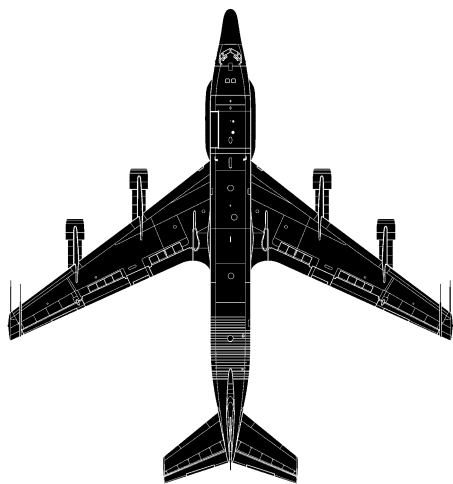


## RC-135



The Air Force RC-135, comprising numerous missionized variants, rates as perhaps the most potent airborne intelligence-gathering platform in history. The secretive Boeing system has been in constant service for some five decades, facilitating combat in Vietnam, Libya, Grenada, Panama, the Balkans, Iraq, and Afghanistan, as well as in numerous smaller operations. The RC-135's continuous on-scene presence, omnivorous data collection, and instant communication with strike aircraft make it a force multiplier of enormous reach and capability.

The RC-135, a four-engine, swept-wing aircraft, features an outer shape that has been continuously modified. The first three RC-135s were converted KC-135 tankers; subsequent aircraft were modified C-135s. Boeing gave the airframe the designation of Model 739. Later models are distinguished by

the variety and complexity of electronic suites. These newer aircraft sport additional antennae, radar platforms, bulges, stings, and other less-than-aerodynamic shapes to accommodate the exotic electronics.

Today, the RC-135 flies in three distinct variants—RC-135S Cobra Ball, RC-135U Combat Sent, and RC-135V/W Rivet Joint. The latter are the most numerous, with 17 in inventory. RC-135s are crewed by technical experts who provide real- and near-real-time information from ever-more sophisticated equipment. The crew expertise connects data from and to satellites, headquarters, and systems engaged in combat. In its long operational history, the RC-135 type has suffered a total of four loss-of-aircraft accidents, all in Alaska.

—Walter J. Boyne

**This aircraft:** USAF's RC-135W Rivet Joint—#62-4134—as it looked while assigned to the 55th Wing and deployed to RAF Mildenhall, Britain, in August 2006.



### In Brief

Designed, built by Boeing ★ first flight (basic C-135) Aug. 17, 1956  
★ number built/conversions (all models) 32 ★ crew of 27 (typical): three pilots, two navigators, 22 mission specialists ★ no armament  
★ **Specific to RC-135V/W Rivet Joint:** four CFM International F-108-CF-201 turbofan engines ★ max speed 500 mph ★ cruise speed 375 mph ★ max range 3,900 mi ★ weight (loaded) 297,000 lb ★ span 131 ft ★ length 135 ft ★ height 42 ft.

### Famous Fliers

**Notables:** Ricky McMahon, George Miller, Larry Mitchell, William Riggs, Merlin Stevens, Harrison Tull, Regis Urschler.

### Interesting Facts

Derived from prototype Boeing 367-80, progenitor of the famous 707  
★ deployed first by SAC ★ broadcasts variety of direct voice communications, including imminent threat warnings ★ military system: on-board sensor suite to identify and geolocate signals throughout EM spectrum ★ offers data and voice links to friendly ground forces ★ conducts Elint and Comint intercept operations out to 150 miles ★ operated by RAF (Rivet Joint) ★ nicknamed (individual Rivet Joint aircraft) Greyhound, Junk Yard Dog, Anticipation, The Flying W, Rapture, Jungle Assassin, Sniper, Red Eye, Fair Warning, Don't Bet on It, Problem Child, Luna Landa.



An RC-135 Rivet Joint on final approach.