

William Padgett, a chief aviation electronics technician, adjusts the video controls on a Lockheed Super Constellation, one of the Navy's Blue Eagle aircraft, broadcasting in the Mekong Delta on Oct. 30, 1967.



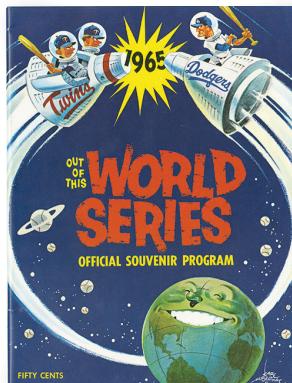
ARE WE COMING IN CLEAR?

Flying radio and TV stations make broadcast history in Vietnam during the Navy's Project Jenny

By Rick Fredericksen

Seven months after Marines hit the ground in Da Nang in March 1965, officially becoming the first U.S. ground combat forces in the Vietnam War, a lone Navy aircraft departed Tan Son Nhut Air Base near Saigon with a surprise, nonlethal weapon. It would bring immediate support to the American buildup and, over the coming months, would transform Vietnamese culture on both sides of the conflict. Fifty years ago, on October 6, a Lockheed NC-121J Super Constellation turned loose its payload: a live radio broadcast of the 1965 World Series.

Anyone within range could tune in a receiver, even a cheap transistor radio, and listen to the opening game between Los Angeles and Minnesota; the Dodgers' Don Drysdale versus the Twins' Jim "Mudcat" Grant. The NBC broadcast, announced by Joe Garagiola and Byrum "By" Saam, came from Metropolitan Stadium in Bloomington. The signal was relayed around the globe and intercepted by airborne technicians who retransmitted the program



A 1965 World Series game was broadcast to Vietnam via an airborne radio station.

over AM and shortwave radio to eager fans below listening in Vietnam and at sea. The play-by-play broadcast was a breakthrough success for the Navy program code-named Project Jenny, and it was only a sneak preview of what the military had in mind.

The World Series broadcast was designed to test the concept of a fully functioning flying radio station, complete with built-in transmitters and antennas. Radio was already available in Vietnam via traditional ground stations operated by American Forces Radio Saigon, but there had never been a sustained live aerial broadcast like that historic ballgame, which lasted two hours and 29 minutes before the Twins prevailed 8-2. But there was a broader vision for Project Jenny that was mind-boggling and nothing short of revolutionary: U.S. military planes would introduce television service to Vietnam, a country with no TV stations.

Project Jenny began an experimental venture and became part of the Oceanographic Air Survey Unit, which was established in the summer of 1965 at Patuxent Naval Air Station in Maryland



as a collection of technology-oriented programs with novel missions.

Military leaders, however, had more in mind than making *The Beverly Hillbillies* available to the audience in South Vietnam. “Previous studies and research,” according to the written history of the air survey unit, concluded that “television would significantly contribute to the U.S. policy objectives of rural pacification, urban stability, national unity, free world support and U.S. prestige in Vietnam.”

The U.S. government had been researching airborne telecasting since the early 1960s, when the initial target was Communist Cuba. The Navy began installing radio and TV equipment on two prototype Douglas C-118 aircraft for that mission, but the planes were not outfitted in time to be deployed during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. As the Vietnam War was ramping up, broadcast operations became a priority, not only for entertaining and informing U.S. troops, but also for psychological warfare campaigns using propaganda and disinformation to deceive the enemy or encourage some to switch sides.

The Project Jenny team planned to roll out TV as a bilingual venture, with separate channels for English and Vietnamese speakers, while maintaining capabilities for multiple radio missions. The airborne TV mission was seen as temporary. It would end once ground stations were up and running.

A Blue Eagle circles above Saigon in January 1967, going on the air for several hours during the evening.

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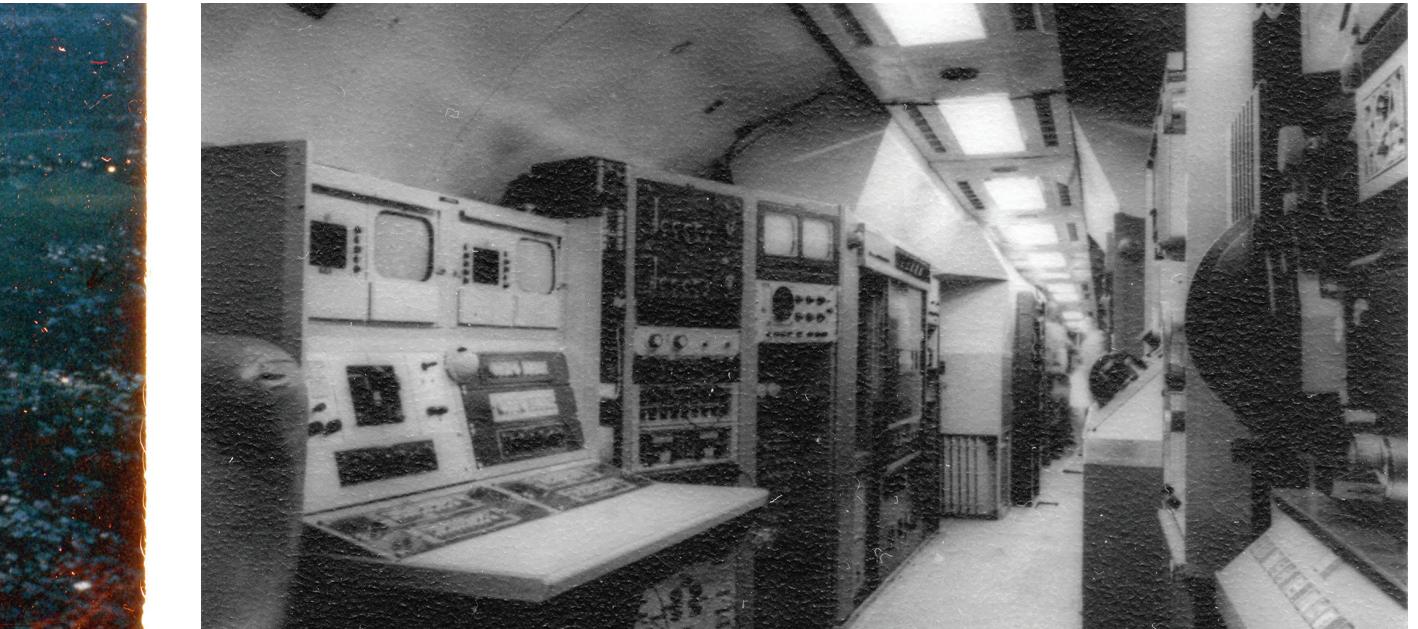
In late 1964 Navy Captain George Dixon, a World War II veteran, was recalled to active duty to head Project Jenny. Dixon had been vice president of Technical Materiel Corp., a defense contractor specializing in communications systems. He would become known as “the father of Project Jenny.” Dixon explained in 1966 that the project was “being designed to fight the enemy with ‘show and tell’ ... instead of bullets and men.”

Radio Corporation of America, a leading inventor and manufacturer in the expanding television industry, agreed to provide the equipment and technical expertise for Project Jenny despite reservations about its feasibility. There were indeed many challenges, including the weight of the equipment and the difficulty of fitting it all into such a small space.

The Navy assigned three NC-121J Super Constellations to the project. Technicians and mechanics immediately began to convert the 1950s-era transport aircraft into hi-tech radio and television stations. The aircraft became known as

Blue Eagle I, Blue Eagle II and Blue Eagle III. Blue Eagle I was deployed for the World Series broadcast and would remain radio-only. The other two Blue Eagles would become TV birds, but they were capable of simultaneously transmitting radio.

Working on Blue Eagles at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, John Lucas, the senior technician for Project Jenny, had to dismember essential



components of TV broadcasting equipment and retrofit them so they could be squeezed inside the Super Connies. “The challenge was to break it down so I could get two transmitters in there, get a whole television studio in there, get all the stuff that feeds videotape machines, film chains and all that stuff, get it packed in there so we could operate it and still be able to do any maintenance,” Lucas recalled. When Blue Eagle II was ready for an aerial performance check, Dixon, Lucas and an RCA engineer were all on board. “Aviation people said they refused to fly because the thing was overweight,” Lucas said.

The crucial test flight took place in late 1965 above Washington, D.C. Lucas asked his wife to watch a specified channel at midnight when engineers would use a “function generator” to create a false signal sent to that channel. “We literally wiped out a broadcast station on the ground by jamming their signal,” Lucas said. “My wife saw squiggles on the screen. That was the intent; hands down it was a success.”

The technicians then started work on Blue Eagle III, as an advance party arrived at Tan Son Nhut Air Base to establish Detachment Westpac, the Oceanographic Air Survey Unit’s operations center in Vietnam. The unit annexed an open space near the flight line and hastily built an improvised facility with tents, scrap lumber and shipping crates. “They wanted it on the air now,” said Jean LeRoy, an Air Force announcer on some 50 TV flights. “They

A video console, receivers, monitors and a small studio were squeezed inside the NC-121J Super Constellation.

wanted to show this presence. It was to let people know we were there.”

By January 1966, the two TV birds had joined Blue Eagle I in Saigon. South Vietnamese Premier Nguyen Cao Ky, U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and General William Westmoreland, the commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, were all beaming for the dedication ceremony at the airport terminal, and of course, it was recorded for later broadcast. LeRoy was attached to American Forces Vietnam Network, which provided radio and TV shows to the troops, and ran the camera. “We had a full-size studio camera and had run cables into the airplane because that was the only place we had a VTR [videotape recorder],” he said.

The “official” beginning of television in Vietnam was Feb. 6, 1966, with the premiere of regularly scheduled programs in two languages. AFVN was responsible for the English-language programming, which ran on Channel 11. Its staff would gather the films and videotapes for the night’s schedule. AFVN also provided the on-air talent to read live newscasts and announcements from a small onboard studio. The Vietnamese-language station, THVN, was broadcast on Channel 9. THVN provided Vietnamese news, entertainment and some *chieu hoi*, or “open arms,” programs to encourage Viet Cong defections.

Air Force Master Sgt. Erich “Shelly” Blunt described that historic first night to the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service newsletter: “Just for kicks, a few of



The television signals could be picked up by “rabbit ears” throughout the capital region.

Super Duper Blooper

A psy-ops mistake nearly downs a Blue Eagle

Blunders are just part of the business in live television. Most of the fluffs and faux pas are harmless, often humorous, but an innocent gaffe made by a Blue Eagle technician in 1968 had the potential to escalate into a diplomatic kerfuffle. It was right after the Communists’ Tet Offensive, a sensitive time with civilians and the military still on edge. Prime-time viewers were watching a Vietnamese-language program when the soundtrack was mismatched, and a startled TV audience heard a

tape recording meant for Vietnamese radio.

The mix-up happened when technicians, using a “humongous patch panel,” were pumping music into the plane’s internal speakers for the crew to listen to, according to Lt. j.g. Ralph Koozer, who was in charge of the broadcast technicians on that flight. “It was a big brouhaha when we landed. I heard the skipper say the Vietnamese were hopping mad and wanted to come up and shoot down the plane.”

Exactly what the audience heard is not clear, but another

Blue Eagle veteran, Jim Eanes, was told that it was a psy-ops broadcast intended for the enemy. Meanwhile, “the South Vietnamese air force thought the Viet Cong had taken over the Blue Eagle and scrambled a couple F-5s.”

The story circulated through the squadron back in the States, where Eanes heard how the technical difficulty was resolved: “The American crew was able to convince the fighter pilots that it was an unintended blooper. They’ve fixed it, and the correct audio was now going out.”

—Rick Fredericksen

us patrolled the area to see how TV was being received. The large round-about near the Brinks [Hotel] with the small park in the center was jam-packed with citizens like crazy, to see and hear. They placed two receivers on a platform about seven feet above the ground... it kind of reminded me of sitting in the last row at the Hollywood Bowl and trying to see the color of the eyes of the performer! In another place, this time in a bar not far from the Brinks, we noticed a large crowd of people on the street, seemingly hypnotized at what was going on inside.”

For several hours every evening, the twin Constellations—flying on alternating nights—went on the air, from the air, circling the Saigon area, showering news and entertainment programs on viewers 10,000 to 12,000 feet below. “We’d fly a racetrack pattern, fly a leg, make a turn, and fly back,” said radio operator Dave Tice, recalling his time perched behind a Blue Eagle pilot in 1966. The signals could be picked up by “rabbit ears” antennas throughout the capital region.

The black-and-white images seen in Saigon were wavy and rudimentary. Even so, viewers found them captivating. And the reception could be improved with better antennas set up by AFVN engineers. “Our engineers would make TV antennas, and I would trade those for all kinds of silly things,” LeRoy said. “Lobsters from the Navy, steaks from the Army, and we would have parties with all that stuff. The engineers knew exactly how to tune that antenna so it got that signal perfectly.”

The Vietnamese and American channels were telecast simultaneously, and the South Vietnamese government provided its own programs, but for locals and expatriates alike, American blockbusters such as *Bonanza* and *Combat* were among the favorites. The U.S. government distributed TV sets “for less than the cost of one load of bombs,” said U.S. Rep. Charles Chamberlain, a Michigan Republican. He considered television “a potent weapon,” that would help defeat the Viet Cong. “We were very proud to be over there,” said Jim Hicks, who flew on Blue Eagles in 1967 and 1968 and manages a website for

Project Jenny veterans, www.blueeaglesofvietnam.com. “I was especially very proud of trying to keep people alive instead of trying to kill people.”

By the end of 1966, *TV Guide* reported that 46,000 receivers had been sold at post exchanges around Saigon. At one time, the PXs imported 10,000 sets a month and usually sold out. Television in Vietnam was becoming a hot commodity, but not everyone liked it. Two months after the telecasts began, the Viet Cong mortared Tan Son Nhut, where the Blue

Eagles parked after their nightly telecasts.

Senior Tech Lucas was still aboard Blue Eagle II when it sustained a direct hit. “I was inside cleaning up,” he said. “There was only one thing between me and the mortar [round], and that was the air conditioner.” The cooling unit, installed to keep the television equipment from overheating, saved his life, but the Eagles were damaged. Blue Eagle II was in bad shape; the others returned to service quickly. The nightly television schedule had to be scaled back for a month while Blue Eagle II underwent major repairs, including fixing a 2-foot gash in the fuselage. A couple of months later, Project Jenny was bolstered with the arrival of a third flying TV station, Blue Eagle VI.

During the fall of 1966, the U.S. military started implementing plans to replace the aerial broadcast platforms with land-based facilities. In September, Westmoreland attended the ribbon-cutting to christen AFVN’s first ground station at Qui Nhon, a coastal town in central South Vietnam. He brandished a samurai sword and sliced through a videotape to inaugurate the station. The next station was in Da Nang, and in October AFVN’s new headquarters opened in Saigon near the U.S. Embassy, adjacent to a THVN-TV facility, which would soon be broadcasting in Vietnamese. The 300-foot tower was the tallest structure in Saigon and provided excellent TV coverage.

With ground stations in several urban areas, the Blue Eagles could concentrate on the Vietnamese-speaking rural population in the Mekong Delta. “The State Department put generators and TVs in

Brought to you by the U.S. Navy



SHOW: Bonanza
ACTOR: Michael Landon
WESTERN: 1959-73



SHOW: Laugh-In
ACTRESS: Ruth Buzzi
COMEDY, MUSIC: 1967-73



SHOW: Combat
ACTOR: Vic Morrow
ACTION, DRAMA: 1962-67

the strategic hamlets and the larger cities,” said Jim Eanes, who was a 23-year-old ensign supervising the Blue Eagle technicians broadcasting the Vietnamese programs. “I’m sure it was all propaganda. It was entertainment and news for the government. They obviously were trying to win the hearts and minds of the population.”

The four-prop Constellations not only were bursting with TV equipment but also had to carry extra fuel for the generator that ran the broadcast electronics. The planes were always over takeoff weight, so they were equipped with four of the most powerful Wright 18-cylinder engines. “Some of the pilots commented the aircraft was a big, lumbering beast,” said technician Hicks. But radio-only plane Blue Eagle I, free of the heavy video gear and external TV antennas, “flew just fine,” said Navy pilot Chuck Monroe.

Monroe was in control of the cockpit in 1968 when Blue Eagle I, based in Da Nang, flew “black radio” missions—special operations—originating off the coast of North Vietnam. “One night we heard radio chatter that MiGs were in the air,” the former lieutenant commander said. “A few minutes later we saw some unidentified aircraft whipping by, thought the worst and shagged ass out of there.” But the plane could have been an American aircraft, and the next day Monroe reminded the Special Operations Group that Blue Eagle I dragged a 1,000-foot-long antenna cable

through the air for broadcasting radio. “That could easily cut a wing off a jet, and it would be best to stay away from us,” Monroe cautioned his colleagues. His crew “did not see any more aircraft come close to us.”

Blue Eagle I’s mission was the most mysterious of the Project Jenny Constellations. “One part of the mission was completely classified, and the other part was psy-ops,” Hicks said. Occasionally a “spook” accompanied the broadcast crew. “That person came aboard to operate radio equipment in the back of the aircraft behind a curtain,” Hicks said. Sometimes a Vietnamese public relations officer would join the flight. “He would listen to the news from Hanoi and take voluminous notes,” Hicks remembered. “As soon as that show was over, we would come up on the air, with our superior altitude, and override their program, and [he would] give the South Vietnamese version of the news, on their frequency.”

As with any other television station, technical snafus sometimes interfered with programming. The constant vibrations of the big planes began to take a toll on broadcast equipment. A report in the files at AFVN states: “One evening, no less than five soldered connections in one tape recorder shook loose. Added to this, the rainy season with its turbulent air currents came along.” Entries in the program logs noted broadcast interruptions caused by a variety of problems: “Transmitter failure,” “probably bad amplifier,” “lost audio,” and “videotape machine kaput.” The most alarming log notation was a near

Tan Son Nhut Air Base, just outside Saigon, was the operations center for the Blue Eagles.



LEFT: ROBERT F. WITOWSKI/U.S. AIR FORCE/NATIONAL ARCHIVES; RIGHT: W1 G.A. MARSHALL/U.S. NAVY/NATIONAL ARCHIVES

disaster: “At 19:15 a fire broke out in #4 engine. The supercharger blew smoke into the fuselage. So smoky the pilots couldn’t read instruments. At low altitude hatches open and smoke cleared.” The unidentified writer concludes, “This was the closest a Blue Eagle aircraft ever came to an actual ditching.”

Lightning worried technician Eanes. “If you got hit on the nose of the aircraft there was this big blue ball of energy that would roll back through the plane, and miraculously it hardly ever knocked out any of the equipment,” he said.

Aircraft electrician Ken Hassebroek, who took some choppy rides during the rainy season, reported that “the Super Connie was a rugged aircraft through storms and through monsoons. It’s really aerodynamic with the three tails.”

There were other nerve-racking experiences. Blue Eagle II was raked by a .50-caliber machine gun during takeoff from Saigon near the end of the Communists’ 1968 Tet Offensive.

When AFVN’s ground station in Hue was overrun and knocked off the air during Tet, Project Jenny came to the rescue. According to a detachment fact sheet, northern AFVN and THVN operations were rapidly replaced by airborne telecasts from Blue Eagle flights.

By the late 1960s television had become deeply rooted in South Vietnam’s everyday life. A growing audience was watching the news, cultural programs and even *Laugh-In*, while gathered around a flickering

The men who kept the Blue Eagles in the air had made television into Vietnam’s “social media” of the ’60s.

The Viet Cong hit Tan Son Nhut during the 1968 Tet Offensive, and Navy planes fired back with rockets.

small screen in darkened living rooms. On the streets of Saigon, young American military newscasters were celebrities. Servicemen bought portable sets for their hooches, and the South Vietnamese government was learning how to spin its own news for the Vietnamese population, both friend and foe. The several hundred American military men who kept the Blue Eagles in the air had made television into Vietnam’s “social media” of the ’60s. During Project Jenny’s first four years of operation, the TV squadron had logged an estimated 10,000 broadcast hours.

Five years after the World Series broadcast, Project Jenny’s final TV mission was flown on Sept. 30, 1970, and the entire project was wound down by the end of the year. A network of reliable ground stations was providing a full schedule of programming over a wider reception area, with more sophisticated production techniques, live news, sports and specials than could ever be broadcast from an airplane.

As primitive as the Blue Eagles might seem today, in one respect they were ahead of their time. Millions of viewers still receive their television from platforms in the sky—except today, we call them satellites. H

Rick Fredericksen, a Marine veteran, was an editor and newscaster for American Forces Vietnam network in Saigon in 1969-70 and a civilian reporter in Asia and the Pacific for 13 years.

