

1212 BALLOON ACTIVITIES SQUADRON

MISSION

LINEAGE

1110 Balloon Activities Squadron designated
Organized, 1 Jan 1960
Redesignated 1212 Balloon Activities Squadron
Discontinued, 8 Jun 1963

STATIONS

Goodfellow AFB, TX

ASSIGNMENTS

Headquarters Command, U.S. Air Force
9 Weather Reconnaissance Group, 1 Jan 1962

COMMANDERS

Maj Keith D. Swisher, 1 Jan 1960
Maj Robert L. Ray, 24 Feb 1961

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

The 1110th Balloon Activities Squadron (Headquarters Command) at Goodfellow AFB, Texas was a unique unit flying H-21, C-47, and L-20s. The unit launched high altitude, unmanned balloons that gathered particulate debris and whole air samples in support of the U.S. nuclear programs. Monthly samples were taken from 70,000, 80,000, 90,000, 105,000 and 120,000 feet. From Goodfellow, the balloons traveled eastward into East Texas and Louisiana in the winter months. The wind switched in the summer time and the balloons headed for West Texas and Eastern New Mexico.

The unit had four to six H-21's, one to two C-47s, and one to two L-20s - the number depended upon the size and locations of the sampling program. At times the unit had missions going on in Panama, Alaska, and South Dakota as well as Goodfellow. The fixed wing aircraft were used mainly to track the balloons when the high altitude winds moved faster than the H-21 could go. The H-21 was ideally suited for this mission because of its long landing gear and large (at that time) cargo compartment. During summertime, temperatures often reached well over 100 degrees and the density altitude in West Texas and New Mexico often required careful flight planning and fuel management. The Panama balloon packages were initially picked up by local H-19's. While in Alaska, the commands H-21's did the job but in 1963, C-130s began to make aerial recoveries at these two locations.

The H-21 operation was challenging but fun. Two H-21s often launched around daylight on a VFR, Project Ash Can, flight plan from GOF to Lufkin, Texas area (or wherever the balloon was forecast to land) and return. Basically FAA did not concern themselves with the aircraft until 15 hours had elapsed. Fuel on board was shown on the flight plan as 3 hours but the aircraft would refuel as necessary. When the balloon packages were picked up, the two H-21s headed for the nearest town with a good motel and civilian or military airport. The pilots closed their flight plan with FAA and reported in the details of the mission to Goodfellow. At this time they got information on the next day's planned mission. Sometimes it was several days before the crews got home, and when necessary, a quick call to the wives brought clean clothes on next day's balloon flight.

One time the balloon package descended into the dense woods in the vicinity of the Sabine River. Fortunately there was one small clearing big enough for two H-21s to land about half a mile from the balloon package. After landing, both crews hit the ground running through the woods to turn off the power and secure the air samples. When that was done, they proceeded to carry and drag everything to the helicopters. After about an hour, the crews realized that they obviously weren't anywhere near the helicopters. Once realizing they were lost they sat down and developed a successful plan to locate the helicopters. After finding the helicopters, the crews had a good laugh just thinking what the Air Force authorities would have said if it were necessary to call in and report the loss of the two H-21s.