***On the Road*** with “Dr Bob” – Chino, California

By

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Chino, CA – Have you ever heard of the call-signs “Disco,” “Big Eye,” or “College Eye?” The “Disco” one is familiar with the E-3B Airborne Warning and Control (AWACS) aircraft around the world; hosted by the Air Force’s 552nd AWACs Wing out of Tinker AFB, OK. But when coupled with “Big Eye” or “College Eye” you are talking about task forces of unique aircraft that had their beginnings and end for almost 10 years during the Vietnam War (1965-1974). Eventually based out multiple bases throughout Vietnam and Thailand, the members of the “Big Eye” and later “College Eye” Task Forces evolved to using the call-sign “*Disco*” when vectoring in F-4 Phantoms to chase off or “Kill” Migs over North Vietnam. To make such a mission work the United States Air Force employed the venerable EC-121 Constellation; affectionately known as the three-tailed/four-engine, “*Connie.”* The aircraft was introduced to the U.S. Army Air Force in January 1943, as the C-69, a high-speed/pressurized (first in the world) transport aircraft capable of carrying 42 troops; 22 were completed before the end of the war. Most of these became airliners and both Trans World and Eastern Airlines put them to work as their big muscle movers; only two remain flyable today. In 1954, at the beginning of what became known as the “Cold War,” the U.S. Air Force’s Air Defense Command (ADC) picked up the a growing fleet of these (newly converted to) Airborne Early Warning & Control (AEW&C) aircraft; placing them into three Wings to conduct 300 mile “off-shore” radar picket missions over the Atlantic, Pacific and Caribbean. Known as “Contiguous Barriers,” these aircraft proved the concept of Airborne Command & Control while offering overlapping radar coverage (and eliminating creases in our fix radar station coverage); a mission continued globally by the AWACs aircraft today. During the Vietnam War they were credited with assisting in multiple Mig Kills over Vietnam by Air Force and Navy fighters. However, their mission combat mission ended on 1 June 1974. On that day, tail number 53-0548 lifted off from the early morning, high humidity, of Korat Royal Thai Air Base, Thailand; arriving (five days later) as the first in an 8-ship loose formation at its final operational location, McClellan AFB, in Sacramento, California. It was crewed by 10 aircrew members, including a 21-year-old flight mechanic crew chief/engine mechanic; “Buck Sergeant” (now retired Colonel) Bob Ditch, this article’s author.

Today you can come by and visit that venerable warrior; a veteran of nearly 10 years of combat operations. One of the last of its kind this EC-121T, tail number 53-0548 is on display at the *Yanks Air Museum* alongside the Chino Airport, in Chino, California. Originally stored at Camarillo Airport, CA from 2000 to 2012, this aircraft made its final (last EC-121) flight, to Chino, on January 14, 2012. Today it stands tall just outside of the Yanks Museum doors as a historical marker from an age gone by of prop and piston-driven airborne warriors who distinguished themselves through multiple hot & cold wars.

This fabled *Connie* is in good company with multiple historic aircraft from around the world. Seen as one of the finest air & space museums in the world the *Yanks Air Museum* is host to many aircraft and multiple other aviation displays. The *Yanks Air Museum* began life as the private collection of Mr. and Mrs. Nichols in 1972 although the museum was not officially founded until 1982. The aim of the Nichols family was at first to own only three rare aircraft, the first of which was the Beech Staggerwing. After acquiring the first aircraft an epic journey of aircraft collection and restoration began which took the Nichols around the world and back again. The travel continues now as the collection of rare and historic aircraft continues to grow and be restored. The number of aircraft at the museum currently is 170 and, although once known as a “secret museum,” the collection now attracts visitors from all corners of the globe.

So, if you are looking for a rare Southwest treat, take a drive west on Interstate 10, pull over in Chino at its airport, and spend one or two days working your way through timeless aviation history; at its preserved best. You will not be disappointed; and be sure to take time out to say hi to my old girlfriend *Connie -* ***While on the Road..***

For more information on the Yanks Air Museum, go to <https://yanksair.org/> .