The Airlifter

Newsletter of the Troop Carrier/Tactical Airlift Association
Promoting and Preserving the Troop Carrier/Tactical Airlift Heritage

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Financial Report

As of today's date, our bank account balance is $11,221.92. Jim Esbeck recently mailed a check for $7,267.38 from the convention account to Treasurer Ralph Bemis. In addition, we have $350.00 in checks for dues that haven't been deposited which gives us a total of $18,839,93 cash on hand. However, we owe approximately $2,500 for refunds for cancellations and reimbursement of Jim Esbeck and Bill Goodall for personal funds they used for convention expenses, which reduces our available funds to approximately $16,339.93. We basically broke even on convention expenses with a total of $14,457 received from members and expenditures of $13,345.62. (The amount received from members includes $1,267 for members who cancelled due to medical reasons and one no-show.) Proceeds from sale of merchandise totaled $2,542 while we took in $1,219.00 from the auction. The merchandise proceeds are offset by $2,631 paid to a vendor for TC/TAA golf shirts. (Sales of golf shirts in Tucson were not kept separate from the sale of other items such as caps and donated items.) We are now paying $4.15 a month to Google for our Association Email account.

This was written a couple of weeks ago. Ralph Bemis advises that the reimbursements for cancellations have been sent out. We now have a little over $16,000 in the association account. In addition, we have $300 in the Memorial Fund savings account.

Chairman's Message

I hope all you Troop Carriers, Tactical Airlifters and Trash Haulers had a great Thanksgiving. As citizens of this great nation we have much to be thankful for and should be careful not to take all our blessings for granted.

I want to thank all the attendees who were at our recent convention in Tucson; you the participants, make these events so memorable and worthy of our time and resources. I enjoyed the new faces and seeing again those of you I met in Warner Robins in 2012. My special thanks and appreciation to our "boots on the ground" who made the convention move like a well-oiled machine. Ably led by Jim Esbeck and Bill Goodall, I thought it was a roaring success. Equally professional, behind the scenes your President Mike Welch and his team provided outstanding support and assistance to the Convention Team. I encourage each member to seriously consider joining the group in Little Rock AR in 2016. Your leadership team will firm up the actual dates as quickly as possible. I think you will find it a memorable experience.

It is my honor and priviledge to serve as the Chairman of TCTAA and offer whatever meager talents and skills I may

have to help achieve the goals and objectives of this organization. You are an august group; I am humbled to be included as a member.

My hope for each of you is that 2015 will meet and exceed all your expectations. May you and your families enjoy good health, be of good spirit and experience runways ahead of you, fuel in the tanks and tailwinds forever.

George Dockery
Chairman

President's Message

Hi, TAC Airlifters: We just finished the 6th Troop Carrier/Tactical Airlift Association (TC/TAA) Convention/Reunion in Tucson, AZ, October 15th – 19th. We had a total of 92 people attend which included spouses and guests. If you did not attend this year's event, you missed out on a lot of fun and fellowship with some of your friends from the past.

On October 15th we had a Margarita Reception at the Doubletree Suites Courtyard Fountain Ballroom. The war stories were a highlight during this evening here and they spilled over to the Hospitality Suite through the night. The next day we had a PowerPoint presentation by our host – Jim Esbeck and Bill Goodall on the events of the day. Then we proceeded to board two buses for our trip to the Pima Air and Space Museum where over 300 aircraft are on display. All of us were able to relive numerous memories of the aircraft we once crewed. After lunch we proceeded on a tour of the 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group (AMARG) aircraft "Boneyard" for an exciting trip through the 3,000 plus aircraft at Davis Monthan AFB storage area. It was surprising to some on how many C-130E aircraft were lined up – probably close to 150 aircraft. To top off the evening, we had a reception dinner in the hotel Solarium Ballroom where the University of Arizona, Air Force Reserve Officers Training Corps Honor Guard posted the colors. We had the "Best of Tucson" Mexican food plus a surprise visit Mariachi Azteca Del Sol Band who entertained us and captured everyone's interest during the evening.

On Friday, October 17th we were again presented the day activities by Jim and Bill, plus Carl Penaranda gave us all a history lesson and presentation on the 463rd Tactical Airlift Wing (TAW). Then, it was off to the buses to visit the 79th Rescue Squadron at Davis Monthan, AFB. There we were entertained by HC-130J Flight Crews and were able to visit an actual aircraft and see their Flight Simulator. After a full day at the base, it was free night as friends got together at local Tucson restaurants, Finnegan's, and/or Hospitality Suite.

Saturday, October 18th was a full day starting with a General Membership Meeting and deciding where the next Convention/Reunion will be – Little Rock, AR is the choice of the members. After lunch, we had a Memorial Service in the Terrace-Fountain Ballroom. The Civil Air Patrol Honor Guard posted the colors and we were all amazed at how professional these young people were. We had numerous solemn moments as people said prayers for departed members of the TC/TAA. Next up was the traditional TC/TAA auction with the Master of All Auctioneers our Chairman, George Dockery doing his wheeling and dealing with the membership. It took two hours, but George was able to squeeze $1,219 from all with numerous funny stories attached. To finish off the afternoon, Ray Snedegar presented his C-5A Baby Lift crash video with actual slides outside Tan Son Nhut AB, South Vietnam in 1975. That evening, we had our Banquet were we were treated by posting of the colors from the Davis Monthan AFB Honor Guard and two special events from heroes. First, Robert Frank and Bruce Shearer, U.S. Army Retired, were presented "Honorary" TC/TAA Memberships as they were two of four "F" Troop 1/9 Air Cav Huey Helicopter crewmembers who helped rescue three of our TC/TAA members – Robert Kirkpatrick, Charlie Armistead and Ralph Bemis from their shot down C-130E aircraft at An Loc, South Vietnam in 1972. Next, was

our guest speaker, Irl "Leon" Franklin who gave us a great presentation on the 1970 raid of Son Tay Prison Camp to free 55 Prisoners of War in North Vietnam. Leon was on the lead aircraft and aircraft commander of the MC-130E Talon I aircraft used in the raid. In 2013, Leon was asked to attend the 27th Special Operations Wing, Cannon AFB, NM to help retire his MC-130E Combat Talon I 64-0523 used in the raid.
The event concluded Sunday morning with a breakfast buffet where everybody had one more chance to re-live those war stories and say their good byes. If you were there, I am sure you had a grand time with your old friends – if you missed it, plan on making Little Rock in 2016 where we guarantee you will see some people you have not seen in 30 – 40 years.
A special thanks goes to Jim Esbeck and Bill Goodall for all the hard work they put into making this event a memorable adventure for us all.

Mike Welch
President, TC/TAA

Hi Sam,

I wanted to comment on the great Airlifter Newsletter as they are very informative to the readers. The C-130E 63-7777 photo in the article brings back memories from Naha AB when the 516th sent some of their new C-130E's to Naha to replace the augmented C-130B's from Langley where I came from in November 1964. This particular C-130E went by the nickname "Bunch of 7777's" and that was what you heard on the radios when it was flying and needed maintenance. We had several guys come from Dyess PCS to Naha about the same time I did and went from brand new C-130E's to the Naha C-130A's and they thought the world had ended with no crew bunks in cockpit and no Auxiliary Hydraulic system to help with maintenance tasks, but they all learned the "A" models and did a good job. We also had several guys come to Naha from Pope in late 1964 and some had been on deployments to the Congo regions with some real stories... Tom Wark can relay some good ones. One of my Pope to Naha buddies brand new C-130E took some pretty good hits in the Congo with wing fuel leaks and fuselage bullet holes.

I will never forget when I was at Langley, and being TAC Headquarters, we were always having ALERTS called and that meant dragging your TAC B-4 Bag to work, grab your GI Tool Box and head for Mobility Processing Line and get your Mobility Bag to add to the all the stuff we had to process with. I had already received PCS Orders to Naha AB Okinawa and they called an ALERT at "O-Dark:30" and everyone went to the Processing Center for the routine "hurry up and wait" scenario. However, this time those in "A" Cell were put on a bus which took them to a TAC C-135 that was sitting on the Transient Alert Ramp in the Langley Main Base area where they boarded with all their TDY stuff and headed off for, NAHA AIR BASE OKINAWA as the advance party for the future 463rd C-130B's that would soon arrive at Naha. One of my friends Joe Lauderdale (nice black guy) was always tired of the TAC Alerts and dragging is bags, tool box around and decided to "beat the system" and took all his clothes out of his B-4 Bag and stuffed it with NEWSPAPERS to make it look like it was full. Well, Joe and the planeload of guys ended up at Naha and had an Open Ranks Inspection to make sure they all had proper clothing for the then rainy Naha climate. When it came to Joe's turn, he stood there reportedly "white faced" when they inspected his B-4 Bag. They could have done some serious Military Reports on ole' Joe, but instead used him as a "role model" of what not to do! He was ordered to report to BEMO and Clothing Issue center to request a COMPLETE list of NEW clothes including the HORSE BLANKET winter coat which ran into the $100's of 1964 dollars and poor Joe did not spend much time in Naminoue as his A2C pay check was pretty small!

When I finally got to Naha after a couple of days of delays at Travis AFB, (my Transient Quarters room mate was a US Army Green Beret SSgt,) we got our charter DC-8 Flight to Naha and after stops at Hickam and Wake Island for fuel we finally got to Kadena and I found a ride down the island to Naha Air Base. When I signed in at the Naha Transient Barracks I was "greeted": by some of my TDY buddies from Langley and yes, I "had to go downtown" and get something to eat. We first went downtown Naha City to a couple of clubs and ended up in NAMINOUE for a Steam Bath! It was in the middle of the night and then there were STRICT Curfews, so we had to spend the night in the Village of Naminoue. I can remember my buddies insisted I have this real cute Okinawan girl give me a "Welcome to Okinawa" steam bath. I ended up in the bath tub, which she would also join me, and proceeded to give me a shave with an old, dull, 3-piece Gillette shaver and the blood dripped into the tub. Yep, that was my orientation welcome to Naha and I will never forget it. The 463rd guys ended up getting PCS orders to the Philippines and I would see my former Langley roommate at Tan Son Nhut in late 1965 or early 1966 when I had to RON there and he was TDY from PI. A side note, the Green Beret room mate I had at Travis showed up one day at Naha Air Base and was part of a group that flew on my aircraft to Vietnam and it was interesting that our paths would cross again like it did. I hope he had a good career as a Green Beret.

I had better get back to work on the TCTAA Convention and wanted to thank you for your great work with all you do with the TCTAA and writing the Airlifter Newsletter.

Have it Good!

(Jim Esbeck)

Airlifter's Dreaded Additional Duties

By Allan D. Wade

We, as career airlifters have great memories and stories to tell about flying experiences, but how many care to remember those dreaded additional duties? How many good stories are there to be told about being the Airdrome Officer (AO) or Officer of the Day (OD)? Or, how about the tedious job of updating the Low Altitude Letdown Charts page by page? Or, sitting alert on Rodeo Ryder with an assigned airplane that is in the hanger on jacks? I personally have better memories of performing AO duties than I do of the others. My memories of being the OD always flash back to a vision of trying to convince the drunks to leave the officer's club at closing time. It's not a pretty flash back!!!

One of my more positive experiences as Airdrome Officer occurred on a wintery Monday morning in 1963 at Evreux AB, France. On Sunday the day prior, I reported to base operations at 0800 for a 24 hour shift as AO. I was a newly minted 1st Lieutenant co-pilot and took the responsibility of being in charge of the airport very seriously. It was snowing and there were no Sunday scheduled departures or arrivals so I spent a considerable amount of time shooting the bull with the weather man.

Late Sunday evening the weather forecast was for the snow to taper off and stop about midnight. I knew the Monday flying schedule was in jeopardy unless the snow was removed from the runway. So I called the Base Operations Officer at his home and got approval to do whatever I could about the snow. I then called and arranged for the snow plows to begin clearing the runway. The plows arrived and began plowing even though the snow was still coming down. When I think back about the situation, I'm never certain whether the plows showed up on my command or if maybe their own leadership had a hand in initiating it.

In any event, after a long night of watching the plows remove the snow, when daylight came on Monday morning, the runway was clear. A full bird colonel showed up at Base Operations and asked about the condition of the

runway. I told him it was clear and he was skeptical of my ability to tell the truth. He wanted to see for himself. So we drove onto the runway and I accelerated to about 50 mph then slammed on the brakes. The decelerometer unit in the airdrome car registered about 20 RCR. The colonel was extremely pleased and I felt relieved that he wasn't going to court martial me for lying.
Soon after when I heard the noise of turboprop engines running and saw a C-130 aircraft on takeoff roll, I was one proud Airdrome Officer.

Next Convention In Little Rock

During our members meeting in Tucson those present voted to have our next convention in Little Rock. Bill Kehler and other Little Rock area members are in the process of determining the date and facility. We hope to have a definite date established soon.

Troop Carrier/Tactical Airlift Memorial

One of the items voted on in the members' meeting was the possibility of placing a memorial in the Memorial Park at the US Air Force Museum. Since our next convention/reunion will be in Little Rock, we have almost four years to plan and fund it. One of our members pledged $500.00 to the fund and we have already received $300 in contributions. Our treasurer opened up a savings account to place all contributions for the fund. If anyone wishes to contribute to the fund (all contributions to the organization are fully tax-deductible) please contact treasurer Ralph Bemis at rtbullwinkle@yahoo.com. Visit the Memorial Park web page at http://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/exhibits/memorial/index.asp to see the memorials that are already there.

Election of Officers and Board Members

We currently have a rotating system of officers and board members with some serving three-year terms while others serve two. Our three-year officers and board members were elected earlier this year so our two-year election is coming due. Our current two-year officers are Vice-President Bill Kehler and Treasurer Ralph Bemis while our two-year board members are Jim Elmer (who is vice-chairman), Andy Vaquera, Don Hessenflow and Tom Wark. In addition to those positions, three-year board member Bobby Gassiott is stepping down due to health reasons which creates a vacancy on the board of directors. Nominations should be sent to President Mike Welch at mikewelch@verizon.net. Those officers and board members whose terms are expiring should also contact Mike to advise whether you wish to continue in that position.

In addition, we are seeking someone who will be willing to take over the secretary's and treasurer's duties in the not too distant future. We are also looking for someone to take over the web site. If you are interested in any of these positions, contact Mike Welch.

TC/TAA Apparel

In preparation for convention, we ordered a new supply of the golf shirts Andy Vaquera and Hector Leyva made up for our 2008 San Antonio convention. After convention, Andy took the remaining shirts along with the caps and other items we had left over back with him to San Antonio. We are now making them available for purchase by the membership at large for $25.00 each. Pictured at left is one of the shirts in blue. We also have them in black, brown and gray. These are really nice shirts that look good with khakis or jeans and are a great means of publicizing the organization. (George Dockery and Mike Welch are wearing their blue shirts in the pictures accompanying their comments.) Some shirts have pockets.

We also have a supply of caps available for $20.00 along with IX Troop Carrier Command, TAC and other patches and pins. To order, go to our sales page at www.troopcarrier.org/sale.html. We'll accept checks or money orders but we're not presently set up for credit cards.

I personally wear my TC/TAA cap quite frequently and sometimes wear one of my golf shirts, particularly to appointments with the VA. They are a great way to promote our organization – and they look good!

Pima Museum C-130 Could Use Some Paint

One of the points of interest at the Pima Museum for me was the Lockheed C-130A they have on display. This particular airplane served on active duty with 322nd Air Division in Europe and the 317th Troop Carrier (later tactical airlift) Wing at Evreux, France and Lockbourne AFB, Ohio. When the 317th inactivated, it went to the reserves and ended up with the Tennessee Air National Guard (which now operates C-17s out of Memphis and drones from Nashville) and went from there to Tucson and the Pima Museum by way of the AMARC. The old bird is still wearing the same paint it had on when it arrived at the museum. Perhaps the 317th veterans group should take up a collection to give it a new coat of paint. Incidentally, the C-130D sitting beside it is in even worse shape. By the way, there are several acres of later model C-130Es in the AMARC where they are being used for parts for operational airplanes. Perhaps one of those airplanes might someday be moved to the Pima Museum. Sadly, there are no more As or Bs at AMARC. Most of the Bs went to foreign governments when they were retired from reserve service.

913th Airlift Group

by Airman 1st Class Scott Poe
19th Airlift Wing Public Affairs

11/6/2014 - **LITTLE ROCK AIR FORCE BASE, Ark.** -- The 913th Airlift Group is Little Rock Air Force Base's most recent addition to the combat airlift mission. In a ceremony July 13, 2014, the Air Force Reserve Command deactivated 22nd Air Force, Detachment One and the 913th AG stood up. As a result of the Air Force's Total Force Integration initiative, the 50th Airlift Squadron under the 19th Airlift Wing is an associate unit of the 327th AS under the 913th AG. "The Air Force's Total Force Integration means a conglomerate between the Reserve, Guard and active duty," said 2nd Lt. John Sessoms, a 913th AG executive officer. "It exemplifies the joint effort by integrating Guard, Reserve and active duty to become one team."

The new AG was authorized to grow to approximately 805 Airmen and civilians in fiscal year 2015. Approximately 28 percent of the members work full time as Air Reserve Technicians and Civil Servants, while the remainder perform as Traditional Reservists, training to defend our national interests. The 913th AG is a self-sufficient group and consists of the following squadrons:
· The 327th Airlift Squadron
· The 913th Operations Support Squadron
· The 913th Maintenance Squadron
· The 96th Aerial Port Squadron
· The 913th Force Support Squadron
· The 913th Aerospace Medicine Squadron
The 913th is still growing and will be fully operational in the near future. Currently, they have 12 C-130H2 aircraft ready to support any operational needs and contingency operations worldwide.

Starting from scratch is no easy task. Although the 913th has officially been established, there are still many requirements to meet. This includes having the proper tools, supplies, equipment and Airmen to perform the mission. "Our main focus is training our Airmen, and procuring equipment," said Senior Master Sgt. Mark Brekken, 50th AS maintenance superintendent. The 913th is currently gathering tools and equipment and renovating facilities to become self-sufficient. They are also in the process of recruiting and training Airmen to support the mission. As the 19th AW down-sizes its C-130H fleet, the 913th AG is acquiring the specific H-model tools and equipment necessary from the 19th AW, in order to effectively carry out their mission. "This has been a very effective partnership," said Brekken. "It saved a lot of money, because we didn't have to have equipment shipped to us from somewhere else, the equipment was right here on base, given to us by our partners."

The group relies on their partnerships to fulfill their mission requirements. Almost half of the current maintainers have come from the 19th AW. The 19th AW and the 314th AW will also assist with back shops, including aerospace ground equipment, sheet metal, non-destructive inspections, heavy maintenance and more. While the 913th AG is still establishing continuity, eventually the 19th AW will be able to evenly disperse the heavy responsibility of combat airlift with their partners and count on the 913th for effective air support.

Airmen bid farewell to Alaska's fleet of C-130s

March 25, 2007 (*Yes, this is old news but a lot of people don't realize the Firebirds are no more.)*

By SHARON G. McBRIDE/Frontiersman

ELMENDORF AFB - It was a bittersweet joy ride. Three C-130 Hercules made a final flight over snowy terrain Friday, signaling the closing of a chapter in the Air Force's aviation history in Alaska. The aircraft, which had been flying missions in Alaska for more than 40 years, are now being sent to the Lower 48 for other missions. The C-17 Globemaster III, the newest airlift aircraft to enter the Air Force's inventory, is now taking the place of these huge cargo planes. But for many who have flown and maintained these huge warbirds, it was hard to let go of the mission in Alaska. "We have loved our time here," said Tech. Sgt. Dan Elliot, who lives in Wasilla. "This was a great assignment and a great base." Elliot moved to Wasilla with his wife, Melissa, and their 2-year-old, Nick, when he was assigned to Elmendorf seven years ago as part of the 517th Airlift Squadron "Firebirds." But just like the C-130s, the Firebirds are being split up and reassigned to other units and other missions.

Past and present members of the unit came together during Friday's flight, to say goodbye to the mission in Alaska and goodbye to each other. Some returned from places as far as England; some took breaks from retirement in the Lower 48; and others, like Elliot, took a break from the day to day mission just to have that chance for one last, sweet ride. "It was the best ride I ever had," said Steve Leers, who came up from Florida. Leers retired in the '70s after flying the C-130s for the Firebirds while stationed in Alaska.
"It was good to be a part of this unit, one last time."

The Firebirds have flown some of the most demanding missions in Alaska and have recently completed a continuous two-year deployment in support of Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom, said Lt. Col. Gary Gottschall, 517th commander, at the flight ceremony. Other missions have taken them closer to home. For example, since 1967, the unit has flown to Arctic Village to take Santa, food, clothing and school supplies to everyone who lives there for Christmas. The last trip was in 2006, but the tradition will continue with the Alaska Air National Guard, which has added Arctic Village to its list of destinations for Operation Santa Claus.

The C-17 is a four-engine turbofan aircraft capable of airlifting large payloads over intercontinental ranges without refueling. Its design is intended to allow delivery of outsized combat cargo and equipment directly into austere airfields, according to Air Force information. The C-17 will deliver passengers and cargo over intercontinental distances, provide theater and strategic airlift in both airland and airdrop modes, and augment aeromedical evacuation and special operations missions. The C-17's biggest contribution to the present airlift system will be long-range direct delivery. The C-17 is capable of rapid strategic delivery of troops and all types of cargo to main operating bases or directly to forward bases in the deployment area. The aircraft is also able to perform theater airlift missions when required. Elmendorf has 18 C-130s that are being transferred to Yokota Air Base in Japan and Dyess Air Force Base in Texas. Members of the Firebirds are being reassigned to other units scattered across the Lower 48. "This was a tight-knit group," Elliot said. "This is the best unit that I have been a part of because of that. I'll definitely miss it."

FORT BRAGG AIRMAN AWARDED RARE SECOND SILVER STAR

November 14

FORT BRAGG, N.C. — A Fort Bragg airman joined an elite group of military members when he was awarded his second Silver Star during a ceremony Thursday at Pope Field. Master Sgt. Thomas Case is one of just three Air Force members to earn two of the medals, which are given for valor."I don't think I won anything," he said. "I think it was just recognition for doing your job." Case doesn't consider himself a hero, although his actions on July 2009 were definitely heroic.While on a mountainous battlefield in Afghanistan, Case risked his life several times to help save his fellow soldiers. He exposed himself to enemy fire, fixed a broken radio and called in fire from supporting aircraft. He also shot dead two highly skilled foreign fighters. The citation was read in front of his peers and family inside a packed hanger at Pope Army Airfield. "Well, your first thought is, 'What were you thinking?' But then after, you read it again, and you swell up with pride," said Glenn Case, Thomas' father.Thomas Case recalls the moment as just another day at work. "You wake up, you get the mission, and you go do it," he said.The Silver Star is the military's third-highest award. Case earned it the first time for similar combat actions in 2003. "The first one – as a younger guy – it's kind of for you," he said. "But if they're going to give you the honor of having a second one, then that's for the community."

The Last Mission of Combat Talon's S-01 Crew

By Colonel John Gargus, USAF (Ret.)

This is the story of the Combat Talon MC-130E that was lost with its eleven-crew members on December 29, 1967, while conducting a SOG mission over North Vietnam. After many years of silence, Major John Plaster authored a book, *SOG - The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam*, in which he described exploits of commandos who lost their lives on missions that had not been brought to public attention for numerous security reasons. The loss of this aircraft fits into that mold. It was, according to Major Plaster, our largest single aircraft loss over North Vietnam. I hope that this story will honor the eleven lost crew members and acknowledge the role of all men who served in the Combat Talon unit, which was first named as Detachment 1 of the 314th Tactical Airlift Wing, then the 15th Air Commando Squadron and finally the 90th Special Operations Squadron.

At the time of this incident, Det. 1, 314 TAW was based at Nha Trang Air Base, Republic of Vietnam (RVN), with 6 eleven member crews and four MC-130E Combat Talon I aircraft. These aircraft were equipped with terrain following radar, Fulton Recovery System and an array of passive electronic countermeasures. They were painted with special dark green paint that significantly reduced their reflected radar energy and, because of their overall appearance, they were affectionately called the "Blackbirds". They provided Military Advisory Command-Studies and Observations Group (MAC-SOG) with dedicated airlift during daytime and conducted highly classified, clandestine missions at night. These night missions were called "combat missions" even though we never intended to engage in what would certainly be a one sided battle with the enemy. The only arms we carried were our survival 38 caliber pistols. We relied on our low level terrain following capability, the element of surprise and experienced airmanship to fly wherever tasked over North Vietnam.

Our "combat missions" were generated at SOG headquarters in Saigon. They ranged from quite ordinary to some bizarre airdrop operations. Thus, we would drop teams of infiltrators behind enemy lines and then resupply them periodically with all their needs. At times we would drop specially rigged personnel parachutes without infiltrators and imaginatively assembled resupply loads to convince the enemy that we had teams operating in this or that area. Sometimes our air dropped loads were rigged to fall apart in the air or be booby trapped for the NVA soldiers on the ground. And, of course, there were psychological operations consisting of high altitude leaflet drops and low altitude drops of pre-tuned radios or gift packages to fishermen in the Gulf of Tonkin. This was interesting and rewarding work. It made us feel that we were making a very significant contribution to the overall war effort by

creating considerable confusion inside the enemy's own territory.

To be effective in our clandestine air operations, we had to maintain a very low profile and avoid shoptalk with airmen of other units. Our geographical separation from SOG headquarters in Saigon helped us in not being visibly tied to their operations. Only a few of us, key command officials and mission planners, got to visit the SOG Headquarters. There, our points of contact told us only operational data for which we had a need to know. We understood the need for this arrangement and loyally carried out our role as dedicated air lifters for this important player in the war.

As we acquired more experience in performing our assigned tasks, we became aware that there were problems with some of the teams we supported in the North. We had to make some peculiar drops with very specific instructions and, at times, execute them under the supervision of tight-lipped SOG jumpmasters who were assigned to fly with us on some missions. This led us to believe that we were dealing with probable double agents and some questionable characters. As mission planners, we did not share these concerns with our crews, but some details had to be disclosed when astonished loadmasters reported to the cockpit that our SOG jump masters halted the paradrop after the first man went out and that they made the rest of the team sit down without offering any explanations. Then after landing, just as the aircraft came to a halt in its parking area, a van would appear and the remaining jumpers would smartly pile into it without any comments to the crew. Events like that and cargo loads that were purposely rigged to foul up or break up upon hitting the air stream had to be explained to the crew involved.

Because the success of our missions depended on secrecy, we were naturally apprehensive about dealing with complete strangers who would not speak to us. In time, we learned that some of the teams were compromised and feared that our aircraft may become an easy target to be brought down over a drop zone. In mission planning, we dreaded the possibility that one day we could be directed to recover a questionable agent or a package from North Vietnam using our Fulton Recovery System. We were known to the enemy for delivering booby trapped resupply bundles. A recovery of an agent or a package would be an opportune time for them to return the favor and bring down a Blackbird.

There was also considerable internal secrecy in our work. Crews were not allowed to discuss their combat missions with other crews. Locations of drop zones and types of delivery payloads could not be shared with others. One could not be exposed to too many details of our clandestine operations. There was always a possibility of being forced down and captured behind the enemy lines. For this reason, Major Thompson, a C-130 navigator, who was not a Combat Talon qualified crewmember, was assigned to our unit as a mission planner. As such, he knew about the locations of infiltrated teams and about the type of airdrops we were conducting. He did not have a crew position and was not allowed to fly "combat missions". This arrangement lasted only for the duration of his one-year tour. It also gave me, Major John Gargus, navigator, and 1/Lt. John Lewis, Electronic Warfare Officer (EWO), both from the S-05 crew, the opportunity to succeed him when he rotated to his next duty station. By that time it didn't matter any more that two crewmembers from the same crew would become his replacements and continue flying combat missions. We began our on-the-job training by helping him to plan this fateful mission. Roy Thompson, who retired as a Colonel, agreed to collaborate on putting this story together. Unfortunately his contribution was lost forever. He passed away on July 25, 1997 before he could join me and John Lewis in sharing his memories of almost 30 years ago.

The frag order for this fateful mission came from SOG on Christmas Day. Our whole detachment celebrated Christmas in the courtyard of Nha Trang's Roman Catholic Cathedral with Christian Boy and Girl Scouts and their parents. When we returned to our hotel after the festivities, Roy Thompson came by to tell me that First Flight Operations had a classified message tasking us with our next combat mission. He wanted to know if I was interested in going with him to review it. I was eager to see what it was all about, so we hopped into our jeep and drove to the Vietnamese side of the base where we shared our secure mission planning and communications facilities with our sister unit, which was designated First Flight. The First Flight was another SOG air asset flying C-123s with some very interesting crewmembers. First Flight cargo specialists assembled all our airdrop packages, rigged all our parachutes and even loaded the cargo for our combat missions. We were to trust their methods and procedures no matter how weird or foreign the resulting drop configurations looked to our loadmasters.

The frag order called for an unusual combat mission. It directed us to execute two airdrops deep inside

North Vietnam. The first one was to be a high altitude leaflet drop on a NNE heading just west of the Red River and the second one a low level resupply drop on a southerly heading just west of the Black River. We positioned ourselves in front of a large-scale classified wall chart with numerous circles of various diameters and colors that depicted locations of known enemy defenses. We traced a probable inbound and outbound route with our fingers and concluded that the mission was a feasible one. The only possible threat to our aircraft would come during the "short look", the leaflet drop when the Blackbird would be in close proximity to the Yen Bai Air Base and its MIG interceptors, or from any other Hanoi area base that had MIGs on night alert. Otherwise, everything else looked good. We would be able to lay out a flight path that would be clear of lethal ranges of all known surface to air missiles (SAMs) and anti aircraft artillery (AAA).

With this accomplished, we returned to our Ahn Hoa hotel to brief our Det Commander, Lt Col Dow Rogers, and our Ops Officer, Lt Col Tom Hines, on the forthcoming combat mission. The mission was scheduled for the night of 28 and early morning of 29 December 1967.

At Ahn Hoa, things were in a festive mood. Major Charlie Claxton, who had performed the role of Santa Claus, was now busy in the kitchen making sure that everything was going on schedule for our big evening meal. We were hosting the American officers of First Flight and borrowed their gourmet cook to assist our own very capable Chinese kitchen staff. Captain Gerald Van Buren, our Officers Open Mess Steward, had already done his job. He made sure that all needed kitchen supplies were either procured in the Saigon Commissary, or that they were obtained from his various contacts at Special Forces operating locations. We would trade with the Special Forces outposts on almost every visit to their remote sites. We would trade San Miguel beer, obtained on our visits to Taiwan or to the Philippines, for crates of fresh vegetables grown in their neighboring montagnard villages. Charlie Claxton was aspiring to replace Gerald Van Buren as the Mess Steward when Gerry completed his one-year tour in Vietnam.

That evening we had what must have been the best feast of our Vietnam tour. We all complimented our kitchen staff and Charlie Claxton and Gerald Van Buren for their superb performance. Our rooftop bar activity that night was somewhat subdued; Most of us retreated to our rooms early to make audiotapes for our families. We all owed special thanks to our wives for making our Vietnamese Christmas as good as it could have been. All the sweets, toys and clothing for the Cathedral party and gift dispensing visits to several local orphanages were sent to us by our well-organized wives. They enlisted support of their local Chambers of Commerce for donations of clothing, candy and gifts and arranged with the USAF for shipment of assembled goods by opportune C-130 airlift. We were proud of them for their contribution to this civic action effort. Sorting of donated clothing became a major undertaking which took us several days to complete. We sized and sorted the clothing in the hot unventilated upstairs storage rooms of our operations building. Sgt Jim Williams spent countless hours helping me in my capacity as the unit's Civic Action Officer. He took charge in keeping the effort going when some other volunteers gave up because of uncomfortable heat and troublesome clothing lint and dust in our improvised Santa's work shop. It was he who recruited SSgt Ed Darcy to help us until the clothing was finally sorted, boxed and labeled for distribution. During the festivities in the cathedral courtyard, both of these young men displayed great enthusiasm in playing games with the Scouts. We all had a great time. Christmas spirit and joy overcame all language and age barriers.

Early next morning Roy Thompson, John Lewis and I settled down in our secure planning room where we drew out the route and prepared master charts for the crew that was going to fly the mission. Our master charts would be used the next day by the mission crewmembers who would study them and customize them for their own personal use.

The entire flight would take about 8 hours. It would follow our often-repeated high-level route from Nha Trang to the SKYLINE beacon in Laos. There the Blackbird would descend to a terrain following altitude and fly a short zigzagging route toward the first leaflet drop area. Then, after a "short look" (rapid climb to high altitude, quick drop and rapid descent), the aircraft would resume terrain following through the low level resupply drop and return to the SKYLINE beacon. From that point the aircraft would continue back home at normal cruising altitude.

In planning our terrain following routes, we always tried to stay away from populated areas, selecting prominent radar return targets for turning points and navigational instrument updates. A unique feature of our terrain following flights was that we flew at controlled ground speeds rather than constant airspeeds. Our aircraft was equipped with the APQ-115 terrain following radar that used aircraft's speed over the ground in its computations for

maintaining desired altitude above the ground. Typically, we flew at 500 ft above the ground during daytime and at 1000 ft at night. Flights over uneven terrain required continuous throttle adjustments to maintain our standard 230-knot ground speed (265 miles per hour). The pilots had a Doppler ground speed indicator that they monitored incessantly. The pilot (left seat) had an APQ-115 screen, which in one display mode traced the terrain directly ahead of the aircraft and in another, cross scan mode, painted the terrain 20 degrees left and right of the projected ground track. Radar navigator had a third mode option for map reading. This one gave him a 45-degree left and right view of the aircraft's projected track, but when the radar was in this mode, the terrain following input used by the pilot was disabled. Flying in the left seat was very strenuous. For all practical purposes it was like flying sustained instrument landing system (ILS). Blackbird pilots had to fly the attitude director indicator's (ADI's) pitch bar which received commands based on radar terrain returns and Doppler ground speed. They had to monitor their radar scope for visual terrain signals and manipulate engine throttles to maintain the desired ground speed. During daytime, well-placed cockpit windows allowed the pilot to verify approaching terrain, but on a dark night, this was impossible. One could not fix his eyes to the outside through the ever-present glare of the cockpit's amber lights and not lose focus on the instruments by which he had to fly. For that reason it became our standard practice to have the First Pilot fly in the left seat and have the Aircraft Commander sit on the right. This was the only way he could command his eleven-member crew. He could not take time away from the instruments to focus on even a routine in-flight problem.

Terrain following combined with special navigational and flying techniques would get us to where we needed to go, but our ultimate survivability over North Vietnam depended on the skills of our Electronic Warfare Officers (EWOs). At that time, North Vietnam had the most formidable air defense system in the history of air warfare. It is true that their radars were not of the latest state-of-the-art, but they were effectively used by operators who had gained considerable skills with them. The same could be said about the AAA and SAM crews. Their tours of duty were not limited to one year like ours. They were at home defending their families against the most advanced American war machines for as long as their war lasted. So these Soviet made radars, which were first introduced in Eastern Europe, were now being combat tested. The U.S. intelligence had appropriate nicknames for all of them. Thus we confronted Bar Locks and Spoon Rests for long-range early warning, Fan Song for SA2 surface to air missiles (SAMs) and Fire Cans for a variety of anti-aircraft artillery (AAA).

Our knowledge of the locations of these radars, combined with our low level tactics, would get us into most target areas without detection. Once detected, however, it became the EWO's job to analyze the threats these radars posed. If all radars were in the locations we plotted on our charts, we would be able to fly through their scanning ranges and stay away from the effective ranges of missiles or artillery they controlled. During mission planning, the EWO would prepare a scenario which would tell him at which point of flight and from which direction each radar's scan would illuminate our aircraft. If he detected radars not plotted on his chart and the received signal strength was stronger, indicating a closer proximity to our flight track, he would have to direct the pilots to get us out of there. By monitoring his state of the art instruments, he could tell whether the enemy radars were in routine mode or were focused on his aircraft in sector scans with added height finders that would help them to acquire aircraft's track, speed and altitude. The missile and AAA crews needed all this information before they could zero in on our aircraft's position and fire. In addition, with SAM's Fan Song radar, he could tell when the radar pulse recurrence frequency changed to forecast an imminent missile launch. All that required good eyes to monitor several visual displays and good hearing to discern distinct chirping audio signals each radar propagated. In a concentrated radar signal area, such as our aircraft would enter upon its climb to drop altitude, the EWO would receive welcomed assistance from the crew radio operator who shared his instrument console and sat on his left. All our radio operators became very adept EWO assistants.

Blackbird's EWOs also had the capability to detect and disrupt an attack by a MIG interceptor. Using passive electronic techniques, they could confuse a MIG long enough to enable their aircraft to escape into a hilly terrain where the interceptor's radar became ineffective and the pursuing pilot risked flying into the ground. First, by monitoring aural and visual signals, they could tell that ground control intercept radar was tracking their Blackbird and most likely vectoring a MIG for an attack from the rear. Once the EWO picked up the interceptor's radar, he could play with the target a pursuing pilot would see on his radarscope. By manipulating the radar echoes reflected from the Blackbird to the interceptor's radar he could offset the pilot's target to the left or right. Then just

as the MIG was ready to fire, he would call for a sharp break away from the established aircraft heading, causing the interceptor to miss his radar target. After the first missed pass the GCI site and the interceptor pilot would get smarter and come around for another pass. In the meantime our Blackbird would make a rapid descent to the treetop level and get lost in the ground clutter where the airborne radar could not find it. The interceptor would have to abort the chase or risk flying into the ground.

In addition, Blackbird's EWOs could dispense highly reflective chaff, which would instantly paint a brighter and larger target than the aircraft. With all that equipment and our special training, we had what we needed to conduct gutsy, but safe operations in the hostile skies of North Vietnam. No one expected a large, slow and unarmed transport aircraft to operate in the same North Vietnamese air space, which proved to be so challenging to the most advanced high performance aircraft in the US inventory.

Our success rate over the enemy territory was commendable. Many of our low level missions through the North Vietnamese air space went undetected. Some were tracked during portions of their flight, but always succeeded in avoiding AAA fire. A few had to abort their high altitude leaflet drops when a missile control radar locked on to them and the EWO detected a frequency shift, which signaled an imminent SA2 missile launch. They always managed to break their radar lock on during a rapid roller coaster dive down to the minimum safe altitude. Fewer still experienced a MIG chase with an airborne radar lock on. Our EWOs always saved the night for us. Consequently, it didn't take long for the Blackbird crews to develop a due respect for the skills of their EWOs.

Two months before, in mid October, our S-05 crew's EWO, John Lewis, defeated three passes of an interceptor that jumped upon us just off the coast near the Haiphong harbor. We were dropping pre-tuned radios to the local fishermen. Pursued, we flew as low and as fast as we could, shaking and bouncing on the air currents our aircraft stirred off the otherwise calm sea water. When John called "Break Left", we had to pop up a few feet in order to avoid dipping the left wing into the water. Our Ops Officer, Lt Col Tom Hines, flew with us that night. It was daylight when we landed at Nha Trang. The wings and the fuselage of our Blackbird were white with salt. John Lewis may still hold the Combat Talon record for besting a pursuing fighter pilot three times on a single "combat mission".

Our first problem on the 29 December mission would be the early warning radar at Na San. We had to stay as low and as far south of its range as possible in order to avoid detection while crossing into North Vietnam. Once inside North Vietnam, we had to get to the east side of the central mountains and stay out of range of well-placed AAA and SAM sites along the Red River Valley. We tried to avoid getting picked up and tracked by the multitude of radars associated with those anti-aircraft weapons. These radars by themselves could not hurt us but would alert AAA and SAM crews for possible action if we came within range of their weapons. Our best scenario was to have no radar track us until we began our rapid climb to 30,000+ feet for the leaflet drop. We knew that once our aircraft got to 9-10,000 feet, all available radars would come up and keep our EWO extremely busy. If the enemy did not respond with a launch of interceptors, the leaflet drop would be completed and the aircraft would resume low level terrain following and proceed westward just south of the China border along the 22nd parallel until reaching the Black River Valley. There a southbound turn would be made. Then staying in the mountains along the west side of the river, the second airdrop would be executed NW of the Na San early warning radar.

Our avoidance of Na San radar was not our concern at this point in the flight. By this time a warning would have been issued from the Hanoi side of the mountains that a leaflet dropping intruder was moving westward toward Dien Bien Phu. Consequently this early warning radar would be scanning in a NW direction, expecting the emergence of our Blackbird. Na San's detection of our flight at this time could actually assist in the accomplishment of the second portion of our mission. Our resupply drop was what we called a " notional" drop, or a diversionary drop. There was no friendly team to receive the two resupply bundles. These bundles were carefully planned by imaginative minds at SOG to confuse the enemy and to have him expend considerable resources searching for infiltrators that did not exist. So the resupply bundles were meant to be captured by the enemy. Na San's detection of our aircraft's slow down could assist the enemy in locating this bogus cargo.

By the time we finished with our planning, we learned that augmented S-01 crew would fly the mission. It was S-01's turn to take the next mission, but there were some questions about the possibility of having this crew skip its turn. Major Dick Day, its Aircraft Commander, and one of the crew's loadmasters were on duty not involving flying (DNIF). His senior navigator, Lt Col Don Fisher, was not yet back from his R&R (rest and

recreation) in Hawaii. His earliest expected return was on that day, December 26. Earlier on this day, the other crew loadmaster departed with S-03 crew on that crew's flight to our parent 314th Wing in Taiwan. He had made arrangements with SSgt Ed Darcy from S-03 crew to switch places. Ed Darcy, a quiet, conscientious young man, planned to save some money by staying in Nha Trang. He did not want to spend it on a 3 to 5 day stay in Taiwan while the ferried Blackbird went through its scheduled inspection and repair as necessary (IRAN) in a maintenance facility that was equipped to handle C130 aircraft. The crews looked forward to their turn to ferry a Blackbird for an IRAN in Taiwan. It was a most welcomed vacation break from the wartime conditions in Vietnam. So, Ed Darcy became a volunteer replacement for one S-01 loadmaster. Sgt. James Williams agreed to take the place of the other load master who was also DNIF.

This mission provided an opportunity for Capt Edwin Osborne to take command of the S-01 crew and for Capt. Gerald Van Buren to move up to the First Pilot's position. The Second Pilot's slot was filled by Major Charlie Claxton from my S-05 crew. He had missed an earlier combat mission when he was DNIF, so this would become a make up mission for him. I made up my mind that I would take Lt Col Don Fisher's place if he did not return in time from Hawaii. I would have been the logical replacement in any case because I already knew the route and mission details and could be used to step in to replace him up to the last minute.

Later on that evening I heard that Don Fisher was back. I went to see him and found him in a most jovial mood. He had just returned from a memorable R&R in Hawaii with his whole family. He had just had the greatest of Christmases and repeated to me and to others that he was "in love with the whole world." He was ready to fly combat.

Edwin Osborne was also ready to fly as an aircraft commander of a combat mission. All our First Pilots were highly experienced as C-130 airlift aircraft commanders before becoming qualified in the Combat Talon Blackbirds. Many felt that to become a highly qualified copilot in the Combat Talon program was somewhat of a career regression even though they understood the need for such demanding pilot qualification. As experienced pilots, they were simply outranked by others with more impressive pilot credentials that became Combat Talon Aircraft Commanders. Edwin Osborne was clearly a pilot who should not be taking a back seat to anyone. He was an excellent pilot qualified as an instructor pilot in the Blackbirds.

The next day John Lewis and I rode with the S-01 officer crew to the mission planning room. Van Buren drove the crew van. He normally drove whenever his crew went places. I was told that as our Commissary Officer he even drove through Saigon on his crew's periodic commissary runs when his crew's Blackbird got extra ground time at Tan Son Nhut to accommodate his grocery shopping. Since Charlie Claxton was destined to inherit that duty from him, it meant that my S-05 crew would get the long ground time on some future transits through Saigon.

On the way to our secure mission planning room, I sat right across from Capt. Frank Parker, a tall blond young man who was the crew's EWO. He was telling several of us how fortunate we were in having missions where we could sneak in and sneak out without stirring up a hornets' nest. He had recently returned from Thailand where he ran into several of his EWO classmates who were flying the RB-66s. Their mission was to deliberately challenge the enemy's electronic detection systems and deadly retaliation in their efforts to pinpoint locations of enemy radars. He used the term we sometimes applied to those situations when one would prefer to be on the ground rather than in the air. He said that his friends were "eating their livers" on their RB-66 missions.

Roy Thompson had everything ready for us when we arrived. All the charts we prepared the day before were either posted on easels or laid out on worktables. Fresh, unmarked charts, flight plan logs and other necessary mission forms were placed on tables where the crewmembers would use them. Roy gave a brief overview of what the mission entailed. About the only unusual thing that he noted was that TOTs, (times on targets), were not prescribed because neither drop zone had a reception team. The psy-ops (leaflet) drop had a fixed drop leg at altitude of 30,000 or more feet, depending on the wind velocity and direction. Weaker winds would require a higher altitude. The heart of Hanoi would be from 65 to 70 miles away and it was hoped that some of the leaflets would make it that far before the sunrise. Lack of TOTs also explained to them why their flight plan was not completed with time of arrival at turning points. They were to calculate these by themselves, planning on a 260-265 true air speed at high altitudes and a standard 230 ground speed at terrain following levels.

Once Roy Thompson was finished with his mission introduction, I joined Don Fisher and Gordie Wenaas, the two crew navigators, to work on the flight planned route. John Lewis and Frank Parker got together to work on

the enemy's defenses. Roy joined the three pilots. Our enlisted crewmembers: two flight engineers, two loadmasters and one radio operator, normally did not participate in mission planning.

Gordie Wenaas thought the mission would be a "piece of cake." He quickly noted that there were practically no threat circles anywhere near our track. Then he started crunching out flight plan times between turning points. Don and I went over each low level turning point, examining the terrain in its vicinity. Practically all were river bends or rivers that would show up well on radar. Some turning points had been used on previous missions and were reported to be good ones. Selected drop zone for the second drop was a location with good radar targets everywhere. He was satisfied with everything and began to prepare his own navigational chart. In this task, Gordie was way ahead of him.

Gordie was a man who undertook every single task very seriously. I remember him going around our hotel taking care of chores whenever his S-01 crew was scheduled to be the hotel's duty crew. Each crew was regularly scheduled for hotel crew duty by the Ops Scheduling as if it were a flight assignment. These duties consisted of servicing our two electrical generators, bringing in fresh potable water from the Air Base, taking care of mail, stocking the rooftop bar and performing whatever maintenance chores were needed at the hotel. Gordie Wenaas was conspicuous by keeping himself occupied with these chores. He showed me how to start up and switch our two noisy generators.

I was then drawn into a conversation with the pilots. Osborne liked the route and had only one concern. It was the time interval between the end of the first drop and the start of the second one. Would his two loadmasters have enough time to move the cargo to the ramp for this drop? How many bundles would there be? How much would they weigh? And, of course, "What is this notional stuff?" The answer to this question could only be provided by our cargo rigger, a Warrant Officer from the First Flight. Van Buren was dispatched to go next door to get him. Van returned alone, but he had the information we needed. He also succeeded in making arrangements for the loadmasters and the flight engineers to be at the aircraft next morning to witness the cargo loading. He commented that the Warrant Officer reminded him that no one was to mess with the cargo and question its rigging. Everything would be set up by the First Flight crew just the way it should be dropped. Anything non-standard or out of place should be ignored. Our job was to fly it there and drop it just as it was configured.

Ed Osborne showed much interest in the terrain following portion of flight. So the pilots gathered around Don Fisher who had already drawn his chart. He walked through every leg of flight and explained each turning point. Charlie Claxton had the weight of the aircraft calculated at the point of acceleration and climb to high altitude. There were questions about how much of the area west of Hanoi the crew would be able to see. Aircraft's track was over the eastern slopes of the central highlands. Numerous peaks with elevations of up to 9,000 feet were immediately to the left and the sprawling Red River Valley with level terrain west of Hanoi to the right. It was to be a dark night with new moon beginning on December 30. There would be total darkness. Some lights would no doubt be lighted towards Hanoi. Our prior flights noted that North Vietnam did not have a complete nighttime blackout. The night would be perfect for the two map-readers - Gordie Wenaas on the right and Charlie Claxton on the left - to use the somewhat cumbersome starlight scope to monitor the terrain below. The scope was of little use at terrain following levels because it had excessive tunnel vision. This made the terrain whiz by so fast that it caused the images to blur. But at drop altitude, where the Blackbird would seem to be at a standstill in relation to the ground below, the scope would give its user a fascinating view of terrain otherwise hidden in total darkness. Very little cloud coverage was predicted for that night.

We pointed out the location of Yen Bai Air Base that would be at the aircraft's 1 to 2 o'clock position during the drop. If there were any MIGs on night alert, that base would pose their greatest threat. This would also be Frank Parker's greatest challenge that night. He would have to defend against a possible interceptor activity.

Ed Osborne examined the terrain into which the aircraft would have to descend after the leaflet drop. He was concerned about the rapidly approaching ground during their maximum rate of descent when the radar stabilization was habitually, but only temporarily, lost and the Doppler limits were also exceeded. Here I pointed out that a rapid descent should not be executed unless the aircraft was in jeopardy due to SAM or interceptor attack. All crews seemed to have the same Pope AFB training mind set. During our training there, each short look was followed by a maximum rate descent, a maneuver which put a lot of stress on the aircraft. This needed to be practiced at every opportunity. Now in real life, if a threat to our aircraft did not materialize, there was no need to

put it through such a stressful maneuver where the crew experienced weightlessness and everything not tied down started floating about. Then at the point of level off, the tremendous G load would force the standing crewmembers down to their knees. On this mission there would be additional cargo just behind the EWO and the radio operator compartment. We did not want any of it to break loose during such a stressful maneuver.

Ed was concerned with the time remaining before the second drop. His loadmasters and the second flight engineer would have to move the cargo to the back of the aircraft and get it set for the drop. Normally, the cargo would be all set from the point of take off. But not this time, The back of the aircraft would have to be cleared of any remaining restraining straps from the leaflet drop. Then the resupply bundles would have to be moved into place. Normally this would not be that difficult because the palletized bundles were on rollers. But being on rollers in straight and level flight is one thing, being on rollers in an up and down terrain following flight is another. Great care was needed to avoid an injury or have a cargo slip off the rollers at an angle where the pallet would jam. This would no doubt be a new experience for these loadmasters. Ed noted with some satisfaction that the terrain following leg going westbound along the 22nd parallel was relatively level because we were taking advantage of the break between 10,000 ft high peaks on the right and 9,000 ft ones on the left.

At a prominent turning point over the Black River the mission would turn south. The Blackbird would fly almost due south hiding behind the high terrain west of the river. This would keep it west of the valley's populated areas. Ahead at the aircraft's 10 to 11 o'clock position would be the Na San early warning radar. This radar would be looking for the reappearance of the intruder that was sure to excite the radars on the Hanoi side of the mountains in the Red River valley. This radar was not capable of directing MIG interceptors and none were expected to come west out of the Red River valley.

Our drop zone was in an isolated area in the vicinity of Highway 6. It was a logical place for a drop zone. This would no doubt add to the credibility to the nonexistent team's presence. Roy Thompson explained the deceptive nature of this drop. There would be no ground markings or signals. The drop would occur on Don Fisher's green light command when his Doppler distance to go ran out. After this drop the crew would continue terrain following into Laos where the high altitude route home would resume at the SKYLINE beacon.

At some point during this low-level route review we were joined by Frank Parker and John Lewis who had concluded their study of the enemy's electronic air order of battle. They pointed out correctly that once the aircraft crossed into the Black River region the enemy defenses were such that a return home at any altitude would be safe. That was a good thought in case of any in-flight problems, such as navigational, mechanical, or outside visibility degradation due to weather.

Then the whole group gathered around Frank Parker's chart. His chart differed from those of Don Fisher and the map-readers Charlie Claxton and Gordie Wenaas. Theirs had smaller threat circles along the flight-planned track. They represented lethal ranges of SAMs and AAA. Frank's chart had the mission flying through much larger circles that outlined scan ranges of various radars. His chart showed that the aircraft would be exposed to many types of radar throughout its northbound portion of flight along the Red River. He estimated that even before the aircraft would reach its drop altitude of 30,000 + feet, all available radars would be alerted to their presence and that he would be saturated with a tremendous amount of visual and aural signals. He acknowledged that he would have to rely on very able assistance from Gean Clapper, the crew radio operator, who would be sharing his console behind the cargo compartment curtain.

Gean Clapper was a true professional in his field. He had many years of experience as a HAM radio operator. As such he had contacts with colleagues throughout the world. On flights over international waters, where it was permissible, he would raise his contacts and relay personal greetings and messages to families back home. He was also very good at electronic warfare. He could positively recognize the chirping sounds of various radars. This should be a great asset on a flight such as this one where sound-wise things would get extremely noisy for Frank.

Frank concluded that with Gean's help he should be able to detect anything out of the ordinary and call for evasive action before any harm could come to the Blackbird. It would be Don Fisher's task to find a safe evasive flight path through the mountains on the left.

After that each crewmember went on his own, putting finishing touches on all paperwork he was producing. We three mission planners assisted them with anything they needed and insured that all mission documents they produced were properly stamped TOP SECRET. None of the documents could leave with the crew.

They were collected by us and locked in First Flight's safe. They would not be released to the crew until the next night before the pre-departure mission briefing.

The next day's mission briefing was a whole crew affair attended by our Commander, Lt Col Dow Rogers, and our Operations Officer, Lt Col Tom Hines. This would be the first time the enlisted crewmembers learned about the target area. All five, the two engineers, two loadmasters and the radio operator, were present when the First Flight's cargo handlers loaded the aircraft. Flight Engineer TSgt Jack McCrary gave us thumbs up on the condition of the aircraft. He was a very meticulous crewmember, well regarded, not just by Ed Osborne, but also by his flight engineer peers. I wondered how much sleep he had gotten during the day. His eyes looked red as if he had not slept at all. But we all knew that his nickname was "Red Eye." He had an eye condition that made them look red and blood shot all the time. His second, SSgt Wayne Eckley, was an engineer of lesser experience, but not short on enthusiasm. His nickname was "Bones." The jungle fatigue uniforms (designed as one size fits all) exaggerated his lean and bony body. There was so much more space left for him inside his fatigues.

The mission briefing started with Roy Thompson who stood in front of several chart-filled easels placed in the front of the briefing room. He briefed the weather. It was going to be favorable for this flight with very few clouds on the east side of the mountains in North Vietnam and strong favorable WNW winds at drop altitude. A low level pressure was moving southeast from China, bringing some cloudiness into the target area in the Black River valley late in the morning.

Then, the mission briefing was turned over to Don Fisher who briefed the route and the drop sequences. He was followed by Frank Parker, who covered the enemy order of battle. He presented the latest SOG intelligence that included known numbers of different MIG interceptors available to North Vietnamese defenses. As always, he mentioned the standard radio silence precautions. Minimum chatter on the intercom! He was going to run every one of his sophisticated tape recorders that registered all electronic signals generated by enemy radars and also captured crew's intercom transmissions. This was going to be a special night for him to gather electronic intelligence signals for our future use. We should end up with a sizable amount of signals from all types of radars. These tapes would then be used by other crew EWOs interested in sharpening their listening and signal interpretation skills.

Frank's briefing was followed by the Aircraft Commander Osborne. He briefed the crew assignments that had been previously reviewed with Lt Col Tom Hines. He would fly the entire mission in the right seat. Van Buren would be in the left seat from the take off through the low level terrain following part of the flight. Charlie Claxton would map read from behind Van Buren during terrain following and then take the left seat at high altitude on the way home. Don Fisher would ride the radar navigator's seat with the curtain drawn during terrain following and the leaflet drop. Gordie Wenaas would stand behind Osborne's right seat and map read from there. Jack McCrary would fly the engineer's seat during terrain following. Wayne Eckley would spend his time in the back playing the safety observer role and provide assistance to the loadmasters. Frank Parker and Gean Clapper were to man their console behind the bulkhead curtain and the two substitute loadmasters, Jim Williams and Ed Darcy, were to make sure they kept their restraining harnesses on during the drops. All crewmembers were to go on demand regulator oxygen upon entering North Vietnam and then on 100% oxygen during the leaflet drop.

There were a few standard questions from Lt Colonels Rogers and Hines about everyone's fitness and emphasis on safety. Finally, the crew was wished good luck.

After this the crew was sanitized. All personal effects, identifications, family photographs, and even jewelry were placed into plastic bags and saved for the crew's return. Each crewmember had only his dog tags and Geneva Convention card as identifying documents. That was the standard procedure for all combat missions.

Because the mission planners had to secure all the classified mission documents and personal effects, the crewmembers were already in their assigned positions running their pre-departure checklists when we rejoined them at the aircraft. We witnessed an orderly engine start and watched the Blackbird taxi out to the end of the runway. From our vantage point we saw them take off and disappear into the darkness over the South China Sea.

About 3 hours later, I returned with Roy Thompson to our Operations Office to monitor the North Vietnamese portion of the mission. We had one of our radio operators monitor a special HF radio frequency over which Gean Clapper transmitted coded mission progress reports every 30 to 40 minutes when the aircraft reached a significant in-flight turning point. A radio station in an unknown location would broadcast continuous one letter Morse Code at regular intervals. Our airborne operator would monitor the same frequency and at proper moments

would insert a two letter Morse Code signal which would let us know which point of the route was reached and gave us the status of the mission's progress. This was such a short burst of transmitted energy that our enemy, who was sure to monitor the same frequency, would not have enough time to zero in his direction finders to locate the position of our aircraft. These transmissions were the only breaks in radio silence allowed during our combat missions.

Upon checking with our radio operator, we learned that the flight was already over North Vietnam and right on time. We did not have any mission documents with us other than the radio operator's log with numbered points and corresponding estimated times of arrival over them, but we had a good mental picture of what must have been happening in the cockpit. So as we sat there, sipping on some very strong coffee that the radio operator prepared, we made occasional comments on what the crew must have been going through.

For the leaflet drop, all the lights were at their dimmest and the radar navigator and EWO/radio operator compartment curtains were drawn to prevent any outside light to affect the night vision of the rest of the crew. All were on oxygen and their intercom voices were muffled by the oxygen mask microphones that registered and exaggerated the sound of every breath they took. The aircraft began its acceleration prior to the rapid climb. Maximum aircraft acceleration to 932-degree turbine inlet temperature was attained in relatively short level flight with aircraft shaking as if its four turbojets were ready to tear loose and leave the bulky aircraft carcass behind.

Then as the aircraft began its rapid climb, Frank Parker's console surely began to light up. At first he would pick up a number of AAA and SAM radars, which would routinely scan their assigned areas. As they detected the Blackbird, they would focus their scan on their just discovered target and activate their height finders to establish the aircraft's altitude. They would pass their acquired target data through their established notification channels. This would cause even more radars to come up and focus on this rapidly rising, but now slow moving target. The crew would hear Frank reporting the inevitable. Two or three AAA radars were tracking them, but from a safe distance. Of greater concern would be the SAM radars. These had longer reach, but were expected to be out of range. He would certainly be calling these to Osborne's attention. Then would come the level off and the start of drop. Each man could tell when each cardboard box exited the aircraft. There was a whoosh sound to each exit as the departing load created an added vacuum in the rare atmosphere of the cargo compartment. The aircraft would seem to stand still, just hanging on in the thin air, being as high as it could climb on the thin cushion of available air. And as Frank watched for the emergence of a GCI radar and its tracking pattern in order to determine if there was an intent to launch a MIG, Gordie Wenaas must have struggled with the night vision scope looking for Yen Bai Air Base some 30 miles away. This was the place from which the nearest MIGs could come. His night vision scope would certainly pick up the heat of an interceptor at take off. He would have to be pointed in the right direction. Others in the cockpit were getting the answer to whether they could see the lights of distant Hanoi now at their 3 o'clock position. Don Fisher must have had his face buried in the hood of his radar as he carefully traced every mile of ground covered by the aircraft. He had to know exactly where he was in case Frank reported radar or interceptor lock on which would demand an immediate descent to a safe terrain between the mountain peaks on the left.

We did not hear any interruptions to the monotonous "V" sound on the radio, so we assumed that all was okay. All the leaflets were delivered. The aircraft was on its way down and proceeding westward to its turning point over the Black River. The next report came just as expected. All was still okay. The aircraft was now southbound running its checklist for the bundle drop by Highway 6.

Roy and I planned to return to the hotel right after the next report and get a couple of hours of sleep before coming back to greet the returning crew. But as we waited, nothing happened. There were no further reports from the aircraft. Our first assumption was that something went wrong with Clapper's radio. We would surely hear something once the aircraft emerged from its radio silence over the SKYLINE beacon. That is when the aircraft would report a small problem like that to our radar sites in Thailand. Once again, there was nothing. With that we returned to the hotel and reported our concerns to Dow Rogers and Tom Hines.

There were anxious moments as the aircraft's return time approached. Calls were made to find out if any landings were made in Thailand or at Da Nang. Then the command at SOG was notified. The SOG took over all search and rescue efforts. Several F-4 Phantoms were launched to survey the area south of the last known reported position. The weather turned bad. The front moved in as expected and the F-4s could not see a thing on the ground. They monitored radios for signals from the aircraft's crash position indicator and from any crewmember survival

radios. They heard nothing. After several attempts, the search was given up. The crew of 11 was declared as missing in action (MIA).

There were many guesses and opinions as to what might have happened. A loss to enemy action was discounted. The aircraft was proceeding normally on its assigned mission after the leaflet drop, which was the most hazardous part of the flight. Enemy attack on the aircraft would have been reported. The enemy had a chance to detect our aircraft by Na San radar, which must have been alerted about our aircraft's escape toward Dien Bien Phu. Had this happened, there might have been some forces in the vicinity of the drop zone capable of bringing down a low flying aircraft with small arms fire. But such an act would have been heralded as a great victory by North Vietnam. The enemy would have learned of our aircraft's fate almost immediately. Even with our low profile, the failure of our aircraft to return to Nha Trang could not be concealed for very long. The enemy should have concluded that it was the aircraft that had dropped several million leaflets west of Hanoi. They did not take credit for its disappearance during this mission. But some thought of a more sinister scenario. The enemy had the aircraft and perhaps some members of the crew and they would use them for propaganda purposes. However, as time went on this probability dissipated. It became clearer and clearer that our aircraft must have impacted a mountain in an isolated area sometime after making its last position report. The return of our POWs in 1973 confirmed that. The names of the crewmembers were not known to any of the returning POWs.

The location of Blackbird 64-0547 continued to be a mystery for 25 years. In 1991, when the villagers of Phu Nung heard that the U.S. was searching for remains of American airmen, various individuals reported that they knew of a crash site in their vicinity. In November 1992 a joint U.S.-Vietnam team was lead to a very isolated location at coordinates 21-39-80N 103-31-20E (Grid 48QUJ 4744596161) where they found few remaining parts of an aircraft which turned out to be our Blackbird.

The crash site is located in a rugged mountainous terrain of Lai Chau province some 32 miles northeast of Dien Bien Phu. It lies just a few miles east of the route that many of our crews flew in the opposite direction toward the same prominent bend in the river over which the last aircraft position report was made. This river bend was a very distinct radar return and we used it on those missions that required our undetected entry into areas between Hanoi and the China border. Since we are unable to retrieve the flight plan for this mission, we do not have the exact location of the initial point for the drop or for the drop zone. I must rely only on my memory and conclude that the aircraft was either on its planned route to the initial point or making a course correction to it. Distance wise, the crash occurred seven and a half minutes from the reporting point at the river bend. Description of the aircraft's impact point reveals that it was heading directly toward the Na San radar site that was about 45 nautical miles away.

The US recovery team pinpointed the crash location on the best available 1 to 50,000-scale chart. This chart shows it to be at 4780 ft on a steep 60-degree slope of a north-northwest facing crescent shaped mountain. The crest of this mountain goes only up to 4870 ft. The main peak of this karst studded mountain known as Nam Bo rises to 5174 ft and it is one mile due west of the crash site. The crash site is very small. Its measurements established by the recovery team are given as 105 by 72 feet. This is a very small area for an aircraft as large as a C-130. Since all the crew remains were recovered from this small location, it can be safely concluded that the aircraft did nor bounce and break up along its track before coming to a stop. Its crash heading must have been perpendicular to the face of the mountain. With that, the destruction of the aircraft must have been instantaneous.

At the time of the crash the crew was getting ready for the second drop. Eckley, Darcy and Williams were in the cargo compartment making sure that the load was properly positioned for the drop. They were moving about and did not yet have their restraining harnesses hooked on. Claxton and Wenaas were the other two crewmembers that were not fastened to any seats. Their map reading duties called for them to stand behind the pilots and peer outside through the side windows.

The first person on the scene of the crash was a twelve-year-old boy. He reported that the aircraft was in many pieces and that it was still burning. He saw several bodies, many of them burnt. He did not find any survivors.

The team found very little at the crash scene. The villagers had pilfered the site within days after the crash and over the years carted away all aircraft parts they could use. In 1991 when they learned about the US search for the remains of airmen, they returned to the site and dug up all the human remains they could find. They turned them over to the proper authorities. When the US recovery team returned to the site in 1993, they found only a few

fragments of human remains and the team leader recommended that any further attempts at recovery should be abandoned. Subsequent analysis of human remains is being conducted by the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii.

There is a question why the site went so long without being reported. Team's investigation revealed that the crash site was reported to the village authorities immediately. It may be that the village leaders were so isolated from the governmental authorities that they didn't know what to do. Or, on the other hand, they were astute enough to realize what kind of fate would descend upon them for pilfering the crash site and keeping the crew weapons as well as those that must have been packaged in the airdrop cargo. Consequently, keeping the news of the crash a village secret had some benefits for their isolated indigenous population. Then, once the American rewards for locating aircraft crash sites became known and profitable, the village secret was revealed.

Our own information channels were also flawed. Personnel associated with Combat Talon were never officially informed about the crash site discovery. In mid 1997, plans were put in motion at Hurlburt to erect a memorial for the eleven lost crewmembers whose status had been changed from MIA to KIA in 1978. As an individual who was closely tied to this unfortunate mission, I agreed to write this story so that the families of the lost airmen would learn about the work their loved ones did in Vietnam and so that those who flew the Blackbirds in that war would recall and share their mission recollections with others. I finished the first draft of this story in July, hoping that John Lewis' and my recollections of the route and events of 30 years ago would help someone to locate the missing aircraft. The title of this first draft was "Missing Combat Talon C-130E". The word of my writing went out and in August I received a surprise phone call from a man who had been looking for information about his friend who flew on that mission. It was Gene Kremin, a radio operator buddy of Gean Clapper. He informed me that the aircraft had been located almost five years before and that his information about the crash site came from the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

John Gargus was born in Czechoslovakia from where he escaped at the age of fifteen when the Communists pulled the country behind the Iron Curtain. He was commissioned through AFROTC in 1956 and made the USAF his career. He served in the Military Airlift Command as a navigator, then as an instructor in AFROTC. He went to Vietnam as a member of Special Operations and served in that field of operations for seven years in various units at home and in Europe. He participated in the air operations planning for the Son Tay POW rescue and then flew as the lead navigator of one of the MC-130s that led the raiders to Son Tay His non-flying assignments included Deputy base Command at Zaragoza Air Base in Spain and at Hurlburt Field in Florida and a tour as Assistant Commandant of the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. He retired in 1983 after serving as the Chief of USAF's Mission to Colombia. He has been married to Anita since 1958. The Garguses have one son and three daughters.