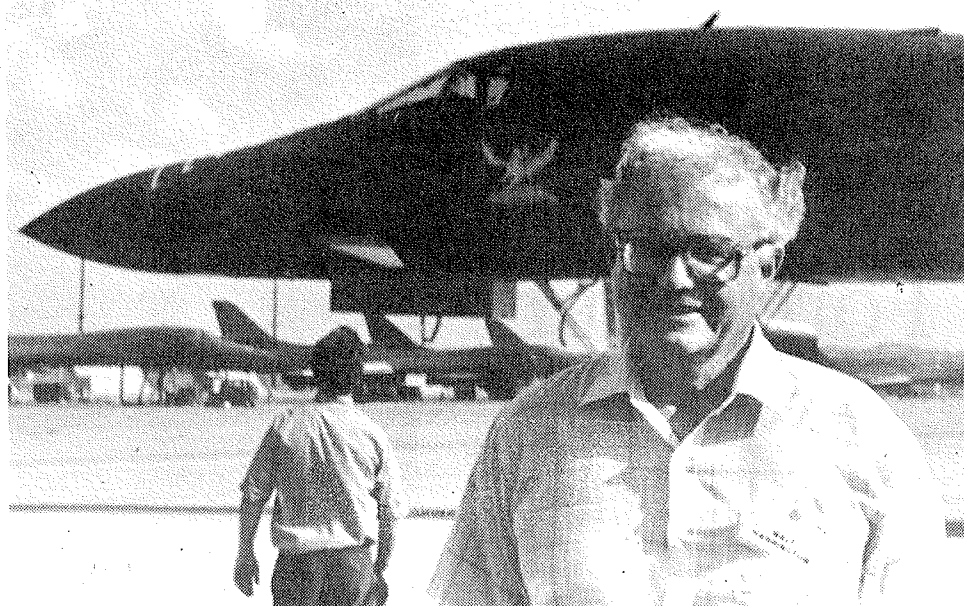


PHOTO BY MARION SOFTKY

WALTER HARRINGTON, Menlo Park developer and former trustee of the Sequoia Union High School District, pauses in front of a B-1B bomber at Dyess Air Force Base in Texas.

Peninsulans handle bomber controls

(Continued from previous page)

on the runway for several hours in the Southern California sun. Sweaty and bedraggled, we dribbled off the plane, only to be greeted by the 15th Air Force brass band playing "Off we go . . ." Half a dozen colonels and a general lined up on the "red carpet"—really red-painted concrete—to welcome us to the 15th Air Force.

B-1s, B-2s and strategy

Lean, mean and 147-feet-long, the B-1B can carry conventional, or nuclear weapons into enemy territory at low elevation.

Anyone who visits Northrop Corp.'s B-2 factory at Palmdale can understand why the aircraft manufacturer is desperate to continue producing B-2s. So far 15 have been authorized. Three are flying, seven are under construction, and Congress is wrangling over funding for the next 60—a substantial price at almost \$1 billion each.

Already some \$30 billion has been spent to set up production. The Palmdale facility has some 8 million square feet of space, including the huge assembly plant. There are 2,500 subcontractors, and 20,000 people are working on the project. It means \$1 billion a year to the California economy, Northrop officials asserted.

Looking like a giant bat ray fish, the B-2 is more than twice as wide as it is long—172-foot wing span to 69-foot length. It is designed to be stealthy not only to radar but to heat, sound and sight. It can carry conventional weapons, missiles and nuclear bombs.

The B-2 is the next generation of technology above the stealth fighters that knocked out Iraq's air defenses at the beginning of the war, we were told. With only two people aboard, it is designed to go, invisibly and without refueling, to any target in the world.

The B-2 also saves resources and people, Gen. Beckel argued. Bombing Libya took 132 airplanes, plus crews and forward bases. The same mission would

take four B-2s and five tankers, all based in the U.S. he said.

"The B-2 program is so far along it would cost more to change than continue," said Gen. Beckel.

Impressions

Three weeks later I am still confused. Half of me believes the colonels and generals who point out the increasing danger of a world where the Soviet Union, like Humpty-Dumpty, may break into warring factions and any ambitious dictator can buy a modern air defense system.

In such a world the U.S. may need bombers that can deliver weapons anywhere in the world against sophisticated defenses without depending on forward bases. That's why the Air Force has set its top priority on the B-2 bomber—not just the 15 that are already flying or in the pipeline, but the 75 it says it needs as a minimum fleet.

"One airplane is not a deterrent. You need quantity as well as quality," said Gen. Beckel. "We have no capability with 15 B-2s."

Yet all my personal instincts shrink from the prospect of such wars. Naively perhaps, I wish the huge cost of ever-more-expensive weapons could be diverted to peaceful needs.

The final moments of our flight gave an ironic twist to the three days we were exposed to high-tech wizardry and impressions of superb performance.

We were all strapped into our seats descending to land at Moffett Field, when we felt the engine gun and the airplane banked. Twice we circled over Woodside before we were allowed to land.

The Navy had a ceremony that day to install a new commander at Moffett Field and upped security. The Navy had neglected to tell the Air Force—or the Air Force neglected to find out—that our plane needed advance permission to land.

As we headed for the parking lot, our pilot and the Navy officer-of-the-day were still arguing on the runway.



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