

AIR COMMANDO

A Professional Publication by the Air Commando Association
Dedicated to Air Commandos Past, Present, & Future

JOURNAL

Vol 12: Issue 1

CANNON AFB REVISITED



**Why Cannon AFB?
... Melrose Range!**

**Cannon Air Force Base:
From Specter of BRAC to
Hub of AFSOC**

**Mission Support
Teams**

**On Becoming an Air
Commando, My
Visit To the Congo**

**Air Commandos at Khe Sanh
315th Air Commando Wing**



**Foreword by Paul Harmon
Colonel, USAF, Retired**

Air Commando JOURNAL



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FOREWORD

Welcome to the spring issue of the *Air Commando Journal*. The editorial staff thanks all the authors who took the time to write down their pieces of our Air Commando history. This edition begins with a little nostalgia. We found a short essay written by Maj Gen Johnny Alison about his great friend Col Phil Cochran in our archives and I thought it would be nice to revisit this wonderful story of admiration between friends.

Sticking with the nostalgic theme, Mr. Patrick Charles tells the story of the little known Air Commando Song. He also adds further insights, which set the stage for Operation Thursday back in March 1944.

We move forward to the 1960s with two of our veteran Airmen. First, Col Roy Lynn led an Air Commando mobile training team to the Congo to help create an airborne rapid reaction force. And second, it was “just another day in the the office” for Capt Bruce Fister flying his C-123 on a resupply mission into the U.S. outpost at Khe Sanh, Vietnam, just 16 days after the infamous Tet Offensive began. This ferocious and surprising communist offensive shocked the American public into reality about the escalating war as we watched it unfold on the nightly news with Walter Cronkite.

Next, Col Rick Beery describes the herculean efforts of the men and women of the 655th Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance Squadron to support the 55th Rescue, later Special Operations, Squadron, and their MH-60G Pave Hawks in all the operations described in the two recent issues of the *Air Commando Journal*. We also follow Lt Col Bill LeMenager as he takes us into the cockpit of his MH-53 Pave Low on a combat sortie leading an RAF CH-47 Chinook helicopter well north into Iraq in late January 1991. The mission was to rescue the remnants of the British Special Air Service ‘lost’ patrol, BRAVO 20, which was forced to retreat after an difficult engagement with a superior Iraqi force.

Finally, we take a closer look at Cannon AFB and what it took to transition the long-time 27th Fighter Wing into a modern day, cutting edge Air Commando hub of excellence and innovation. Retired Col Toby Corey, working on the AFSOC staff, leads us from a phone call from the AFSOC vice commander through

what it took to acquire a second installation to support our rapidly expanding command. Corey went on to be one of the first Air Commandos to arrive at the the 27th Fighter Wing to support the transition to a special operations wing. Next, Lt Col Rick Masters, now Mr. Masters and long-time Director of Staff for the 27th Special Operations Wing, was also there at the beginning. A former AC-130H and MC-130H electronic warfare officer, Masters shares his knowledgeable perspective on the evolution of Cannon from the Base Realignment and Closure list to the center of excellence it is today, while serving with eight (and counting) wing commanders.

A key point that Masters makes is how the 27th SOW naturally evolved as an “always open to new ideas,” “comfortable with change,” and “on the leading edge of innovation” organizational identity over the last 15 years.

To close out our 27th Special Operations Wing story, Capt Andrew Walker provides insights on the importance of Melrose Range as a “backyard” training range for the 27th SOW and the greater joint special operations community. And lastly, SMSgt Dan Graham describes AFSOC’s proof of concept for multi-capable airman and a look at the command’s Mission Sustainment Teams.

In closing, this issue spans 79 years of Air Commando history; from our beginning in World War II to the modern day Air Commando. I hope you enjoy the issue as much as we enjoyed bringing it to you.



Paul Harmon, Col, USAF (Retired)
Editor-in-Chief

SITREP

Greetings to all Air Commandos! I am Joe Mast your new ACA Vice President. I am excited and look forward to serving you in this capacity. Let me tell you a little about me. I served on active duty in the Air Force for 29 years, 1 month, and two days (But who is counting?). I started my career as a Telephone Equipment Repairman, performed that job for eight years, and was successful. Once I got promoted to Technical Sergeant, the Air Force decided I needed to retrain and assigned me to Eglin AFB Aux Field 9, Hurlburt Field (How lucky was I!) where I became an AVTR/Sensors Maintenance Technician. That was my first introduction to special operations. I served in many units and capacities within special ops. Some of my duty positions included 1st SOW/DCM Acquisitions and Logistics Manager, 20th SOS Specialist Branch Chief, 1st SOG Operations Superintendent (Can you believe it? As a maintenance guy), 352nd SOG Command Chief Master Sergeant, and finally as an Aircraft Program Manager for various aircraft companies supporting special ops programs and modifications. Like many of you, I deployed numerous times to many locations. Some of the places I deployed to were Howard AFB, Panama; Elmendorf AFB Alaska; King Abdul Aziz AB, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; Kecskemet and Solnicka, Hungary; Mombasa, Kenya; U-Tapao and Udorn, Royal Thailand Air Force Bases, Thailand; Pordenone, Italy; San Vito Air Station, Italy (too many time to count); and several more. I am currently working for FEMA as an Operations Division Supervisor providing operations support to disasters in the U.S. and possessions, several times a year. OK, enough about me.

I have set a few goals for myself as the ACA Vice President. First, I would like to provide the ACA membership, Board of Directors, and Executive

Staff, with the best support possible. Second, I would like to assist in spreading the word about Air Force Special Operations heritage, history, and the incredible people who have served as Air Commandos. Third, I would like to make ACA more representative of all the personnel (ops, maintenance, and support) who

serve or have served in the Air Force special ops community. Fourth, I would like to challenge every ACA member to recruit one member this year and in subsequent years. This goal will ensure the ACA can continue to tell the wonderful special ops story, assist in allowing ACA to remain in good stead financially, and most importantly provide financial support when needed. Lastly, ensure ACA remains financially solvent to support Air Commandos past and present and meet their unmet financial needs using our restricted ACF funding. It is important to note that this funding is generated by individual donations, and we solicit all Air Commandos to help us in this

endeavor. I will do my best to fulfill the aforementioned goals and sincerely hope all of you will join me in that effort.

One more thing:

One donation opportunity the ACA recommends to donors over age 70½ is Qualified Charitable Distributions from Individual Retirement Accounts (IRA), especially when you are required to take Required Minimum Distributions from your non-Roth IRAs. Distributions directly to you are treated as ordinary income and taxed at your highest marginal federal income tax rate. If your distribution is made directly from your IRA custodian to a 501(c)3 nonprofit, which the ACA is, the distribution will not be taxed—huge extra “bang for the buck.”

Thank you for supporting ACA! Hooyah!



Joe Mast, CMSgt, USAF (Retired)
Vice President, Air Commando Association

HOTWASH

AIR COMMANDO JOURNAL, Volume 11, Issue 2 Operation JUST CAUSE, Panama 1989 Article

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My thanks for the continuing outstanding efforts producing this informative and ageless magazine; a gift for Air Commandos past, present, and future! I read every magazine from cover to cover, albeit not nearly as fast as in the past.

OG Mannon, Maj Gen
USAF (Retired)
ACA Life Member

All,

Just finished reading the most recent ACA Journal, about the 55th SOS and Pave Hawk, absolutely outstanding! Thanks so much for all your superb efforts and hard work.

Tailwinds,
Clay T. McCutchan, Maj Gen
USAF (Retired)
ACA Life Member



(US Air Force photo by Ty Greenlees)

73rd SOS Gunship crews awarded MacKay Trophy for 'most meritorious flight' of 2021

The *Air Commando Journal* incorrectly used the wrong photo in Volume 11 Issue 3, on page 17. We sincerely apologize for the error and would like to feature the correct photo. This has been corrected in the online version of the *ACJ*. Above, the crews of Shadow 77 and 78, 73d Expeditionary Special Operations Squadron, Joint Special Operation Air Component-Central receive Mackay Trophy 2021 awards for their support of Operation Freedom's Sentinel, which provided close-air support for 2,000 Americans evacuating the embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan,

in August 2021. The awards ceremony took place in the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force, Wright-Patterson Air Force base on 12 Dec 2022.

Finding the Journal

Dear readers, during the 2022 Christmas holiday I visited Washington, DC, for the very first time. My number one goal was to visit the Library of Congress to see the *Air Commando Journal* among our nation's most important volumes of literature.



Jeanette Elliott and Gary Johnson in the Periodical Reading Room of the Library of Congress.

I soon learned the periodicals were in the Newspaper and Periodical reading room which was not located in the iconic Jefferson Building but in the basement of the Madison building.

With the help of my family, we ended up finding Mr. Gary Johnson, a Reference Librarian in the Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room. When I asked how I could find a copy of the *Air Commando Journal* he quietly replied, "I have a copy on my desk." We were floored that among the staggering number of periodicals in the library he would have a copy of our journal close at hand. The excursion turned out to be one of the highlights of our trip, Mr. Johnson was an amazing tour guide of all things Library of Congress!

I highly recommend anyone traveling to Washington, DC, visit the Library of Congress. Not only is it arguably one of the most architecturally beautiful buildings ever built, but the unimaginable volume of reading materials is staggering and leaves a lasting impression.

Jeanette Elliott
ACA Media Coordinator

AIR COMMANDO JOURNAL, Volume 11, Issue 2 Ethiopia: Proof the 55th SOS Was Ready to Go Any Time, Any Place!

Dear ACA Journal Editors, Staff, and ACA Board members,

Thank you for the truly exceptional publication of ACA Journal Vol. 11, Issue 2 (November 2022) and your comprehensive "Tribute to the 55th SOS." As a Night Hawks veteran of some of the earlier and transitional years of this magnificent squadron and aircraft (Nov. 1991-June 1996), I was very pleased to receive this issue and read every word of



A “picture of a picture” of a framed print that hangs on my office wall. I apologize for the quality of this rendering. Although the 1989 Ethiopia recovery mission pre-dated my time at the 55th, this picture – in addition to just being damn cool – was undoubtedly a distinct memory from the aircrews that participated in that ground-breaking rapid deployment.

its firsthand accounts by many of my former squadron mates, most of whom I was privileged to see again last April at the Hurlburt Airpark dedication of 87-26009. Walking through the history of this single, unique AFSOC squadron’s achievements in peacetime, combat, and combat support operations gave me one again an immense appreciation of the men and women I served with during this pivotal assignment. The stories speak for themselves, and the memories they recall are both inspiring and humbling.

I know well that I was fortunate to be part of such an accomplished group of aviators and leaders, and the lasting impact of that experience served me well during the course of my career and in the years since. I very recently received the latest issue of the ACA Journal and look forward to reading “the rest of the story” about the 55th. Of particular note, the Antelope Island tribute is a very poignant reminder of the cost of freedom, as I have a deeply personal connection to the tragic loss of Merit 84 in 1992.

Thank you again, and keep up the great work!

Sincerely,
John (Matthew) Lyons, Lt Col
USAF (Retired)
ACA Life Member

Air Commandos in the Cold War

Hello! I am an active duty USAF officer, late of the 6th SOS, working on my PhD in history. I am conducting research for my dissertation on the Cold War in Southeast Asia and need to find people who worked or trained with the Philippine, Thai, Taiwanese, or Laotian air forces between 1950 and 1990. If you can help, please contact me through the ACA!

Dan Jackson
ACA Life Member



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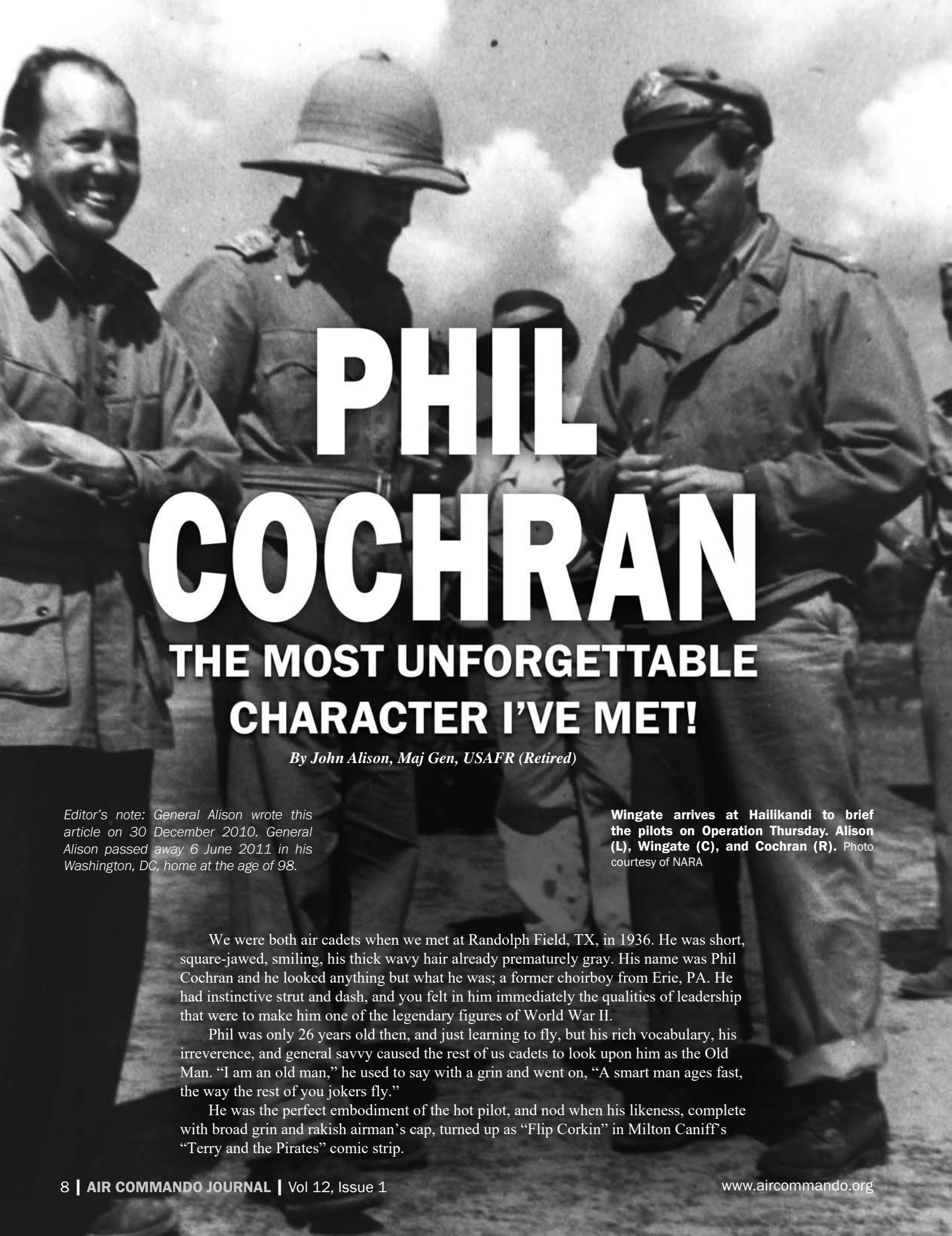
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PHIL COCHRAN

THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE CHARACTER I'VE MET!

By John Alison, Maj Gen, USAFR (Retired)

Editor's note: General Alison wrote this article on 30 December 2010. General Alison passed away 6 June 2011 in his Washington, DC, home at the age of 98.

Wingate arrives at Hailikandi to brief the pilots on Operation Thursday. Alison (L), Wingate (C), and Cochran (R). Photo courtesy of NARA

We were both air cadets when we met at Randolph Field, TX, in 1936. He was short, square-jawed, smiling, his thick wavy hair already prematurely gray. His name was Phil Cochran and he looked anything but what he was; a former choirboy from Erie, PA. He had instinctive strut and dash, and you felt in him immediately the qualities of leadership that were to make him one of the legendary figures of World War II.

Phil was only 26 years old then, and just learning to fly, but his rich vocabulary, his irreverence, and general savvy caused the rest of us cadets to look upon him as the Old Man. "I am an old man," he used to say with a grin and went on, "A smart man ages fast, the way the rest of you jokers fly."

He was the perfect embodiment of the hot pilot, and nod when his likeness, complete with broad grin and rakish airman's cap, turned up as "Flip Corkin" in Milton Caniff's "Terry and the Pirates" comic strip.

As we moved along in our training to Langley Field, VA, and Mitchel Field, NY, Phil worked ceaselessly to perfect himself and the squadron he now commanded. He loved to experiment, to try the unorthodox. Phil turned his fighter planes into fighter-bombers by strapping bombs to them, and used the technique of skip-bombing. Once he strapped a bomb to his plane and dropped it on a German general's headquarters at Kairouan Tunisia, flying in so low he had to zoom up to get over the one-story building.

Phil was no respecter of rank, and on one occasion clashed with Gen Henri Giraud, commander of all French forces in Africa. The French, for whom Phil's squadron was flying air support, were badly mauled by Rommel's panzers. After one engagement, Giraud shouted at Cochran, "There should be more planes, hundreds more!"

Phil yelled back, "You've got to fight on the ground! You can't hide behind a rock and have planes do the whole job." A few days later, Phil got a letter from Giraud, conceding he was right. And, not long after presented him the Croix de Guerre medal.

Living in a dugout, scrounging for supplies, flying so incessantly that he barely had time to eat and sleep, Cochran became a legend among his men. Once General "Uncle Joe" Cannon saw several bedraggled, unkept men and snapped, "Do you mean to say your commanding officers lets you go around looking like that?." "Hell, General," an unshaven pilot drawled, "You ought to see him." (meaning Cochran)

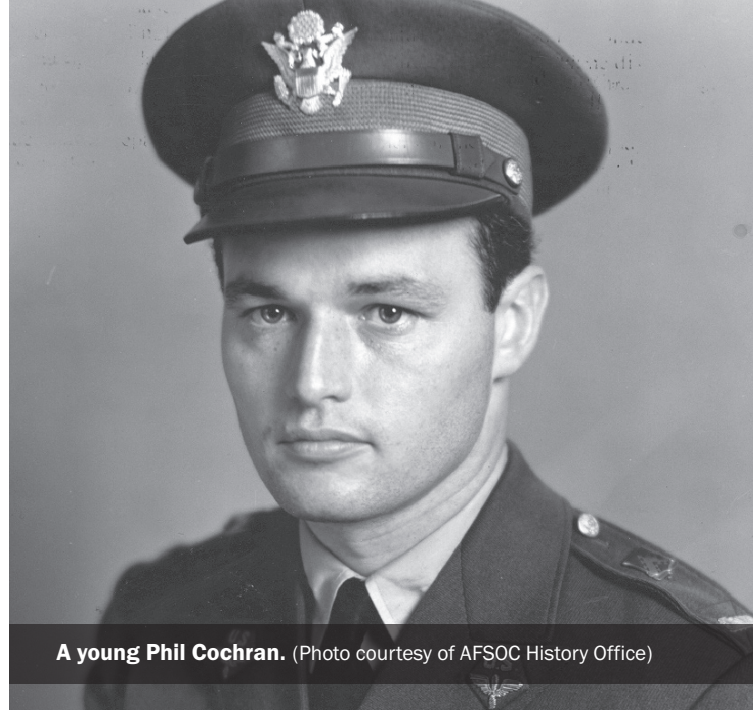
"Cochran dominated his world from Tebessa, Algeria, onward," wrote Vincent Sheean. "He seemed a kind of electrical disturbance in human form, and he infected the very ground with the delusion it belonged to him."

When North Africa fell to the Allies in May 1943, Cochran returned to the United States and soon was summoned to Washington. The Allied leaders had agreed on a plan to retake Burma by invasion from India. England would furnish the ground forces under Brig Gen Orde Wingate. America would furnish the air support, led by Phil, with me as his deputy commander, by providing close air support, resupply of his forces, and evacuating the wounded.

"But we're fighter pilots!" Phil flared when Gen Henry "Hap" Arnold outlined the assignment. General Arnold continued explaining the plan, with a twinkle in his eye. We gathered that although we were to support the land drive, he wouldn't mind if turned it into an air show. That twinkle was all Phil needed. But how could you make an air show out of flying support for men and mules trudging slowly through the jungles? The inspiration struck...gliders! Why not leap the troops over the jungles to land behind enemy lines?

Arnold who called Phil "the toughest little Irishman I've ever seen," told him to draw up a list of what he needed. Then we set out scrounging-dogtrotting through the corridors of the Pentagon, pounding on doors to beg, borrow, or steal the men and equipment. We got 500 men, pilots and glider specialists, 30 rocket firing North American P-51A Mustangs, transport planes, a squadron of Mitchell bombers, 150 light planes, and 150 gliders. Our glider pilots trained in North Carolina.

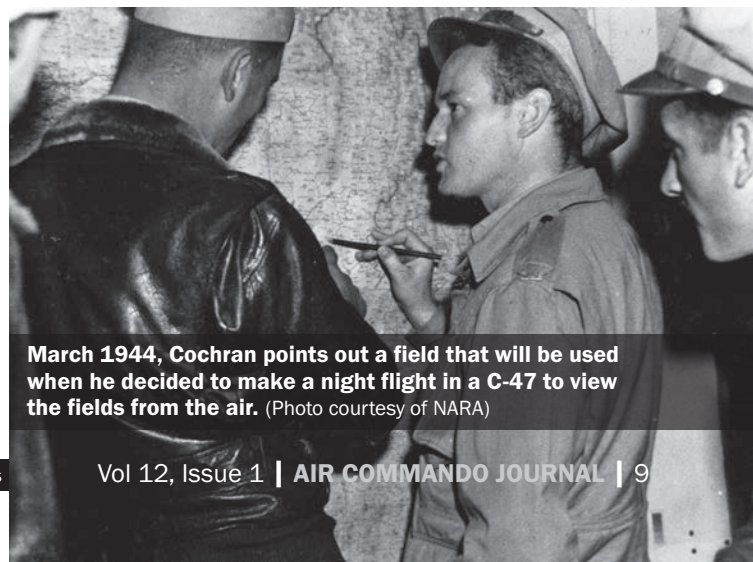
"People that fly airplanes are fool enough," Phil said, as



A young Phil Cochran. (Photo courtesy of AFSOC History Office)



Phil Cochran's photo is used to sell war bonds. (Photo courtesy of AFSOC History Office)



March 1944, Cochran points out a field that will be used when he decided to make a night flight in a C-47 to view the fields from the air. (Photo courtesy of NARA)

Battle III

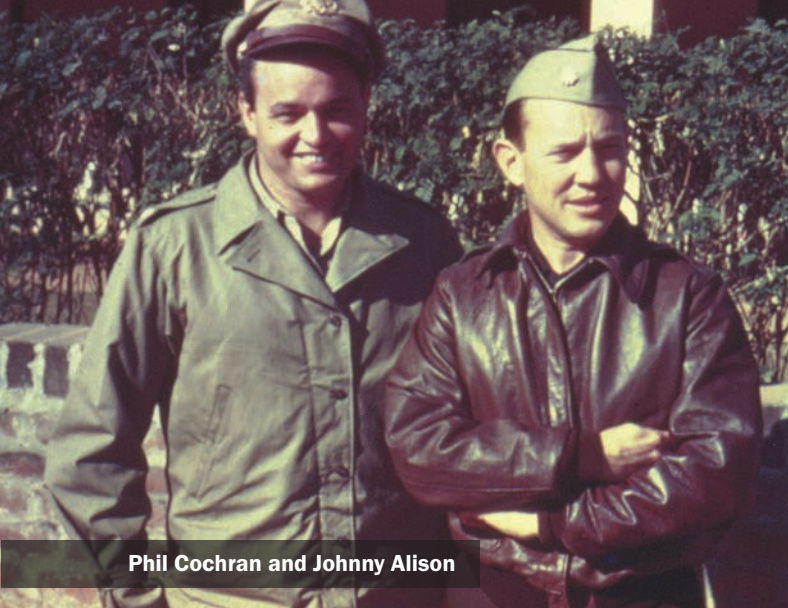
we watched the big, lumbering craft, “but anyone who gets into one of those things is a damn fool.” Then after a few minutes: “Well, let’s find out how to fly one of these contraptions ourselves.” After learning to fly a glider, Phil tried snatching gliders off the ground with speeding planes—a new and ticklish technique. He kept working at it, riding in a snatched-up glider himself, until our pilots had perfected the perilous maneuver.

With our Air Commandos finally trained, Phil flew to Delhi to join Wingate. He arrived to find the campaign canceled...scrubbed, Wingate said bitterly, for lack of air transport. Phil stormed that only a limited amount of transport would be needed since, in addition to the light planes Wingate was counting on, we had 150 gliders to haul supplies. Wingate’s dark eyes widened as Phil explained that the gliders could also move a sizable force of troops. The general immediately spread a map on the floor and planned how his Chindits, airlifted deep into the jungle, could fan out from there and fight the Japanese.

Phil went before the Southeast Asia Command. Around the table sat Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten and Generals Auchinleck, Stilwell, Chenault and Stratemeyer. Phil’s quick thinking and colorful vocabulary now stood him in good stead as he argued for his glider plan. “My boy,” Lord Mountbatten said finally, “you are the only ray of sunshine we’ve had in this theater this year.” The Burma invasion plan was reinstated.

When I landed in India Phil met me, bubbling with enthusiasm. We worked hard at our base in the Assam hill country, getting ready for the big push. We lived in grass huts in the jungle; there were tigers and pythons around, and baboons sometimes ran across the airfield. Morale was high among the men although discipline, as usual under Phil, was lax.

Once Mountbatten came to our airfield and addressed the men. A returning pilot, seeing the crowd gathered around a speaker on a jeep, assumed it was Cochran. Putting his Mustang into a dive, the young pilot swept down at 500 MPH and buzzed Mountbatten’s head. The tall



Phil Cochran and Johnny Alison



Gen Hap Arnold and Col Phil Cochran. (Photo courtesy of AFSOC History Office)



Col Phil Cochran and Gen Johnny Alison attend the then named Special Operations Force (SOF) Hall of Fame dedication with Brig Gen Robert Cardenas in April 1969. (Photo courtesy of Jim Ifland)

Supreme Commander of the Southeast Asia Theater stood there without flinching, but Phil almost fainted. “That damn fool is new here, Lord Louis,” he explained hastily, “He thought it was just me.”

In preparation for the invasion our planes began pounding Japanese bases in Burma. Although Phil, now 34, was old for a fighter pilot, he was in the thick of action. During one mission his plane was shot up and he was mistakenly reported killed. That time his hometown paper printed his obituary.

The all-airborne invasion of northern Burma was made the night of 5 March 1944. Our transports took off after sundown, each plane towing two gliders jammed with troops and mules. I piloted one of the lead gliders; Wingate had ordered Phil to stay back at headquarters with him. Our target was a jungle clearing (we called it “Broadway”) 165 miles behind the Japanese lines in Burma.

It was almost a disaster. On the way, 17 gliders were lost—many of them over enemy territory. Of the gliders that landed, most piled up in buffalo wallows or in furrows hidden by the tall grass, where elephants had dragged teak logs. We would be frantically dragging wounded men and bucking mules out of one wrecked glider when we’d hear another whistling down through the darkness to smash into it. Finally we got our damaged radio working and, after 46 gliders had landed, stopped the rest from coming down.

Fortunately, our invasion caught the enemy by surprise and there was no immediate opposition. Soon we had a makeshift runway ready to receive more planes and gliders. The next night we occupied a second clearing, and then a third. We built airstrips in the clearing, and from these new bases Phil and I and our fighter pilots harassed the Japanese. Phil used a trick he had developed in North Africa of equipping his plane with a weight on the end of a cable, zooming in low over Japanese telephone lines and ripping them out with the dangling cable. In one month alone our fighters destroyed one fifth of the Japanese air force in Burma, once destroying 100 planes on the ground in two days. Phil’s Air Commandos and Wingate’s Chindits had strangled Japanese supply lines, contributing materially to the fall of northern Burma to Stilwell’s army shortly afterward.

It all seems far away now. The Burma jungles have grown up again over the rutted old clearing called Broadway. The P-40s and P-51s Phil Cochran flew seem as obsolete as armored warhorses, but his own qualities of daring and imagination and humor are vivid in my memory. Whenever I think of those adventurous days, I see him on the dusty jungle runway, gray hair blowing in the prop wash, surrounded by his “kids,” the fighter pilots who worshipped him...I also see my dear friend.



About the Author: John R. Alison was a highly decorated combat ace from World War II and a veteran of the Korean War. He commanded the 75th Fighter Squadron in China and was deputy commander of the 1st Air Commando Group in Burma. The general and Phil Cochran are original members of the Air Commando Association Hall of Fame. He was inducted into the USSOCOM Hall of Honor in 2010.

Air Commandos Song

Lyrics by
COL. REED G. LANDIS, A. C.
Chief of Staff, 1st Troop Carrier Command

Music by
CAPT. W. N. DEKKER, A. C.
1st Troop Carrier Command

Intro.

The Forgotten Air Commando Song

Verse

boys

Hail cl

The Air Commandos

Lyrics by
COL. REED G. LANDIS, A. C.
Chief of Staff, 1st Troop Carrier Command
Music by
CAPT. W. N. DEKKER, A. C.
1st Troop Carrier Command
Arrangement by
FRANKIE CARLE and
JANE BURROUGHS
First featured on the air by Horace
Heidt and His Musical Knights
Royalties to Army Air Forces
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VINCIT QUI PRIMUM GERIT

you want the

By Patrick J. Charles

In the summer of 1942, Robert Crawford's "Army Air Corps Song" was at the peak of its popularity. Only "White Cliffs of Dover," "Praise the Lord," "When the Lights Go on Again," and the "Star Spangled Banner" were more popular in the World War II era "war tunes" category. Building off that popularity, Mildred A. Yount, the head of Army Air Corps Song Committee, received General Henry "Hap" Arnold's permission to publish a book, which contained several widely known Army flying songs—some as far back as 1922. Titled *Air Force Airs*, nestled in between "L'Armee DC L'Air Corps" and "The Bombardier Song" is the forgotten and virtually unknown song "The Air Commandos." Composed by Captain W.N. Dekker, written by Colonel Reed G. Landis, and arranged by 1940s bandleader Frankie Carle, the song's lyrics describe how with "Paratroops and Gliders with hearts like knights of old," the "air commandos" will "build a front and then another front and tear the foe apart."



Presented with the First Troop Carrier Command Division of the Army Air Forces Branch of Army Emergency Relief

At first glance, the lyrics would seem to describe the events of Operation Thursday, where from 5 to 6 Mar 1944, the 1st Air Commando Group (ACG), commanded by Colonels Philip G. Cochran and John R. Alison, successfully executed a joint air invasion of Burma as part of larger Allied plan to push back the Japanese forces in the China-Burma-India Theater, and reestablish an Allied land route between India and China. In carrying out the operation, the 1st ACG utilized gliders to land a specialized invasion force deep inside Japanese-occupied territory—a force tasked with establishing an expeditionary airfield, known as Broadway, to land follow-on specialized ground forces, aircraft, and military supplies, all with the objective of disrupting the Japanese military's infrastructure and lines of communication. And this innovative use of air power, which at the time was a military first, has prompted many historians to designate Operation Thursday as the birth of air-centric special operations—that is, a reliance on specialized air power and tactics to carry out military operations.

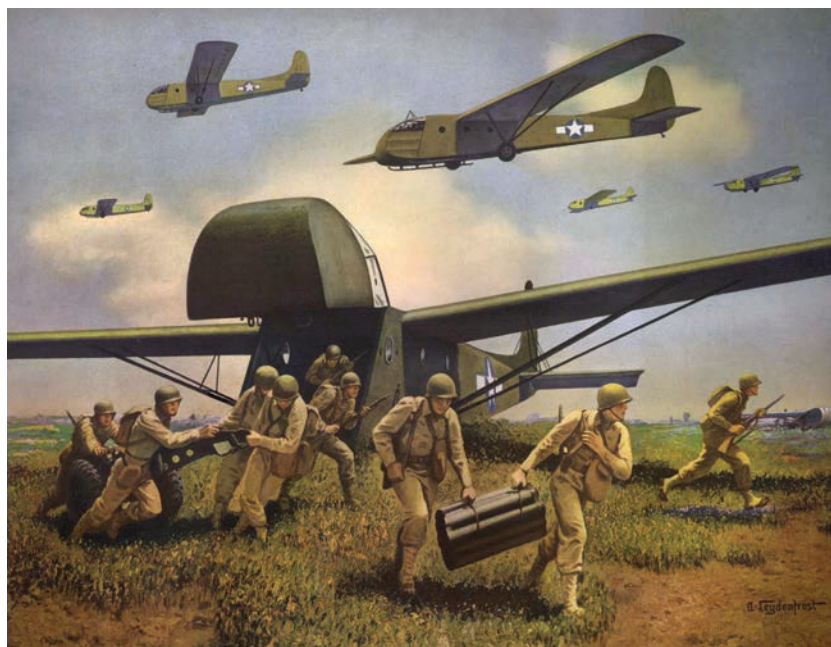
The story of Operation Thursday is one of special operations legend. It is a story that generally starts with a late August 1943 meeting between General Arnold and Colonels Cochran and Alison. Therein, according to several historical retellings, Arnold recruited Cochran and Alison to lead a joint operation behind Japanese lines. Additionally, Arnold vested Cochran and Alison with broad authorities to assemble and recruit an air-centric special operations force initially named Project 9, and later renamed the 1st ACG. Simply put, according to these historical retellings, Cochran and Alison were the principal architects of the air-centric special operations concept that would be forever memorialized as Operation Thursday.

For more than half-a-century, this historical account was accepted by American military historians and the United States special operations community as true. However, upon a close examination of the evidentiary record, it becomes clear that this longstanding historical account overlooks two key facts—facts that undermine the claim that Cochran and Alison were the architects of air-centric special operations. First and foremost, as the papers of General Arnold plainly show, the concept of air-centric special operations was not developed ad hoc by Cochran and Alison in late 1943. Rather, it was thoughtfully devised by Major General George C. Kenney as early as May 1942, and subsequently endorsed and improved upon by Arnold himself. Second, not only did Arnold endorse Kenney's air-centric special operations concept, he formally approved it. In a 17 July 1942 press release, Arnold publicly announced the formation of the 1st Troop Carrier Command (TCC), consisting of an "air commando force":

This air-borne attack force does not give us an instantaneous or cheap solution to our war problem. Its creation is calling for a stupendous effort. The time when it will attain its full power is still a long way off...Glider pilots and air-borne combat troops will be in the forefront of attacks...The importance of these

swiftly moving combat teams cannot be overestimated. This will be a self-contained force whose soldiers, equipment and supplies are all transported by air. It will be able and trained to strike the enemy where he is least prepared. Although many details must be kept secret concerning its exact size, composition, tactics, objectives, and when and where it will strike it can now be revealed that in size, equipment and fire power the air-borne army ultimately will exceed anything the world has yet seen.

Despite the perceived flare of Arnold's Air Commando announcement, the newly formed 1st TCC was in reality nothing more than a reorganization of what had been Air Transport Command—a command that just one month prior had been reorganized out of what was previously known as Ferrying Command. And given that both Air Transport Command and Ferrying Command had been tasked with the transporting of military personnel, freight, and mail to the battle front, this remained a key mission of the 1st TCC.



Bayonet Fighter (Photo courtesy of the author)

Where the 1st TCC operationally distinguished itself from its organizational predecessors was the 1st TCC's additional mission of establishing and training an Air Commando force—a force that would "provide for the air movement of air-landing troops, glider-borne troops, parachute troops and their equipment, evacuation of the wounded, and the resupplying of ground units when required." The 1st TCC's motto was "he conquers who gets there first," and Arnold surmised that the command's battlefield employment possibilities were "limited only by the imagination of the theater commander..."

In the months that followed, the 1st TCC got to work on developing an air commando concept of operations. As it pertained to gliders, the 1st TCC surmised several military uses. But ultimately, after numerous trial and error, the 1st

TCC determined that the best two military uses for gliders were a) for “transport operations free from enemy action” and b) for establishing “air-heads where enemy action would be encountered.” It was from these two military uses of gliders that “The Air Commandos” song was born



in the minds of 1st TCC Chief of Staff Colonel Landis, a World War I ace, and 1st TCC officer Captain Dekker. Yes, although the lyrics of “The Air Commandos” song may read as a description of Operation Thursday, the song was in fact the product of 1st TCC, which further cements that the initial development of air-centric special operations did not begin with Cochran and Alison. Rather, it began with the 1st TCC.

The fact that Cochran and Alison did not initially develop the air-centric special operations concept is not to suggest that their contributions are irrelevant. Far from it. In fact, without Cochran’s and Alison’s operational fortitude and adaptability it is unlikely that the air-centric special operations proof of concept would ever have been realized, at least not by the close of World War II. Additionally, it is fair to say that Cochran and Alison were essential in modifying and adapting several 1st TCC Air Commando capabilities to not only fit the operational needs of British Maj Gen Orde Wingate, but also to expand the proverbial operational box. Cochran’s and Alison’s forward-thinking use of helicopters to evacuate several wounded service members is a great case in point.

However, with that said, the historical evidence is clear and convincing that the 1st TCC was at the forefront in

developing air-centric special operations tactics, techniques, and procedures well before Arnold, Cochran, and Alison met to discuss Project 9 in late August 1943. The 1st TCC’s development of glider capabilities—particularly to build “airheads” behind enemy lines—underscores this historical fact. So too does the 1st TCC’s training and utilization of airborne engineer aviation units—units that were principally designed to enable air-centric special operations following the force’s initial “vertical envelopment” through the creation and maintenance of “temporary airfields and runways in undeveloped areas.” This in turn provided “a place where men and material could be landed” and “the wounded evacuated...” Lastly, there is the 1st TCC’s development of light plane capabilities, which in hindsight proved crucial to the 1st ACG later executing Operation Thursday.

In addition to being at the forefront of air-centric special operations tactics, techniques, and procedures, following Operation Thursday, the 1st TCC was tasked by General Arnold with producing two Air Commando squadrons. The 317th Troop Carrier Squadron was produced by the 1st TCC specifically for the 2nd Air Commando Group. Similarly, the 318th Troop Carrier Squadron was produced by the 1st TCC specifically for the 3rd Air Commando Group.

The point to be made is simply this—the 1st TCC was crucial to the development of air-centric special operations, and without the 1st TCC it is highly unlikely Operation Thursday would have come to fruition. It is a historical finding that corrects my earlier, 2017 assessment that the 1st TCC Air Commandos failed to meet General Arnold’s challenge in creating an air-centric special operations force. The 1st TCC did in fact meet the challenge, with Colonels Cochran and Alison adapting and modifying it to operational execution. And it is a historical correction that came about by simply stumbling across a song titled “The Air Commandos.”

In closing, it is worth noting that in addition to a copy of “The Air Commandos” song appearing in the 1943 book *Air Force Airmen*, Penn State University Special Collections maintains a copy of the sheet music as it was sold to the public for 20 cents. The sheet music is contained within Fred Waring Scores Collection, wherein is also contained Waring’s different instrument renditions of the song. In total, 22 music instrument renditions were scored by Waring, including that of piano, guitar, saxophone, bass, and violin.



About the Author: Patrick J. Charles currently serves as the Research Division supervisor at the Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA) located at Maxwell AFB, Alabama. Charles previously served as the Senior Historian for United States Special Operations Command (2016-19), Wing Historian for the 24th Special Operations Wing (2014-16), and Group Historian for the 352nd Special Operations Group (2010-14). This article was modified from a previous version published on AFRHA’s website.

**Editor’s note: Author’s footnotes have been removed to save space. Mr. Charles footnotes are available upon request to the editor Air Commando Journal.*



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On Becoming an Air Commando

My Visit To The Congo

By Roy Lynn Jr, Col, USAF (Retired)

I had been stationed at Otis AFB, Cape Cod, MA for 4 years flying Airborne Early Warning & Control missions in the EC-121 Super Constellation. In July 1962 I received orders to report to the 1st Air Commando Group at Air Force Auxiliary Field # 9, FL. These orders came out of the blue since I hadn't volunteered like almost everyone before me had. It turned out to be a pleasant surprise though. I was assigned to the 319th Troop Carrier Squadron and started to check out in the C-47 aircraft, also known as the "Goonie Bird." So much for flying a modern-day airplane.

My transition started off a little shaky. I discovered the nose wheel was located on the rear of the aircraft. Another problem was the yoke for the aircraft controls came up from

the floor beside my legs, and halfway up took a 45 degree turn across my knees. Because of my height (6'4"), the yoke interfered with my ability to operate the controls and the rudder, particularly during the landing phase. There was some discussion about switching to the C-46 which didn't have the

problem. This was nixed by my squadron commander since the



Have Goon, Will Travel coffee cup.
(Photo courtesy of author)

C-46 didn't go to Vietnam. I sucked it up and learned to fly, knees cocked to one side, sitting on one cheek. Eventually, I got the hang of it and later I was made an instructor pilot

and then a flight examiner. I also flew the "Goon" during my next four assignments.

After checkout, I got to go to survival school at Stead AFB (for the second time). In due time, I was sent to Vietnam --Saigon, Bien Hoa, and Nha Trang, where I flew lots of Special Forces support missions. Within a year, I had received my "Have Goon, Will Travel" coffee cup, my Air Commando hat, and learned why the motto of the squadron was, "Last to know, but first to go."

*Note: This logo was based on "Have Gun Will Travel," a popular western TV series during the late 50s and early 60s. The main character, Paladin, had a chess knight emblem adorning his holster.

To The Congo

In early April 1964, I was notified that I would form a Mobile training Team (MTT) crew that would proceed to Sembach AB in Germany, pick up a C-47, fly it down the west coast of Africa to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Why were we going?

Since the beginning of time, the Congo had been in perpetual turmoil. It had been a colony of Belgium until 1960, when it became an independent country. Then it descended further into chaos and disorder prompting the United Nations to send a peacekeeping force into the country. At its peak, in late 1961, UN forces numbered nearly 20,000 military personnel from over two dozen countries.

After four years, even while the unrest continued, the UN decided to pull out in 1964. This presented a large security problem. The solution was to create a rapid reaction airborne peacekeeping force. The fly in the ointment was that the Congolese had no paratroops, no aircraft, no parachutes, and no pilots and only a few months before the UN left. What to do?

Here was the plan: the US would furnish the aircraft; the Italians would provide the pilots; and the Israelis would provide the parachutes and the training. But time was short, and nothing was in place. That's where we came in. We had to get an airplane and crew to the Congo ASAP to support the Israelis' training of the Congolese paratroopers. The Israelis were ready, and we were hustling.

Deploying to the Congo

This was not simple! We had five crew members: me (aircraft commander); Capt Tom Taylor (co-pilot); 1st Lt Frank Blum (navigator); TSgt Nicholas Combs (loadmaster); and SSgt Howard Brown (flight engineer). We spent a few days getting our immunizations, in-country briefings (geography, politics, survival, intelligence, and a crash course on French). On 26 April we departed Eglin AFB on a Southern Airways airplane headed for Washington, DC. We spent the next four days in Washington mainly getting our visas and diplomatic clearances for our flight from Germany to the Congo. Countries involved were: France, Spain, Morocco, Canary Island (Spain), Senegal, Liberia, Gabon, and finally the Congo. Very hectic! Somewhere in these four days we were able to accept an invitation from Senator George Aikin (VT) for lunch in the Senate dining room (a family friend). Very special.

We departed Washington on 1 May and arrived at Sembach AB, Germany the next afternoon. There we inspected our aircraft and met Maj Sasson Levy, Israeli Army, a very sharp officer, who was going to be in charge of training the Congolese paratroopers. He briefed us on our duties at destination, and wanted some modifications made to the aircraft to bring it to the "Dakota" configuration. This consisted mainly of removing the static line from the ceiling and installing it along the starboard side of the cabin. We also put a shield on the tailwheel to prevent any contact with the parachute when it opened. While we were there, SSgt Brown got the measles and spent three days in the hospital. It's always something!

On 6 May we departed Sembach, Germany on our 6-day trip down Africa's west coast to N'Djili Airdrome, Leopoldville (now known as Kinshasa), Republic of the Congo. We remained over night in five different countries along the way and refueled in three others. We flew a lot over water, sometimes with hours of no radio contact. It was 1964 and there was no GPS. Navigators really had to navigate. On one stop, no one spoke English and we had to pump our av-gas out of 55-gallon barrels. This whole experience was new to all of us.

We arrived in the evening on 11 May and were met by a host of welcomers: representatives from the Congolese mission, Major Levy, his Israeli troops, and maybe a hundred of Congolese would be paratroopers who really gave our aircraft the once over. We spent the next day getting briefed and settled. From mid-May until the end of July we were busy working with the Israelis to train the paratroopers. The first step was to test the French parachutes with three dummy drops each (about 700 total).



Roy Lynn, third from the left, standing next to Senator George Aikin. (Photo courtesy of author)



Major Sasson Levy of the Israeli Army. (Photo courtesy of author)



Refueling on Africa's west coast. (Photo courtesy of author)

We then trained the jump-masters and eventually started to drop the paratroopers. This amounted to about 1,000 drops.

Our five crew members were holed up in a second-floor apartment (very spartan) in Leopoldville. There was a curfew in town; no one on the streets from 6PM until 6AM. Later, curfew was pushed back to 8PM and we could get dinner somewhere. Our routine was to get up early in the morning, have a C-ration breakfast and hustle out to N'Djilli airport a few miles out of town. We would do our preflight and take a short hop to N'Dolo field where we would load up with our payload for a drop. We made flights each day, but we did have some opportunities to do a little sightseeing.

Of course, things didn't always go that smooth. The weather caused some delays. The shield around the tail wheel kept breaking and needed to be repaired or replaced. The aircraft had oil leaks, cowl flap problems, and a few other issues that were worked by SSgt Brown. He was a great flight engineer. There was a major problem with the engine oil that resulted in two engine replacements. We didn't know this, but it's not good to mix commercially available oil with Mil-Spec detergent oil. It causes the oil to thicken and slow down its cooling properties. Engine overheat! We had Sabena Airline maintenance change out the engines after new ones were found and delivered, but the situation put a hitch in our get-a-long. One more thing: our co-pilot, Captain Taylor, had to go home on emergency leave. We were able to fill in until his replacement, Lt Russell Gentry, arrived from Hurlburt Field.

Occasionally, at the behest of the Congolese Mission, we were diverted from our training mission to fly to other locations in the Congo. We flew supplies for the Congolese Army (ANC) to locations not far from Leopoldville. On two occasions we flew across the country (East) to Bukavu where a US Consulate was located. On these trips we hauled rockets, ammunition, and spare parts for two Air America T-28s located there. While there, we also flew a recce mission looking for rebels and an air evac mission.

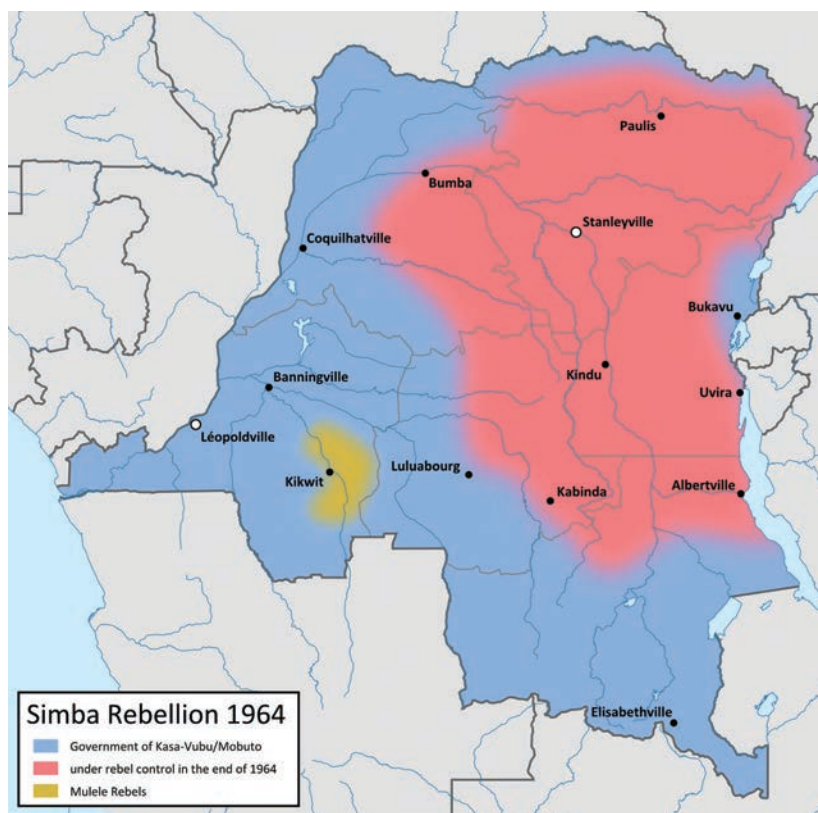
In late June, the Italian pilots and the C-47 for the Congolese arrived. It was good to have another airplane because ours was in Sabena maintenance having both engines replaced. The pilot's name was Captain Gregoletto and the co-pilot was Lieutenant Albano. Both knew how to fly pretty well, but neither of them knew much about the aircraft systems, flight procedures, emergency procedures, or air-drop procedures. Evidently, in Italy the pilots just fly the plane: the flight engineer starts the engines, adjusts all the controls, etc. etc. Their flight engineer was

always in the cockpit. I began flying air-drop orientation missions with them. Initially they were having trouble holding their altitude and airspeed over the drop zone. The pilot got the hang of it quickly, but the co-pilot...not so much. Both had trouble understanding radio transmissions. I recommended that the co-pilot not be allowed to solo in the aircraft without further evaluation.

With the Italian pilots and the aircraft being integrated into the training program and both of our aircraft engines replaced, we were preparing to fly back up the African coast and return our aircraft to Germany.



Training Congolese paratroopers. (Photo courtesy of author)





Dropping paratroopers (Photo courtesy of author)



Capt Roy Lynn sightseeing. (Photo courtesy of author)



Both engines were replaced. (Photo courtesy of author)



Supplies for the Congolese Army (ANC) being loaded. (Photo courtesy of author)

Then things got interesting... a change of plans.

Another Air Commando crew was slated to fly to Bukavu to support operations at the consulate there. Bukavu is located on the eastern border of the Congo, abutting the country of Rwanda and very close to the country of Burundi. They aborted this flight with a multitude of aircraft problems, and we were ordered to go in their place. We unloaded some of our stuff and took off for Bukavu. We arrived in late afternoon and immediately loaded up with Congolese Colonel Mulomba, 23 of his commandos, and 1,000 pounds of cargo for transport to the nearby town of Shamunda. The next day, we flew Colonel Mulomba, 19 commandos, and 2,000 pounds.= to Shamunda. We learned that there was a bit of a war going on in that area and it fell to the rebels two days later on 31 July. It was about this time our crew received a present from Col Heinie Aderholt, the 1st Air Commando Wing commander; we were each issued an AR-15 rifle.

Interestingly, a memorandum from Mr. William H. Brubeck of the National Security Council Staff to President Johnson appeared in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Vol XXIII, Congo 1960-1968*, "Memorandum from William H. Brubeck of the National Security Council Staff to President Johnson." (Office of the Historian. Archived from the original on 2 February 2017. Retrieved 24 January 2017) read:

In April 1964, President Johnson authorized the Department of Defense to provide the Congolese with six T-28, ten C-47, and six H-21 aircraft, plus a six-month supply of parts and ammunition. Two US civilian pilots managed the operation and training.. They did some reconnaissance and combat missions in Kwilu during spring 1964. Under local pressure to join combat in Eastern Congo, the pilots flew to the region. Their support likely helped save the Kivu, a large region in Congo. When the State Department received questions about the circumstance, they answered by stating that there were no American civilian pilots flying in combat positions. The conversation with the press, before confirming the facts, was a massive misstep and resulted in some controversy. Secondly, because the information was incorrect, the State Department needed to act more quickly to correct themselves. Instead, they lagged, and the next day released information that the State now knew that some American civilians had flown combat but had violated no US laws. The press portrayed the incident as a quarrel between the State Department and the CIA. This led to an agreement between the US and Congo that there would be no more American civilian pilots flying in operational missions in the Congo.

...The "civilian pilots" were us!

Since we went on to conduct operations out of Bukavu, I



Capt Roy Lynn and Italian pilot Capt Gregoletto. (Photo courtesy of author)



Steep drops on both ends. (Photo courtesy of author)



Damage to the windshield. (Photo courtesy of author)

should describe the runway/airport there. It was situated on a hilltop west of the town and the runway was about 3,000 ft. long. The approach end started at the edge of a steep cliff and ended at another steep drop off. No room for mistakes!

While we were at Bukavu, we took our direction from Dick Matheron, ostensibly the vice consul, but really a member of the “agency.” On 2 August, we were informed that the situation in Bukavu was deteriorating, and we may need to evacuate the dependents there.

On 5 August, we were asked to fly Colonel Mulomba to Stanleyville (now known as Kisangani) to boost ANC morale and pick up some supplies. I was concerned about security at Stanleyville, so I had Colonel Mulomba come up to the cockpit to use our radio and check. He reported that the coast was clear, and we began the steepest descent possible into the runway. At about 2,000 ft, we started to take ground fire. One round went through the floor of the cockpit and shrapnel hit my boot. This was fortunate, if it hadn’t hit my boot, I would probably be singing soprano today. Another round went through our windshield and shattered glass all over the cockpit. The glass cut the exposed part of my arms, but worse, the glass flew into the face of my copilot, Capt Al Smith, and cut him up pretty bad. We had some other hits on the aircraft as well. Needless to say, we didn’t land there. Very soon, the Colonel was up in the cockpit apologizing for the incident. Captain Smith was evacuated to a hospital and recovered without any permanent injury. It was good we didn’t land there, because we learned later that Stanleyville had fallen to the rebels and about 2,000 people were held as hostages, the last of whom weren’t freed until November.

For the next 16 days we flew recce missions around Bukavu, looking for rebel incursions and we found plenty. We acted as a forward air controller or FAC for two Air America T-28s all over the area. The rebels were attempting to reach Bukavu and we were making plans to evacuate our people. It was very intense. During this time, we received several more bullet holes in our aircraft, but no one was injured and nothing vital on the plane was damaged.

On 21 August I deserted my crew. I was replaced by Major Barnett because I had to return to the U.S. I had an assignment to attend graduate school, my wife was 9 months pregnant, and time was running out. The next day I flew back commercial to Hurlburt Field where I was debriefed by everybody. My wife and daughter had been moved to Washington, DC, and my household goods were put in storage. It took me a couple of days to extract myself from Florida and drive to Washington. Regrettably, I was a few days late for the birth of my son.

I went on to receive my master’s degree in business, had many more assignments including another tour in Vietnam and retired after 22 years active duty.



About the Author: Col Roy Lynn, USAF (retired) served 22 years in the Air Force after graduating from West Point in 1955. He accumulated about 6,000 hours of flying time, with two combat tours in Vietnam. He spent four years in the Pentagon and had two tours at Wright-Patterson AFB. His final assignment was as a System Program Director at Hanscom AFB, MA. Colonel Lynn lives in Concord, MA with his wife of 66 years.

NOTE: All photographs were taken by Capt. Lynn or one of his crew members.

Air Commandos at Khe Sanh 315th Air Commando Wing

Phan Rang AB, South Vietnam

By Bruce Fister, Lt Gen, USAF (Retired)



Historic patch of the 315th ACW
(Photo courtesy of Fred Gockel)



Author shown flying in his white t-shirt.
(Photo courtesy of author)



C-123 on the ramp.
(Photo courtesy of USAF)

Phan Rang AB was about mid-way up the east coast of South Vietnam, between the very southern tip of the country up to the Demilitarize Zone that divided North and South Vietnam. It was the home of the 315th Air Commando Wing (ACW).

The C-123K was a tactical transport powered by two Pratt and Whitney R-2800 piston engines that put out 2,500 horsepower at a manifold pressure of 61 pounds per square inch. More than you need to know, they were just big reciprocating engines with 18 cylinders arranged in two circular banks of nine. They were temperamental engines that liked to backfire and belch large clouds of gray smoke when they were started. They required constant attention managing throttles, prop levers, mixtures, oil cooler flaps, and cowl flaps. That is why our crews had a flight engineer. The later K model aircraft were augmented with two J-85 turbojets, the same engine that was in the T-38 trainer we all flew in pilot training.

During my time flying C-123s in Vietnam, you could find me in the cockpit wearing a white "T" shirt. For some

reason, we never thought about having to escape and evade. For Khe Sanh missions we wore flak jackets and helmets, unusual for us Air Commandos. I kept an M-16 and 250 rounds of ammunition behind my seat. While we wore parachutes for Khe Sanh missions, our real strategy if shot down was to crash land in the jungle and fight it out until picked up by the rescue helicopters. The C-123 was originally designed as a glider (glider hooks were still in the aircraft) and it had a strong tubular structure in the nose of the aircraft, so we thought nothing of a crash landing.

The 1968 Tet Offensive of the North Vietnam Army (NVA) and the communist Viet Cong (VC) insurgents in South Vietnam began the night of 31 January. I had flown all day and was at Nha Trang AB outside the city of Nha Trang expecting to return home to Phan Rang when I got orders for an emergency resupply to the army airfield at Phan Thiet. The airfield had lost nearly all its electrical generating capability because of attacks that day. The good news was that there was enough generating capacity to light one side of the runway. The bad news was that our controllers in

Saigon didn't know which side, but just a minor problem for Air Commandos. I left Nha Trang with a very heavy load of generating equipment. Approaching Phan Thiet, I saw tracers along the beach off the east end of the runway which I believed were friendly, but we made our approach and landing from the west. From Phan Thiet we proceeded to Tan Son Nhut AB outside of Saigon for fuel. Tan Son Nhut runway lights were on, but the rest of the field was blacked out because the VC had penetrated the airfield perimeter. We took on fuel while we provided our own close in security armed with our M-16s. We left Saigon and returned to Phan Rang, all in a night's work that began the Tet Offensive that was to play out heavily at Khe Sanh.

Da Nang AB was about an hour flight north from the C-123 home base of Phan Rang. On the 16th of February, just 16 days after the 1968 Tet Offensive began, we had a mission to Khe Sanh, an area of some of the greatest North Vietnamese attacks during the offensive. Flights into Khe Sanh originated from Da Nang AB. We departed Phan Rang



usually about 0800 in the morning to pick up our load for Khe Sanh at Da Nang. This morning it was 8,000 pounds of high explosive rocket heads loaded on wooden pallets similar to what you might find in a warehouse. During our intelligence brief we were warned, "Don't land on the first 1,000 feet of the runway, the NVA have tunneled under it." That was it. No mention of anti-aircraft fire (although much was reported) or the fact that the first 1,000 feet of the runway was not inside the Marines' perimeter (I didn't know this until after I returned home from Vietnam). Joe Jackson (subsequent Medal of Honor recipient) was the 315th ACW

Da Nang detachment commander for operations into Khe Sanh. He always wore a white cowboy hat on the parking ramp and gave final instructions. It was always business as usual and I never thought much about landing at Khe Sanh, but then I was just a dumb junior captain.

So off we go...

Da Nang Tower: Bookie 21 cleared for takeoff, contact Hue Approach Control when airborne on 315.5.

Bookie 21 [ICS (internal communication system)]: Gear up, flaps up.

Hue App Control: Bookie 21: Cleared direct to hold on the 300-degree radial at 14 miles off Hue Tacan at 9,000 feet; you are on the top of the stack, call when you have contact with Khe Sanh radar approach.

Khe Sanh GCA: Bookie 21, this is Khe Sanh GCA, tell the aircraft on the bottom of the stack to depart the holding fix on a heading of 280 and instruct all aircraft to descend 500 feet.

(Author's note: Every 10 minutes the stack moved down 500 feet with each departure into Khe Sanh.)

Departing the Stack: Bookie 21, this is Bookie 25 on top talking to Khe Sanh, depart the fix on a heading of 280 and contact Khe Sanh RAPCON on 305.5.

Khe Sanh GCA: Bookie 21 this is Khe Sanh radar approach, maintain your heading, weather is variable at 500 feet and ½ mile. Begin descent and maintain heading.

Bookie 21 (ICS): Gear down, flaps 50. Watch for the O-2 FAC marking targets.

Bookie 21: Khe Sanh radar, we have the field in site.

Bookie 21 (ICS): Assault flaps, we'll jink hard left toward the bend in the river and then back to the right, touch down 1,000 feet down the runway.

Jump on the binders, no reverse, so we don't shut down the jets, we'll make the first turn off.

(Author's note: The C-123B had two augmenting J-85 jets, one on each wing. When the reciprocating engines were put into reverse, the J-85s automatically shut down to avoid foreign object damage; however, at Khe Sanh the J-85s were needed for a quick takeoff and climb out.)

Loadmaster drop the ramp and get ready to jettison the load.

Loadmaster (ICS): Load clear, taxi slowly through the parking area to pick up as many Marines as possible. Mortar rounds are tracking behind the aircraft.

Khe Sanh Tower :Screaming-- get out, inbound arty!!

Loadmaster (ICS): Pilot we have eight pax, ramp is up, ready for takeoff.

Bookie 21 (ICS): We're airborne off runway 10 diving right into the river bend to pick up airspeed, gear up, flaps up, pulling hard and banking left into the clouds, now we can settle down.

Loadmaster (ICS):Pilot we're OK in the cargo compartment, one news reporter is passing out shots from a bottle in a brown bag. They're all a little nervous. If you give them a smooth ride back to Da Nang you might get a treat from the brown bag.

Bookie 21 (ICS) Wow, we just missed that C-130

SPECIAL OPERATIONS WARRIOR FOUNDATION

In 1980, during Operation Eagle Claw, a courageous, but failed, attempt was made to rescue 52 Americans held hostage in Iran. On that tragic day, eight Special Operations Forces lost their lives, leaving behind 17 children.

In memory, an immediate enduring battlefield promise was made by their teammates to take care of those and subsequent surviving children by providing full educations, and additional educational opportunities, "cradle to career" (preschool – college), to the surviving children of Special Operations Forces lost in the line of duty. The feeling then was, and will continue to be, it is the least we can do to honor those who made, and unfortunately will make, the ultimate sacrifice.

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happiness through
academic success...
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- Access to online tools for ACT/SAT test preparation
- High school summer academic, leadership, & professional programs
- College planning conference (EPIC) hosted by SOWF for high school students
- Access to online college planning platform, College Success Academy
- College to Career transition program, including funds available for internship relocation and an opportunity to study abroad



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coming in the opposite direction; he was way off course and the visibility stinks.

Da Nang Tower: Bookie 21, this is Da Nang tower, you're cleared to land.

Bookie 21 (ICS): Co-pilot, recheck the gear and flaps.



C-123 Flight Deck (Photo courtesy of author)

Bookie 21 (ICS): Co-pilot call tower and see if we've touched down.

Smile...that's how good I was. And another day at the office. Off load our pax and we're cleared home to Phan Rang.

This is a short description of one of my flights into Khe Sanh. Typically, C-123s landed, offloaded, and took back off in three minutes, but I know our crew did it in one minute. There were other missions and probably more dangerous because we had to spend time off-loading some heavy equipment such as a 155mm artillery gun barrel, and another time, mobile arresting gear to set up a low altitude ground proximity extraction system for C-130s. Those took time and for some reason we were not attacked.

We lost three C-123s at Khe Sanh, they were just bulldozed off the side of the runway. One loss resulted in five crew members and their passengers killed. We always flew with the windows open, and they were large enough for the cockpit crew to easily egress. One of our aircraft had a mortar round explode in front of the right engine on take-off from Khe Sanh. I saw the aircraft back a Da Nang and it had over 200 holes in it, the co-pilot was wounded.

This was a challenging mission and our C-123s were the only aircraft allowed to land at Khe Sanh after mid-January 1968, except for an occasional Air Force or Marine C-130. We kept these missions up until mid-April 1968 when the siege lifted. During that time the Marines were completely dependent upon resupply from C-130s and C-123s.

The C-123 Air Commando crews did airdrops along with C-130s. It was a small drop zone, but I think the air drops were fairly successful. There was one minor problem and that was a mine field between the west end of the Khe Sanh runway and the small drop zone. Many of us

contributed to the mine field, although I understand the Marines were able to retrieve most of those loads.

This is just one accounting from this Airman's perspective, but the real action at Khe Sanh was the Marines fighting on the Hills 881N and 881S (meters) beyond the airfield, the center piece of the action. North and parallel to the Khe Sanh runway were Hills 950 and 1015 where the NVA set up artillery and mortar positions which were a constant threat to the runway complex. It was said that they had the complex mapped with grid squares so they could follow taxiing C-123s. One day during the siege, Khe Sanh received 1,300 incoming rounds. There was also incoming artillery from Laos just nine kilometers west of Khe Sanh.

Khe Sanh Combat Base anchored Khe Sanh Village, Lang Vei Village, and the US special forces camp along Route 9 that led east to Ca Lu and then to Dong Ha and Quang Tri on the coast of South Vietnam. It was the western most Marine position just below the DMZ that separated North and South Vietnam and was one of a series of Marine fire bases that extended west from the east coast of South Vietnam. As early as 1966 it was recognized that Khe Sanh held a strategic position guarding three primary North Vietnam Army routes of infiltration from Laos into South Vietnam. Consequently, Khe Sanh became a NVA point of attack beginning in late 1966.

Khe Sanh was on a plateau with trees that rose 60 feet all entangled with dense elephant grass which made observation of infiltration routes difficult. The Rao Quan River ran from northwest to southeast past the east end of the Khe Sanh runway. Typically, the weather was rainy and foggy and was a factor that made flying into Khe Sanh for the Air Force challenging and was a difficult situation for Marine helicopters moving material from the Khe Sanh main base



Khe Sanh from an aerial view. (Photo courtesy of author)

to the sites of the hill fighting. It also made it difficult for tactical air to support the Marines although there was much of that to include B-52 Arc Light missions in close proximity to the base. There was a ground approach radar on Khe Sanh, but it was destroyed far too often, and replacement radars were never calibrated, but it was close enough. Khe Sanh also had a Tacan, but it never worked.



Aerial View of KheSanh (Photo courtesy of author)

Khe Sanh was under constant attack by estimates between 30,000 and 40,000 communist troops against approximately 6,800 Marines. The fight was the highlight of the January 1968 Tet Offensive, and it was from then through mid-April of 1968 that Khe Sanh was under siege by the NVA. President Johnson worried that Khe Sanh would be another Dien Bien Phu that resulted in the defeat of French forces in Vietnam in 1954 and was a fact that weighed on the President to the point that the battle was almost micromanaged from the White House. He didn't want another "Dinbinfoo."

I am proud to have been part of this fight. While it was a small part of the Vietnam war, the Air Commandos of the 315th Air Commando Wing kept the Marines alive until Army convoys broke through on Route 9 and were able to resupply the Marines. The C-123 and the crews were somewhat unique as they were the only ones that had the capability to land consistently and safely at Khe Sanh. In July of 1968 Khe Sanh was destroyed by our forces and abandoned.



About the Author: Lt Gen Bruce Fister was an Air Force officer and pilot for over 32 years with 7,000 hours flying time. During the Vietnam conflict, he accumulated 1,000 combat hours flying the C-123. He has flown around the world twice and has been in 53 different countries on every continent on the globe. During his career, General Fister commanded at multiple levels and had

leadership role in Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada in 1983 and Operation Just Cause in Panama in 1989. He became the wing commander at Rhein Main AB in Germany days after the headquarters was bombed by the Bader Meinhof gang in 1985 and led the wing through the recovery and further defense against terrorist attacks. General Fister was the second commander of Air Force Special Operations Command serving from 1991 to 1994. After retiring from the Air Force, he was the Executive Director of a Christian nonprofit organization for 10 years. General Fister has written two books: *Growing and Building Faith, Prayer, and Leadership* and *Growing and Building Revised for you the Leader*. He is also co-author of *Lead to Serve, Serve to Lead*. *Leading Well in Turbulent Times* with Brigadier General, Retired Gwyn Armfield.

Editor's note: The author's footnotes have been removed to save space. The notes are available upon request.

THE SEARCH FOR



The staff of the ACJ offers this graphic representation of a MH-53 leading a RAF CH-47.

By William T. LeMenager, Lt Col USAF (Retired)

Al Jouf Regional Airport in northwestern Saudi Arabia was very busy during Operation Desert Storm, from mid-January through early March 1991. On 14 January elements of the 1st Special Operations Wing forward deployed from King Fahd Air Base to position for the coming Operation Desert Storm. The units and aircraft included 20th SOS MH-53J Pave Low helicopters, 55th SOS MH-60G Pave Hawk helicopters, and 9th SOS HC-130P Combat Shadows.

The British Army Special Air Service (SAS) squadrons also deployed to Al Jouf and began executing cross-

border operations on/about 17 Jan 1991. Their aviation support consisted of four or five RAF CH-47 Chinook helicopters from 7 Squadron, RAF Odiham, England. The RAF Chinooks flew long range SAS insertion, extraction, and resupply missions. They were supported logistically by C-130s from the RAF's 47 Squadron, RAF Lyneham, England. We had a very good operational relationship with the SAS and RAF flyers, as we did with AF Reserve A-10 pilots from New Orleans, and two US Navy Reserve HH-60H squadrons. Special Operations Command-Central was

BRAVO TWO ZERO



tasked with the combat search and rescue from the beginning of Operation Desert Shield and so USAF Pararescue (PJ) support, sourced from multiple squadrons across the Air Force, was dedicated to support the command's CSAR mission.

The SAS command and control center was located in the same large "temper tent" at Al Jouf as the Navy HH-60H, A-10, and AFSOC planners. These small C2 ops centers consisted of a desk/table or two with long-range radios and other necessary, minimum equipment and supplies (like

coffee pots and boxes of Tabasco mini-bottles). The SAS patrols were executing numerous cross-border missions in Land Rovers and on foot via CH-47 long range insertion. A couple days after insertion it became apparent that one of the foot patrols, Bravo Two Zero, was in trouble. Radio communication was intermittent and garbled. Then communications from the team ceased altogether. This was unusual and highly alarming.

On 27 Jan 1991, Super Bowl Sunday— the Giants versus the Bills— our MH-53J crew was tasked to lead an



MH-53J Pave Low hard crew at Al Jof, Mar '91. Top L-R: Phil "Squirrel" Carroll, Corby Martin, Bill LeMenager, Mike Lael. Kneeling L-R: Mike Harte, Barry "Bear" Harrison. Not pictured: TR Hill, FE on BRAVO TWO ZERO mission.. (Photo courtesy of author)

RAF Chinook to search for, locate, and extract Bravo Two Zero. My crew was Capt Corby Martin, aircraft commander, flight engineers MSgt Mike Lael and SSgt Mike Harte and aerial gunners; Sergeants Barry "Bear" Harrison and Phil "Squirrel" Carroll. We also had a guest flight engineer, Sergeant TR Hill. The initial search area was somewhat close to where an F-15E crew (Corvette 03) was shot down a week earlier, but further south and east, away from the heavily concentrated Iraqi air defenses in that area. We built a route that would take us around, and sometimes skirting through, Roland and SA-6 SAM lethal rings. It looked like we could pull it off, but the fuel was going to be tight for our aircraft.

We launched as a two-ship with an RAF CH-47 departing Al Jof on a clear, very cold, moonlit night. After a hot refueling stop at Ar'Ar, near the Saudi /Iraqi border, we began our mission northbound deep into Iraq. The clear, high illumination conditions allowed the rare opportunity to fly visual with our NVGs. The majority of our flying through Desert Shield and up to this point in Desert Storm was at night "heads-down" using the Pave Low's excellent terrain-following/terrain-avoidance (TF/TA) radar, forward looking infrared (FLIR) sensor, and radar altimeter.

We were leading the Brit Chinook into combat skimming over sand dunes and dipping into wadis at 50 ft above the ground, sometimes lower. This was, to my knowledge, the first combined US/UK forces combat helicopter formation mission. As we flew further north the terrain became much flatter and nondescript, yet it was still easy to remain visual. On one stretch I recall flying at least 30 minutes at 20-30 ft above the ground, while watching sporadic bursts of AAA flash 5 miles to our left. The S-60 streaming tracer fire was especially impressive, but the Iraqi gunners could not reach us. Regardless, we were getting

uncomfortably close to some plotted Roland and SA-6 sites, so we always had an eye and ear on the radar warning receiver (RWR), with flare and chaff expendables at ready.

We were heading for Bravo Two Zero's last known position (LKP), which was their insertion point given to us during our pre-mission planning. When we requested information about the team's evasive plan of action (EPA) we got largely blank stares, and a, "Well, they'll attempt to get back to Saudi Arabia..." response. (The Saudi border was about 140 nm south from the insertion point.) Enroute to the LKP, Corby entered a creeping line search pattern in the Pave Low's enhanced navigation system (ENS) in order to provide precise course guidance. The creeping line box extended south along their presumed EPA route. This seemed absurdly strange; we were going to fly a search pattern in the middle of Iraq, in a real shooting war, on a parallel north of Baghdad!

A little background, ENS search patterns were marginally covered during my Pave Low training; do it once or twice, sign it off, on to more important things. Search patterns are civil search and rescue techniques. Yet there we were: half-mile spacing with 10-mile legs flying 70 knots, in the middle of Iraq in the middle of the night on Super Bowl Sunday!

As we were flying the programmed pattern, we were shocked to hear the Chinook pilot broadcast a call in the blind to Bravo Two Zero over the unsecured UHF Guard frequency letting the Iraqi's know our approximate position via their direction finding equipment. Broadcasting on the



Special Air Service commandos and vehicles at Al Jof.
(Photo courtesy of author)

Guard frequency, in the clear, wasn't mentioned during our pre-flight mission brief. A second un-briefed event was the Chinook launching flares, presumably to provide a visual signal to the patrol. This had the same effect of momentarily shutting down our NVGs as the missile launches we experienced on the first night of the air war. Fortunately,

our scanners were quick to call the difference, so no evasive action was necessary. Even though we could carry about five hours of fuel on the MH-53 this was not enough for extended coverage in the search area without inflight refueling, which wasn't an option that far north inside Iraq. It was basically a matter of getting in there, do a slow search, and fly home and that was all we could do. We were disappointed, but proud to have made a valiant effort and as we approached BINGO fuel we began the long haul south back to Saudi Arabia. Up to that point in the mission, there was hardly a stir to interrupt the beautiful night, except for our wingman's radio broadcast and flare release. I even wondered who was winning the Super Bowl, but it seemed an irrelevant matter.

As I mentioned, the radio calls and flare release had given us a scare, but nothing compared to the bona-fide missile launch indications that suddenly lit-up our RWR and our earphones as we egressed the search area. About all you can do at that point is punch chaff and get as low as safely possible. I was still punching chaff when Corby casually said, "OK you can stop now, I don't think they're coming down here in the dirt to get us." We didn't know for sure at the time who or what lit us up, but we laid down a chaff cloud that probably floated, like a colossal Graf Zeppelin, clear into Syria and Turkey. We were told after we landed that it was likely a friendly combat air patrol over head checking us out with their radars.

Heading back to the Saudi border, we more or less retraced our inbound route. This was a tactical No-No, but given the multitude of defense systems, there were virtually no other good options. When we were 30 minutes from the Saudi border an AWACS, callsign "YUKON," came up UHF secure with an excited advisory, "SA-8 directly on your intended route!" No problem, we'll just fly around it, except the deviation would take us pretty close to the Iraqi Mudaysis Air Base. It was either that or a plotted I-Hawk site that our intelligence office briefed the Iraqi's had. We opted to skirt the Mudaysis airfield that had been heavily bombed by coalition air forces because we couldn't be sure about the possible I-Hawk site. Basically, we were flying through a virtual SA-8 farm in that part of Iraq. The SA-8 had features which strongly favored the missile operator, not the slow low flyer and there was no sure way of telling where those mobile systems might be at any time. And, the Iraqi missile operators were practicing very good emission control for fear of getting blasted by a F-4G HARM missile. Ultimately, we skirted the alleged site with some breathing room. Not a stir from the airfield, which we could vaguely make-out to the southeast, as we pressed on toward the border.

Given our crew's experience leading AH-64A Apaches to destroy a radar site on night-one (17 January 1991), we

knew that the border crossing would present a high chance of being engaged by shoulder-fired SAMS and/or lethal small arms fire. Especially since it was by now likely known that coalition helicopters were operating deep in Iraq. So, the pucker factor naturally increased as we flew nearer to the picket line on the border. We noted that our guest flight engineer TR Hill was becoming especially anxious as we neared the border and it became apparent he was dying for a cigarette. Our hard policy was no smoking over the fence because a flicked cigarette butt, flaming a shower of sparks,



MH-53 landing (Photo courtesy of USAF)

would be non-tactical, or something like that...never mind we were flying a large, near-50,000 pound helicopter with the radar cross-section of a B-52 and blasting a TF/TA radar signature that can almost melt granite.

We cross the border uneventfully though were very disappointed we failed to locate a friendly team in trouble. The story of that ill-fated SAS patrol is told in the book, *BRAVO TWO ZERO*, by Andy McNabb, a pseudonym. Other patrol members subsequently published their own accounts of the mission. After reading McNabb's book, I surmised that the patrol had successfully fought and evaded their way west, near the Syrian border by the time we mounted our search effort.

In conclusion, of the eight men on the patrol, three were killed in action or died of hypothermia, four became POWs, and one escaped into Syria; five of eight eventually returned to their homes in England. They were nowhere near the area we searched, but all of us are proud knowing we gave it our very best effort. Any Time Any Place!



Lt Col Bill LeMenager, USAF (retired) spent the majority of his career in AF Special Operations. He served in the 20th SOS at Hurlburt Field beginning in August 1988 and flew the MH-53J Pave Low for the next nine years at the 20th SOS, and the 21st SOS at RAF Alconbury and RAF Mildenhall, UK. Colonel LeMenager also served in several group, wing, and MAJCOM operations and staff positions. He retired from the Air Force after 23 years of service.

Maintenance Support for the Air Force MH-60G Pave Hawk



By Rick Beery, Col, USAF (retired)

In the December and January issues of the *Air Commando Journal*, readers were treated to a good recap of the MH-60 Pave Hawk's utilization by the 55th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS) under the Military Airlift Command (MAC) and then after the flying squadron was redesignated the 55th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) under the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC). Those issues of the journal included articles highlighting the MH-60 acquisition and modification process, as well as confirmation of the squadron's rapid and long-range deployment capability. That capability was demonstrated by the search for Congressman Leland in Ethiopia, as well as some notable operational missions and deployments such as Operations Just Cause, Desert Shield/Storm, Provide Comfort, Northern Watch, Eagle Flight, and Allied Force. The awesome performance of the aircrews over the years sealed the legacy of the MH-60G in Air Rescue and Special Operations history. However, the aircrews did not do it by themselves. Most of the authors who contributed stories describing the operational missions gave credit to the maintainers and support personnel who kept the "birds" flying. My goal is to bring those people out from behind the scenes and tell the story of the important, and some would say superhuman, efforts by hundreds of dedicated maintenance and support personnel. This article will supplement the operationally-focused articles by describing some of the maintenance contributions that ensured the amazing legacy of the MH-60G Pave Hawk.

At first, the 655th Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance Squadron (CAMS) was the primary maintenance organization providing the full range of organizational and field level maintenance support for the Air Force H-60s. From the initial acquisition of the H-60, through the extensive modifications, aircrew training, confirmation of the operational capability, and numerous deployments, the maintainers and support personnel were always there to ensure the crews had ready aircraft to accomplish the nation's business.



But first, it will help to offer a little background on the maintenance concept and structure of the 655th CAMS.



655 Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance Squadron emblem (Photo courtesy of Air Force Historical Research Agency)

In the 1980s MAC organized its maintenance functions into three levels—organizational, field, and depot. Organizational maintenance is what we called flightline maintenance and generally consisted of crew chiefs, expeditors, inspectors, aerospace ground equipment (AGE) specialists, etc. Field level maintenance consisted of the back shops providing avionics, electrical, hydraulics, sheet metal, and other specialist and advanced support. And depot level support provided heavy maintenance, often beyond the expertise of the base units and left to the designated depot facility for each type aircraft. The depots were also responsible for the aircraft testing and repair manuals. Sometimes depot repairs could be done by qualified field level technicians or by depot teams. When new types of aircraft were acquired by the Air Force the lines between the maintenance levels often blurred with each level contributed significantly to developing and formalizing test procedures and repairs. Many times the depot would ask the 655th CAMS to propose a procedure. The written procedure would go to the depot for review and edit. Then it would come back to the squadron to confirm it worked. This

would take a lot of time and effort depending on the complexity of the test and repair. The 655th CAMS structure helped provide the necessary maintenance for the H-60s as well as the several HC-130P/N aircraft assigned to the 55th ARRS.

The 655th CAMS was initially constituted on 12 August 1982 at Eglin AFB, Florida. At first, the squadron was responsible for maintaining HC-130 King rescue C-130s and HH-3 Jolly Green Giants for the 55th ARRS. By December of that year the H-3s were being replaced by UH-60A helicopters. The UH-60 would undergo numerous modifications over the subsequent years to upgrade it into a rescue aircraft and then to a special operations helicopter. On 18 April 1989, the 655th CAMS was reassigned to the 1st Special Operations Wing and on 1 March 1990 it was redesignated as the 655th Special Operations Maintenance Squadron. The squadron was inactivated on 22 September 1992 as part of the sweeping Air Force organizational changes directed by the Air Force Chief of Staff. During its ten years as the lead H-60 maintenance unit the 655th CAMS made tremendous contributions by

Volant Wrench was a special program which gave a few flying officers each year the opportunity to work in a maintenance organization while maintaining minimal qualifications in an assigned aircraft. Later, the program was expanded to include other operationally-oriented logistics squadrons such as transportation, aerial port, supply, etc. The goal was to get a better crossflow of expertise and understanding between aircrew and maintainers. Having a pilot working every day in the maintenance squadron worked well. While in that assignment I had opportunities most aircrew members never get; I was part of the training, planning, and work that goes into ensuring operationally ready aircraft are available “That Others May Live” and “Anytime, Anyplace” (shameless plugs for both combat rescue and special operations). During my time in the CAMS I received exceptional guidance, support, and mentoring from my two commanders—Lt Col Tom Kleiv and Lt Col Rich O’Dell. I could not have asked for better. But, as with any maintenance organization, the Chiefs run the show and I learned so much from CMSgt Jimmie Webster who



The HC-130s were fully operational and deployed regularly for exercises and missions. (Photo courtesy of author)

integrating the H-60 into Air Force Rescue and Special Operations.

I had the great fortune of being assigned to the 655th CAMS as a MAC Volant Wrench officer in 1986.

worked diligently to keep me from doing dumb things.

When I arrived in the 655th they had approximately 260 personnel divided into maintenance control,

flight line, field maintenance, and avionics maintenance functions supporting 6 HC-130s and 10 UH-60A helicopters. These maintenance professionals provided day-to-day maintenance support for the training and operational missions of the 55 ARRS. Additionally, they supported the USAF's effort to modify and upgrade the Army UH-60s to the Air Force MH-60G configuration.

At that time the H-60s were still being used for initial aircrew and maintenance qualifications. Generally speaking, operators and maintainers are enthusiastic about serving as initial cadre for new weapon systems and are more than willing to put in extra effort to ensure success. This integration was a little more challenging because we were learning at the same time as we were fielding this new helicopter. As Rick Newton pointed out in his December *Air Commando Journal* article, "The True Story of the Pave Hawk," The original 10 H-60s were procured outside the formal Air Force system and the engineering work done at Warner Robins Air Logistics Center was done without contractor support. Also, there were no formal USAF publications accompanying the aircraft. This meant the aircrews and maintainers had to fill in the gaps that were created by working outside the Air Force's procurement system.

While the aircrews in the 55th ARRS/SOS were writing chapters for the flight manual, maintainers from the 655th CAMS were assisting Warner Robins by writing USAF test and repair procedures. This process of bringing the aircraft into the squadron while simultaneously writing the technical manuals continued for several years as each aircraft was cycled through modifications. These modifications included new fuel tanks, air refueling systems, navigation systems, weather radar, hoist, etc. Some modifications were installed piecemeal while others included packages of several new systems and components. Even the external stores support system (ESSS) referenced in Newton's article had written installation, testing, and repair

procedures, even though those systems were tucked away in storage and, to my knowledge, were never actually used. The challenges of supporting initial training, currency training, and operational deployments, while integrating a completely new aircraft into the USAF were many, but the maintenance professionals of the 655th CAMS faced them all head-on and as the squadron motto said, they made it happen.

Later in 1986, the squadron received four EH-60A Quick Fix electronic warfare versions of the Blackhawks, on loan from the Army, to support training while the Air Force UH-60s were being cycled through various modifications. Even though the EH-60 aircraft had avionic systems the Air Force did not use, the basic airframe was the same as our UH-60As and could be used for initial flight training. However, getting the additional EH-60s added a large workload to the maintenance team because of the unique avionics systems, a 40% addition to our fleet with no corresponding increase in manpower, and no USAF test and repair procedures for the EH-60 helicopters.

Because of the transition to new aircraft along with increased numbers of helicopters, our manpower was often spread very thin. The requirement to continue training while also remaining ready to support "real world" missions created a need for novel ways to get all the jobs done. For example, we decided to store some of the helicopters to reduce maintenance workload. There was really no need to keep 14 H-60s ready to fly, so putting some aircraft into storage allowed us to focus more workers on training, exercises, and missions. At times we would bring the depot team Warner Robins AFB to Eglin AFB to install the modifications. This gave our maintainers first-hand knowledge of the new systems being installed while providing additional skilled labor to assist the depot team without sending personnel away from Eglin AFB.

By the end of 1988, nine of our

UH-60s had been modified to the point that they were redesignated as MH-60Gs. At the same time, the squadron grew to 350 personnel and our aircraft fleet grew to nine HC-130s, nine MH-60Gs, and nine UH-60As. Every day at Eglin was filled providing aircraft for aircrew training on both helicopter types, as well as evaluating and validating the test and repair procedures for the unique MH-60Gs. Even though the squadron was very busy they were able to support an average of 20 deployments per year. Numerous joint readiness training exercises laid the foundation for our training with special operations units from the other Services and set the stage for future missions and operational success.

One of our first mission tasks was to ensure the helicopters could rapidly deploy. We needed to create an ability to prepare and deploy within hours, not days. So, we worked with our operations counterparts to build a streamlined deployment support package. Additionally, we developed rapid MH-60G tear down and build up procedures. I remember a test of our deployment capability when we got a no-notice deployment exercise to prepare three helicopters for a C-5 load out, fly to Ft Bragg, North Carolina, reassemble the helicopters and fly an exercise mission. The exercise went exceptionally well. We trained teams of eight personnel, four maintenance and the four aircrew, to tear down and build up each helicopter. The maintainers provided the expertise while the aircrew provided the muscle. Training and developing tear down and build up procedures together paid significant dividends and this particular exercise went extremely well. The tear down was accomplished in less than an hour. After the helicopters were loaded onto the C-5, followed by a night, low level flight on the C-5, our people rebuilt the helicopters and had them airborne in less than 30 minutes after landing. Several of these exercises confirmed we had created a tremendous rapid deployment capability that was proven time and again to be very effective

The ramp at Eglin AFB. HC-130 in the center, MH-60Gs in the right foreground, and UH-60As behind the HC-130 (Photo courtesy of author)



at quickly getting special operations airpower all over the world; the embodiment of any time, any place.

In addition to the actual combat deployments, confirmation that the 655th CAMS was doing exceptionally well was demonstrated during a MAC Operational Readiness Inspection (ORI) and then a Maintenance Standardization and Evaluation Team (MSET) visit. The ORI in 1989 was an intensive 30-day inspection integrated with inspections on other MAC units. We deployed our aircraft using C-141 Starlifters from a special operations low-level qualified airlift wing that was going through their own ORI. As the C-141s carrying our helicopters approached the deployment location at Pope AFB, North Carolina, we were notified the airfield was under simulated attack. That simulation was intended as part of the airlift crews' evaluation, but we decided to suit up in our chemical warfare gear and participate also. Our teams did an engine running offload with over 40 personnel and all our equipment. The

Inspector General team was rightfully impressed by that participation and gave the maintenance team laudatory comments. The 655th CAMS garnered top ratings for departure reliability, aircraft generation, deployment, and chemical/conventional warfare.

During the MSET, the maintainers earned "excellent" or "outstanding" ratings in every category and the H-60 section earned additional laudatory recognition for their outstanding performance. From the superb performance during the higher headquarters inspections, 655th CAMS personnel continued to confirm their excellence while supporting deployments to Ethiopia, Panama for Operation Just Cause, and Saudi Arabia for Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. As a result of their dedicated efforts the squadron earned accolades as the MAC Outstanding Rescue Maintenance Squadron for 1988, the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award, and induction into the 23AF Logistics Hall of Fame.

In 1992, the 655th CAMS was

deactivated and the maintainers were distributed between several squadrons. They still provided exceptional support to the MH-60G helicopters and aircrews as was proven by the outstanding results for Operations Provide Comfort, Northern Watch, and Allied Force to name a few. For more details of those missions I urge you to read the December 2022 issue of the *ACJ*.



About the Author: Rick Beery graduated from the USAF Academy in 1978 and went on to fly the H-3 and H-60 at various assignments, including time in the Volant Wrench program at Eglin AFB. He performed staff duty at the Pentagon in the Air Staff and Joint Staff then continued flying the MH-60G in the 55 SOS where he was selected to command the Operations Support Squadron and then the Maintenance Squadron in the 353 Special Operations Group in Okinawa. He got back to Hurlburt Field, eventually commanding the 16 Logistics Group/16 Maintenance Group and then retired in 2007 after 29 years active duty.

WHY CANNON AIR FORCE BASE?

... MELROSE RANGE!

By Toby Cory, Col, USAF (Retired)

In 2005, Air Force Training Ranges were, and still are, at a premium. During this same time period, Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) was setting the stage to double the number of aircraft in its inventory. Neither Hurlburt Field nor Eglin Gulf Test Range could support this growth for training. US Army Special Forces and US Navy SEAL force structure was also increasing in order to keep up with the ever-present demand for special operations forces (SOF) in the Global War on Terrorism. Our west coast SOF partners struggled to find available range time and absorb the rising costs of using these training ranges. Cannon AFB and Melrose Air Force Range could help resolve some of the challenges facing USSOCOM forces.

I can still remember the day it all started, just like it was yesterday. As the low man on the totem pole in the Headquarters AFSOC Force Structure Branch, I was holding down the fort during lunch when a call came in from the third floor. The commander's secretary requested someone from the branch to come up stairs immediately. I'm not sure what I expected from my first trip upstairs, but it was definitely not seeing the

AFSOC Vice Commander Maj Gen John Folkerts standing in his doorway waiting for me. His words stick with me today—"General Wooley just came out of a meeting with General Moseley, the Air Force Chief of Staff, and he wants to give AFSOC another base and he is also considering putting some A-10s in the command. Go put a P4 (Personal For) together thanking him for his support to AFSOC and ask for permission to take a look at Cannon AFB."

Two things ran through my mind as I raced back downstairs; a second base is actually going to happen this time, and don't blow this task. By now, everyone was back at their desk and curious about what had happened upstairs. After providing a quick summary of what had just transpired, someone muffled, "Well, good luck with that." Perhaps they still remembered the command's failed "West Coast" basing effort from just a few years earlier. Back then, the team working the Base Re-alignment and Closure Commission (BRAC) effort provided some relevant "intel" that Davis-Monthan AFB, home of three A-10 squadrons, as well as Holloman AFB would also be on the list for restructuring. It was very timely information and it took me just a few

minutes to generate the P4. I included thanks to General Moseley for his offer and support and also requested permission to look at Davis-Monthan and a couple of bases in New Mexico as potential bed-down solutions for AFSOC's planned growth. At that time, I thought I was doing the right thing by looking at all options that might be on the table. Unfortunately, General Folkerts didn't share my optimism with his review of the P4. "What is this Davis-Monthan stuff? My specific instructions were to say Cannon AFB!" The second draft was spot-on and off it went straight to the General Moseley. In less than an hour, I made my fourth trip upstairs to find out General Moseley had just thanked us for our interest in Cannon AFB and Melrose Range and, to my surprise, directed us to take a look at Davis-Monthan as a basing option, as well.

Within days, we assembled a small HQ team of civil engineers, legal, public affairs, operations, and logistics professionals and our task was to conduct preliminary assessments of Cannon AFB/Melrose Range and Davis Monthan/Barry M. Goldwater Range (BMGR) complex to determine feasibility for AFSOC training. We also developed the rough order of magnitude (ROM) cost of

making a second AFSOC home at each of these locations. Our rules of engagement were to confine our discussions to government personnel



Keep CAFB Open sign (Photo courtesy of author)

only. Rumors were already circulating in Clovis and Portales, New Mexico, and Tucson, Arizona. We could expect these communities to be hungry for any information they could glean from these visits if given the opportunity. We had to control the narrative because it was way too early in this process to risk these communities' setting expectations before basing and force structure decisions were approved by Congress.

The 27th Fighter Wing commander, Col Scott West, welcomed the team at his weekly staff meeting and offered the full support of the base to assist with the site survey. He also stressed the importance of avoiding contact with anyone from the local community because they knew our team had arrived and already asked for the opportunity to assist with the assessment. Takeaways from the Cannon/Melrose assessment included the fact that the base came with existing infrastructure to support a wing organization. Cannon provided both medical and mission support groups with dedicated facilities and personnel, two runways, a 66,000-acre training range, and special use airspace. The airspace surrounding Cannon/Melrose was shielded by nearby White Sands Missile Range (WSMR) and air traffic control flowed commercial and private aviation around WSMR. This left Cannon and

Melrose protected in its shadow and provided almost unlimited training potential. As for the base itself, this was not Cannon's first exposure to BRAC and it showed. Air Combat Command (ACC) did not want to invest needed funding in a base threatened with closure by BRAC. The base infrastructure was in need of many upgrades and repairs. Flight line facilities would have to be reconfigured to support larger AFSOC units. The biggest issue we identified was our C-130s would not fit in any of the current flight line facilities, so the base needed

several C-130 hangars in addition to operations and maintenance facilities. Base personnel reinforced a common theme during the visit—AFSOC would be hard pressed to find another location with the same level of strong support shown by communities of Clovis and Portales.

Our survey of Davis-Monthan provided a much different result. There was no base infrastructure to support another flying wing, and there were no operations or maintenance facilities available or ramp space to park another wing's aircraft. Another big concern was training space. The city of Tucson had grown over the years and was now encroaching very near to the base. As a result, nighttime aircraft arrivals and departures had to cease by 10:30 PM. Approval was required to fly between 10:30 PM and 6:00 AM and there was no indication the surrounding community would be receptive to an exception for AFSOC units flying primarily at night. The BMGR located nearby provided another challenge, similar to scheduling and flying AFSOC training missions onto the Eglin Test and Training Range. BMGR could accommodate our

training requirements, but we would have to share range priority with three other flying wings located at Davis-Monthan, Luke, Nellis AFBs, and Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Yuma. The range owners (56th FW at Luke AFB and MCAS Yuma) told us that, at best, we would get priority one week out of every six. BMGR also had an issue with the endangered Sonoran pronghorn antelope, cactus pygmy owl, and flat-tailed horned lizard. Biologists had to verify that no antelope were within five kilometers of the target sets before live fire operations could be conducted. The presence of antelope often caused last-minute range closures, which would definitely impact our AC-130 live-fire training. We estimated the beddown cost at Davis-Monthan was about twice the cost of reconfiguring existing facilities and building the additional new facilities at Cannon AFB.

Hurlburt Field was a third option considered for beddown of another wing and associated new force structure of MC-130J, AC-130J, CV-22, Predator, and non-standard aviation aircraft coming to AFSOC. This option was not feasible for many reasons, including the protection of wetlands



AC-130 first targets (Photo courtesy of author)

surrounding the base, and the cost of building the infrastructure needed to house another wing at Hurlburt. Finally, as mentioned above, Eglin Range was already saturated and could not support the training requirements of another wing's worth of aircraft and aircrew. The ROM (rough order of magnitude) for this option was similar to the estimated cost for Davis-

Monthan.

Armed with the survey results, HQ AFSOC informed HQ USAF that we could make Cannon AFB/Melrose work, but there would be a significant costs associated with reconfiguring the base from a fighter mission focus to what was needed for our special operations missions.



AC-130H Melrose first shoot (Photo courtesy of author)

Cannon AFB and the State of New Mexico provided another strategic benefit to AFSOC and USSOCOM. Aside from “owning” the base and the training range, New Mexico had several powerful senators and congressional representatives led by senior-ranking Senator Pete Domenici who was the Chairman of the Budget Committee and sat on the Senate Appropriations Committee. The delegation also included Congresswoman and AF Academy graduate Heather Wilson; Congressman and Vietnam C-130 pilot, Stevan Pearce; Congressman and House Committee on Appropriations member, Tom Udall; and senior Senator Jeff Bingaman. AFSOC would now have both Florida and New Mexico delegations to lobby for AFSOC aircraft recapitalization with the C-130J and combat loss aircraft replacement programs.

With the command convinced that Cannon/Melrose was the answer, the focus shifted to identifying challenges and solutions for base transfer. The biggest challenge we faced was identifying and capturing

the cost of making a new home. The AFSOC Community Planner, Mr. Tim Hoffman, led the charge to build a base master plan that would set Cannon AFB on a course to provide the infrastructure needed for a new mission. The plan included flightline facilities, military and family housing, and addressed base deficiencies

like flightline encroachment. This master plan was critical for the command to justify increased base operating budgets and MILCON (military construction) funding for the Cannon conversion.

The Air Force made the decision official in the summer

of 2006—Cannon AFB and Melrose Air Force Range were getting a new mission effective 1 Oct 2007. The city of Tucson put an article on the front page of Albuquerque Journal congratulating the community of Clovis on the great news and indicating that they were very happy to hear this decision. However, one thing stood in the way. The base transfer required a full environmental impact study (EIS), complete with public hearings. An EIS of this magnitude normally required two years to complete. The “guidance” we received from USAF headquarters was to complete the EIS prior to end of September 2007, if we wanted any end-of-year money to fund the force beddown requirements or repair base infrastructure when the base transferred. There was some cause for concern that a couple of ranchers living near Melrose Range might voice their objections and extend the time need to complete the study. However, the AFSOC team accepted the challenge and, to everyone’s surprise, completed the EIS almost one year from when it began. The pay-off

was monumental. Approximately \$40 million of fiscal year 2007 end-of-year money flowed to Cannon and projects started immediately. One existing hanger was modified to make it C-130 capable. Squadron and maintenance facilities were renovated to house AFSOC’s larger organizations. In a matter of months, Cannon had moved from the BRAC list to the number two spot behind Anderson AFB (Guam) on the Department of Defense’s list of bases with the most construction funding. Success continued as the base received another nearly \$45 million of end-of-year money in FY 08 and just short of \$50 million end-of-year money in FY 09 to address the needs of the new tenant and mission.

Not everyone was happy to hear that AFSOC had selected Cannon for a second base. Senator John McCain’s Armed Services Subcommittee staffers, demanded an audience with the AFSOC staff to examine the analysis behind the decision and to voice their displeasure over it; someone had to explain to Senator McCain’s constituents why Cannon was selected over Davis-Monthan. During this same trip to Washington, we heard about a Congressional inquiry from a concerned wife of an AFSOC aircrew member, stating that the aircraft take-off performance of heavy gross weight AC-130s operating from Cannon at 4,295 feet elevation was much more dangerous than operating out of Bagram AFB in Afghanistan at an elevation of 4,895 feet. She believed we would lose an aircraft and crew flying out of Cannon. AFSOC leadership pressed forward and the following week announced that the 3rd SOS Predator squadron, 73rd SOS MC-130W squadron, 16th SOS AC-130H squadron, and the 318th SOS Non-Standard Aviation squadron would be the first units to make the move to Cannon.

To coordinate and facilitate the base transfer from ACC to AFSOC, our commander activated Detachment 1 in January 2007 to ensure we were ready to takeover by October 2007. Detachment 1 included special tactics, logistics, communications, and

operations expertise. The Detachment plugged right in to the 27th FW providing an AFSOC perspective to ongoing development of the base Long-Range Master Plan; assisted the 27th Mission Support Group with preparing a project list for end-of-year funding; and a second list of larger MILCON projects for the next Program Objective Memorandum cycle, better known as the POM cycle. Detachment 1 also assisted with the EIS and began efforts to reconfigure the Melrose Range for live fire training. Previously, the fighter and bomber communities dropped inert practice bombs, but that would change when the AC-130 gunships began using the range with their 40mm and 105mm weapons.

Identifying base infrastructure improvements and required MILCON projects was easy. The difficult part would be assigning the bill payer. USSOCOM's initial position was that the base transfer was an Air Force decision and therefore should fund everything the base needed to support its new mission. HQ AFSOC did a tremendous job working with the Air Force staff to fund the "service common" projects, and convinced USSOCOM to budget for the "SOF unique" infrastructure needed to establish and support Cannon's AFSOC presence and joint SOF mission.

Besides a successful base transfer, the biggest challenge for everyone that year was establishing the infrastructure needed for the 3rd SOS move from Creech AFB to Cannon without interrupting their on going combat capability. The 3rd SOS's support to SOF deployed in the Global War on Terrorism could not be affected by the move. [Editor's note: see "Standing Up a Squadron While in Combat" in *Air Commando Journal* Vol 8-1 online] The first order of business was to prioritize Cannon's communications infrastructure because the entire base had just three SIPR (secure internet protocol router) lines and no fiber-optic cable connectivity. Primary and secondary fiber-optic cable capability was brought in to the base to enable

capability to fly missions from Cannon. Additionally, the 3rd SOS facility was modified for classified operations. Hats off to everyone who participated in establishing this capability on schedule and without a reduction in 3rd SOS combat capability.

With the clock ticking down on the completion of the Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision, the required public hearings were scheduled in the communities of Clovis, Clayton, and Fort Sumner, New Mexico. The 27th FW and HQ AFSOC teams provided attendees with information about the base transfer and an introduction to AFSOC aircraft and

the rancher and told him to sit down and be quiet because he was not from the community and had no right to speak for them.

With the new mission coming soon, there were couple of individuals in the 27th Operational Support Squadron that could not wait for October to arrive and decided to get a head start with range modifications. The Melrose Range manager, Mr. Johnny Rogers, and his range management team headed to Anniston Army Depot in Alabama in search of armored targets for Melrose. He was determined to satisfy the gunship aircrew's biggest complaint with Eglin's A-77 impact area, which had



AC-130W firing over MAFR (Photo courtesy of author)

missions. We received overwhelming support and enthusiasm from each of the communities. Every city wanted to be involved in the new mission. Citizens came forward with offers to provide use of facilities for our training, and even offered to act as role players, if we needed them. However, there was one rancher that pushed back and attended each public hearing. Some years earlier, the 27th FW lost an F-16 and its pilot during a training mishap and it crashed on the rancher's property. He spoke out against military training anywhere near his ranch and stated the military could not fly in the airspace above his ranch. We were surprised at the Clovis public hearing when someone "politely" interrupted

a single distorted hulk of metal as a target. As Johnny told the story, they grabbed a tray of sweet rolls from the hotel breakfast bar as they left for a meeting and delivered them to the folks who managed the Anniston Army Depot inventory of targets. While enjoying the tray of sweet rolls, Johnny told them about Cannon's new mission and asked if they had any armor targets he could have for Melrose. The manager scratched his head, and began to apologize. He said he was sorry but he didn't think they had anything available. He then paused mid-sentence and said he might have something out back worth looking at. As they headed out to the used target lot, the manager explained that many



Pink Tank (Photo courtesy of author)



MAFR Target post AC shoot (Photo courtesy of author)



Leahy in F-16 Champagne (Photo courtesy of author)



Toby F-16 ride (Photo courtesy of author)

of the targets did not have their tracks attached and might be difficult to move them around the range.

You had to know Johnny, may he rest in peace—he embodied the AFSOC spirit before anyone on Cannon had ever heard of AFSOC. Johnny grew up in East Texas and his favorite slogan was “Git-er-done,” and he lived by those words. His response was epic. “We are going to shoot them up and we don’t care if they have tank tracks.” With that, the deal was sealed. Anniston even paid the transportation cost to ship the targets to New Mexico. Not too long after, a Burlington-Northern freight train showed up loaded with over 100 M-60 tanks, armored personnel carriers, and other assorted armored vehicles for Melrose Range. The range team now had everything they needed to begin building two live fire impact areas, Jockey and Spirit, in memory of two AC-130 and aircrew combat losses. Later that year, the AFSOC commander, Lt Gen Mike Wooley

flew an AC-130H Spectre on the first live-fire sortie to christen the new live impact area.

During the summer of 2007, 27th FW leadership began to pick up an AFSOC flavor when Col Michael Plehn arrived and assumed command of the 27th Operations Group and its F-16s. Not long after, AC-130H and MC-130W aircraft and crews began to rotate through Cannon to build up a training presence in the area and to influence the renovations of their new homes. Cannon hosted one last bombing competition. Fighters flew in from all over to US to participate and determine bragging rights for best drop score. The 73rd SOS was also invited to participate. If memory serves me correctly, they selected the High-Speed Training Bundle for a low altitude airdrop. The crew put it a few feet from the target and walked away from the competition winning first place and, of course, bragging rights.

In late July of 2007, almost one year from start date of the

environmental impact statement was complete with a positive Record of Decision, HQ AF notified AFSOC that this hurdle was cleared. The base could now transfer from ACC to AFSOC. The 27th Support Group was ready and submitted numerous facility repair and infrastructure projects for end-of-year funding. Very few projects would be completed before they were needed by the new units moving to the base, but it was the beginning for a renovated and rejuvenated Cannon AFB. The 3rd SOS operations facility required several more weeks before it would be finished, but the squadron moved on schedule and phased in the number of combat orbits flown from Cannon as the renovated facilities were completed. Mission success!

Two questions were on everyone’s minds now—what name would be given to the new AFSOC wing, and who would be first in line to lead the organization. AFSOC soon announced that Col Tim Leahy would be the new wing commander,

and one of his first decisions was to decide on the wing's designation. His two obvious choices were to reactivate the 1st SOW or better yet move the 16th SOW flag to Cannon and let HQ AFSOC reactivate the 1st SOW name at Hurlburt, its rightful home for decades. In the end, Colonel Leahy and the AFSOC commander decided to preserve the heritage and legacy of the 27th FW and designated AFSOC's newest wing the 27th Special Operations Wing.

By this time, all the F-16s had departed Cannon and the base was fully engaged in preparing for the Oct 1st change of command and securing as much end-of-year money as possible, while at the same time programming for MILCON projects further down the line. The 27th Civil Engineer Squadron kept submitting projects until 11:59PM on 30 Sep 2007 and their handiwork paid off. Almost every project the civil engineers submitted came back approved with associated funding, just as HQ Air Force had promised months earlier. As I mentioned previously, I believe the first-year total for end-of-year funding was near \$40 million. Additionally, Team Cannon successfully secured

funding for the first of many C-130 capable flight line facilities during the first POM cycle.

On 1 Oct 2007, Cannon AFB, New Mexico, became home to the 27th SOW and ended almost two-and-a-half-year process to find a home for the programmed AFSOC growth and the most important and memorable project I contributed to during my 27-year career. Looking back, Cannon AFB and Melrose Range were two stars aligned and available for the taking. Cannon was the only real option available to AFSOC. It included the promise of funding to upgrade infrastructure to support the mission and supplied a training range that supported our joint training requirements. In addition, the "new" Melrose Range lured SOF partners to come to train, instead of draining AFSOC squadron training budgets to pay TDY costs to send crews off-station to train with those partners. Melrose Range had unlimited potential and afforded the 27th Operations Group the ability to control where unit training took place, instead of having to beg for range time elsewhere where they had a low priority. So, why Cannon/Melrose? This duo was the

only option that provided the facilities and real estate needed to support AFSOC's planned growth and also included a place for them to train. With the additional political clout of the New Mexico delegation, AFSOC was poised for growth and increasing combat capability. Any time any place!



About the Author: Col Toby Corey served on active duty for 27 years. He began his career in the B-52G/H. Post-Operation Desert Storm, he transitioned to the MC-13E at the 8th SOS and deployed in support of operations in Haiti, Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. He performed duties in the 16th Operational Support Squadron and AFSOC/IG before transferring to NAS Roosevelt Roads to serve in the SOCSOUTH J3 and J5. After returning to Hurlburt Field, he moved to HQ AFSOC/XP (A5) Force Structure Branch and facilitated the process of finding a second base to support AFSOC growth. Once Cannon AFB was secured, he was the first to move to Cannon and commanded Detachment 1 followed by the 27th Operation Support Squadron. He retired in 2013 as SOCCENT J8, Director of Resources and Requirements. He now is a Program Manager at Elbit America, Inc. providing Helmet Mounted Displays Systems to both the F-35 and F-16V aircraft.



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-- NORTON A. SCHWARTZ, Gen (Ret) Former USAF Chief of Staff

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Cannon Air Force Base: FROM THE SPECTER OF BRAC to the **Hub of AFSOC** Pathfinding and Innovation

By Rick Masters, Lt Col, USAF (Retired)

A Little AFSOC History Up Front

Air Force Special Operations was initially established on 10 Feb 1983 as the Twenty-Third Air Force, under the Military Airlift Command, and based at Scott AFB, Illinois. On 1 Aug 1987 the Twenty-Third Air Force Headquarters moved to Hurlburt Field, Florida basing it with the 1st Special Operations Wing (SOW). Then on 22 May 1990 the Twenty-Third Air Force deactivated and Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) was activated in its place, becoming the tenth US Air Force major command.

As AFSOC stood up in 1990, the force structure aligned under it was the 1st SOW at Hurlburt Field, FL; the 39th SOW at Rhein-Main AB, Germany and the 353rd SOW at Clark AB, Philippines. The 1st SOW was headquartered at Hurlburt Field, but its forces and aircraft were split between Hurlburt Field and across town at Eglin AFB. The CONUS-based aircraft assigned to the 1st SOW included the AC-130H Spectre Gunship, the MC-130E Combat Talon, the MC-130P Combat Shadow, the MH-53J Pave Low III, and the MH-60G Pave Hawk.

As AFSOC was about to recapitalize two of its major weapon systems in the early-to-mid 1990s, adding the MC-130H Combat Talon II and the AC-130U Spooky Gunship, there was now enough force structure to potentially split the

1st SOW into two dislocated wings and the headquarters began to explore adding a second CONUS base in the western United States. Options explored included Beale AFB, CA and McChord AFB, WA, among others. After several years of planning the political and budgetary appetite to create a second CONUS based waned and the plans were shelved.

Following 9/11, as AFSOC deployed to support, first combat operations in Afghanistan, and then combat operations in Iraq, the nature of this new global war on terrorism would require AFSOC to further expand its special operations force structure.

This expansion included new mission areas such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and theater mobility. As AFSOC began the rapid procurement of specialty aircraft like the MC-130W Dragon Spear, MQ-1 Predator, U-28 Draco, PC-12 Pilatus, M-28 Sky Truck (later the designated the C-145) and the Dornier 328 (later designated the C-146), it became immediately apparent that all of these newly acquired aircraft



were beyond the basing capacity of Hurlburt Field (even with some space at Eglin AFB). It was now 2005, and it was imperative to find that second CONUS installation.

Intersection of Necessity and Opportunity

This was also in the time of the last congressionally mandated Department of Defense Base Realignment and Closure Commission, more affectionately known as BRAC. During this period, the focus of the DOD was squarely on consolidating and closing military installations, while AFSOC was experiencing massive force structure growth and in need of expansion. This is where necessity and opportunity would come to intersect.

The Air Combat Command (ACC) planning for the recapitalization of the sizable F-16 Fighting Falcon and F-15 Eagle fleets, with a smaller fleet of F-22 and F-35 aircraft, had offered up Cannon AFB in Clovis, NM, one of its eleven installations, for closure and it was, in fact, selected for closure on 13 May 2005. Although ACC, knowing its future fighter wings would be downsizing, considered Cannon to be excess infrastructure the local communities surrounding the base had come to rely on the base and its force structure to support their economies. These local communities quickly organized “Operation Keep Cannon” and began a month’s long effort organized under the local Chambers of Commerce and their respective military affairs committees, namely the Clovis Committee of Fifty and the Portales Military Affairs Committee (PMAC).

The “Operation Keep Cannon” effort quickly gained steam and it didn’t take long to get the governor, state legislature, and federal congressional delegation all on board, which notably included Governor Bill Richardson, the democratic governor and former United Nations Ambassador and US Senator Pete Domenici, the ranking Republican who served on the influential Senate Budget Committee. Shortly after, these New Mexico leaders were able to secure a BRAC Commission on-site visit of Cannon on June 23, 2005. By 26 Aug 2005 the BRAC Commission changed the recommendation for Cannon AFB from “Closure” to “Enclave” status. This “Enclave” status gave the Air Force the option to realign a new mission to Cannon within one year or the base would proceed to closure.

As I said earlier, this is where necessity and opportunity would come to intersect. The necessity of a small town rural community that had come to rely on the near-by military base as its economic lifeline, the necessity of an Air Force major command that had grown beyond the real estate it had allocated and desperately need to expand, and the opportunity created by the BRAC Commission to reverse its earlier decision to outright close Cannon AFB and instead leave an opening for the Air Force to re-align a new mission to the eastern plains of New Mexico. This intersection came on 20 June 2006 when the Air Force announced that AFSOC would be moving its forces to Cannon AFB establishing a second base in the western United States.

Upon the announcement, Headquarters AFSOC went into full planning mode to prepare for the transition of Cannon from ACC to AFSOC. The commander immediately established a cross-functional Site Activation Task Force (SATAF) and began to evaluate every aspect of this transition. AFSOC would be the command owning Cannon AFB and that dynamic would make the transition easier, or at least more straightforward, than if the new special operations wing were to bed down as a tenant unit on another command’s base, but that did not mean that the challenges we would face would not be significant. At its most basic level, we were replacing a wing of small, single seat fighter aircraft with one that included various C-130s and other platforms. So even though the flightline infrastructure was in decent shape, it would be completely insufficient for AFSOC’s aircraft. This meant that the first order of business would be to get the programmers busy programming for new aircraft hangars to accommodate AFSOC aircraft.

In April 2007, AFSOC established Detachment 1, HQ AFSOC at Cannon AFB. This initial cadre consisted of a detachment commander, Lt Col Toby Corey, and a small team to begin on-site engagement with the 27th Fighter



Lt Gen Michael Wooley (left) passes the guidon of the newly formed 27th Special Operations Wing to the new commander of the wing Col Tim Leahy. (Photo by A1C Evelyn Chavez)

Wing. Members of the detachment worked directly with the programmers to finish out the Military Construction (MILCON) projects and get them into the Program Objective Memorandum, or POM. It also allowed the team to work directly with the squadrons identified to move out to Cannon. This task was a little bit more complicated than it would seem because the identity of those units changed continuously between the spring and summer of 2007. Initially, the plan had been to split the 1st SOW in half to source Cannon’s units, then it shifted to pulling units from the overseas groups back to the States to make up the core of Cannon’s new special operations wing. Ultimately the plan was solidified by moving the 16th SOS gunships and the 20th SOS CV-22s out west and rounding them out with expansion units such as the 3rd SOS flying the remotely piloted MQ-1 Predator, the 73rd SOS MC-130s, and 318th SOS’s non-standard aviation fixed wing aircraft.

I arrived at Cannon AFB in July 2007, and became the Director of Staff for the 27th Fighter Wing (FW). I was sent out early to transition the wing for the last three months under ACC and then help stand-up the 27th SOW under the command of Col Timothy Leahy, as his Director of Staff. That transition was smoother than I could ever have imagined, principally because the outgoing 27th FW commander, Col Scott West, and Col Leahy were Citadel cadets together and were also classmates during their tour at the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies (SAASS) and were very good friends. The 27th FW leaders and staff were fully committed to seamlessly transitioning the wing and installation from the fighter mission to the special operations mission and on 1 Oct 2007 we did exactly that. AFSOC became the parent command of Cannon AFB and the 27th SOW. Along with the new installation in the western US, AFSOC also assumed stewardship of the Melrose Air Force Range, located about 30 miles west of Cannon. Owning its own “back-yard” training range that could support our flying training was the “crown jewel” that solidified AFSOC’s decision to beddown the new force structure at Cannon. While the special operations flag was planted on 1 Oct 2007, a tremendous and long-awaited achievement, we were still quite a ways from becoming the organization that the 27th SOW is today and still continuing to further evolve into what AFSOC needs it to be for the future.

were engaged in combat operations. We also re-activated the 318th SOS in 2008. The 318th’s theater mobility or non-standard aviation (NSAv) mission began, initially the single-engine PC-12 Pilatus, and then expanded to include the slightly larger twin-engine M-28 Sky Truck, later designated the C-145A. In 2009, we moved the 16th SOS AC-130H Spectres, in full, from Hurlburt Field to Cannon all while maintaining combat commitments in CENTCOM...they did not miss a single combat tasking during the transition. In 2010, we moved the 20th SOS with its Ospreys from Hurlburt to Cannon and we reactivated the former 524th Fighter Squadron as the 524th SOS, also flying the NSAv mission, but focused on higher passenger capacity. The 524th SOS was initially equipped with leased Bombardier Q-200 aircraft and later with Air Force-owned Dornier 328 aircraft, redesignated as the C-146A.

Also, during this early period of the 27th SOW, ongoing combat commitments of US Special Operations Command and AFSOC needed to increase the presence of the gunships in the combat theater. The increase requirement was beyond the capacity that could be sustained by both Cannon’s AC-130Hs and Hurlburt AC-130Us. The 27th SOW was asked to work with USSOCOM’s rapid acquisition programs to refit our MC-130W aircraft with a weapons package and make it an AC-130W. In less than two years, AC-130Ws were deploying into combat from the 73rd SOS. The program,

“Dragon Spear,” not only brought additional combat capacity to the battlefield on an unheard-of timeline, but this program also accelerated the broader AC-130J program to recapitalize the entire fleet of AC-130Hs, AC-130Us and AC-130Ws, by about a decade.

The early 27th SOW led command efforts to establish and fully realize what SOF remotely piloted aircraft (RPA) could be. With the 27th SOW leading the way, AFSOC was able to create the RPA enterprise standard for fixed facility operations with a state-of-the-art facility, purpose built for the command and control and remote split satellite control of SOF configured MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper RPAs. Further, again leveraging the rapid acquisition capabilities of USSOCOM, the 27th SOW created “Leadoff Hitter” short cycle software development and fielding that yielded a variety of innovative SOF capabilities on AFSOC MQ-1s and MQ-9s.

By 2012, we had rounded out the operational units assigned to the 27th with the addition of a second RPA mission control squadron, the 33rd SOS (MQ-9) and a new RPA squadron focused exclusively on launch and recovery operations, the 12th SOS. We also activated a new intelligence squadron to support both manned aircraft units and the rapidly expanding RPA missions. Additionally, we reactivated a second former ACC squadron with the stand-up of the 522nd SOS flying AFSOC newest procurement, the MC-130J Commando II.

Also, in 2012, we were wrapping up the big MILCON program to build C-130-sized aircraft hangars and the additional operations, maintenance, and simulator facilities



A crew chief leads in a C-130 after it landed at Cannon AFB September 29. Air Force Special Operations Command assumed command of Cannon in a change-of-command ceremony Oct. 1.
(Photo by SSgt April Wickes)

Early Evolution of the Wing and the Base

When the 27th SOW was activated, there were only three MC-130Ws at Cannon as the 73rd SOS had only partially moved from Hurlburt Field. This was the extent of the operational units and aircraft assigned on the day the new special operations wing was activated. We completed transitioning the 73rd SOS throughout 2008 and began the tricky relocation of the 3rd SOS mission and MQ-1B Predators from Creech AFB, NV, to Cannon while they

to support our growing wing. When ACC left in 2007, their wing was made up of three F-16 flying squadrons. By this time our wing had grown to nine active flying squadrons. More relevant was the total base population had grown from approximately 3,200 personnel to over 6,000 Air Commandos. In addition to the new mission facilities, we started to address and catch up on the types of facilities needed to support the larger base population — new dormitories, dining facilities, fitness facilities, and military family housing. We didn't just transform the mission of Cannon AFB, we also transformed the landscape. In the ten-year period from 2008 to 2018, \$1.5 billion dollars were invested into Cannon AFB and the base is no longer the last of eleven installations scraping for their share of increasingly scarce resources of a large major command (ACC), and it shows.

Additionally, during the early evolution of the 27th SOW and Cannon AFB, we were also evolving and growing the Melrose Air Force Range from a 8,000 acre bombing and gunnery range to a full 70,000 acre premier SOF air and ground integration range. This too was no small feat. Even though the whole 70,000 acres was government land, ACC only used the internal 8,000 acres and leased the remaining acreage to ranchers and farmers. Given the nature of the SOF-unique training planned for the full range, we had to sunset or discontinue the leases for the ranchers who had come to rely on them. While transitioning the leases, we were also starting to explore what it would take to configure the range for the training we needed. Also, since most of the investment dollars we had at that time were rightfully targeted to mission facilities and quality of life facilities for Cannon main base itself, and any investment to transform the range would require clever and innovative use of other people's money. Ultimately, we terminated the leases and secured investment dollars from the Joint National Training Center and other DOD level entities to build roads, target areas, mock cities, and villages, as well as support facilities that allow for the full integration of SOF ground teams with AFSOC airpower for realistic training, mission rehearsal, and validation exercises.

In 2013, the 318th SOS was re-missioned from the NSAv theater mobility mission to a manned-ISR with the departure of the C-145A and the arrival of the U-28A Draco. Along with the re-missioning of the 318th away from the NSAv mission set, the 524th Special Operations Squadron was relocated from Cannon to Duke Field in Florida to continue the theater airlift mission in partnership with the Air Force Reserve's 919th SOW. In 2014, as the MC-130P Combat Shadow fleet was retired across AFSOC, the 522nd SOS was re-flagged as the 9th SOS one of the original AFSOC squadrons, and the "Night Wings," now called Cannon AFB home. In April 2021, the 318th SOS was split and the 310th SOS was activated, also flying the U-28A Draco. Later, in October 2021, the 17th SOS moved from

Kadena AB, Japan, and was re-missioned to the AC-130J Ghost rider gunship, joining the 16th SOS, which was also re-missioned from the AC-130W to the AC-130J. The 27th SOW now had two AC-130J equipped squadrons. Most recently in October 2022, the 6th SOS stood-up at Cannon AFB, with several MC-130Js from the 9th SOS giving the 27th a second MC-130J Commando II squadron.



73rd SOS over MAFR (Photo courtesy of USAF)

Accelerating the Evolution of the Base and Wing through Innovation

A key advantage of being a relatively new wing is that there is not a long bureaucratic memory of "that's the way we have to do it because that's the way we've always done it," so the 27th SOW has naturally evolved an "always open to new ideas," "comfortable with change," and "on the leading edge of innovation" organizational identity. One key area where this innovative identity has played out with tremendous results is in the area of resiliency of the force. A decade of continuous deployments was pressuring the force to the point that USSOCOM focused attention and secured resources to better support the resiliency of the preservation of the force and families. Cannon leadership immediately began analyzing how to best apply the funding in a way that could leverage all of the various, and somewhat disconnected, Service-provided programs and resources in a way where the whole would become better than a sum of its parts. This led to a command-wide effort to optimize the organization, oversight, and application of all resilience

programs and resources and resulted in the Integrated Resilience Optimization Network or IRON program. Using innovative ideas and the process improvement model, we developed the model into an organizational change request (OCR) and then piloted this new organizational construct for AFSOC. Now this is the standard organizational construct for all AFSOC wings.

Early on in the evolution of the 27th SOW at Cannon AFB, we identified a threat to the long-term viability and survivability of the base. Water surety was going to be a long-term challenge for the base, the wing, and the command. The local community was also keenly aware and equally concerned. The base, the city, and the county worked together and outlined a combination of efforts to address long-term water surety. One particularly innovative effort we explored together was a DOD-sponsored program called the Readiness and Environmental Protection and

broader communities of eastern New Mexico.

Similarly, when General C. Q. Brown became the Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF), he challenged the entire Air Force to “accelerate change or lose.” The 27th SOW and Cannon leadership was listening and AFSOC was listening. As part of this challenge, the CSAF identified five focus areas that would drive the cultural change needed to meet the future competitive operating environment. These areas were mission command, force generation, agile combat employment, multi-capable Airmen, and a new wing A-Staff structure. AFSOC immediately leaned into each of these areas and called on the 27th SOW’s ability and inclination to embrace change and experiment. AFSOC tasked us to lead the pathfinding effort to develop and validate a mission sustainment team (MST) concept that would leverage mission command and advance the concept of multi-capable Airman to force generate an agile combat employment

capability in the form of a Special Operations Tasked Unit (SOTU). The broad concept of the MST is to deploy a Sustainment SOTU to allow SOF air and ground elements to forward deploy and maneuver without being overly reliant on large fixed-base operations and sustainment. It leverages multi-capable Airmen to execute sustainment functions in a small team construct that inherently supports communications, logistics, security forces, beddown/sustainment (force support and civil engineering), medical, airfield management, as well as contracting/pay agent capabilities.

The 27th SOW was tasked to develop and implement this MST concept of operations in September 2020. The team went to work identifying the skillsets needed to execute this expeditionary capability and select an initial cadre of those Airmen. Then the real work began, combat and survival skills were honed. The team began to learn and then gain competency in each other’s functions.

In March 2021, just six short months from receiving the task, the team was ready to demonstrate this new capability. Partnering with the operations and maintenance groups of the 27th SOW, the MST executed a full mission profile, at an austere location within a national training range in the western United States. The MST personnel were infilled, built a bare base operation and received follow-on forces from Cannon. In extreme environmental conditions, they successfully sustained flying operations and maintenance operations. Additionally, they fed, showered, protected, and enabled command and control of the deployed forces over the multi-day exercise. The team learned, refined, repeated, and provided AFSOC with just the capability that had been envisioned.

Building on the innovative mind-set that contributed to the success of the MST, rapidly bringing broad ideas and concepts into a tangible organization delivering a crucial combat capability, the 27th SOW sought to further nurture innovative thought across all wing operations. The 27th commander created the first innovation cell called



73rd SOS AC-130W over MAFR (Photo courtesy of USAF)

Integration or REPI program. This is a program where the DOD partners with an environmental organization to protect the environment in and around military installations and ranges which in-turn protects the military’s access to training to maintain readiness. Historically this program had been used exclusively to protect access to military training ranges, but in reading the program criteria, it seemed to be equally applicable to water conservation, though it had never been used for that purpose. So, the Cannon Team drafted a proposal and submitted the document to DOD and it was selected for funding and allocated \$15 million, which will be matched by another \$15 million from the eligible entity conservation partner. Jointly we allocated funding to entice willing farmers to transition their farmland from irrigated farming to dry-land farming under a restrictive easement on their water rights, initially for a three-year period and then transitioning into a perpetual easement. The amount of water projected to be conserved in the initial three years is 12 billion gallons. That is water that will remain in the ground to support the future water surety of Cannon AFB and the

Commando Spark. This team works directly for the wing commander and is tasked with cultivating innovative thought across the entire base. Understanding that those closest to the task are the ones where innovation can pay the biggest dividends, Commando Spark focuses all the way down to the most junior Airmen on the line. Additionally, the wing has also incorporated continuous process improvement with innovation to bring innovative thought into every aspect of wing operations from broad to specific, from processes to procedures to specific tasks. In the three years that the Air Force has conducted a Service-wide “Spark” competition across all major commands, a Cannon Air Commando has reached the Air Force-level finals.

Whether it is pathfinding a new gunship rapid acquisition capability, institutionalizing SOF RPA, optimizing the resiliency of the force, protecting critical natural resources for the benefit of an entire region, or taking a whole new MST employment concept from bar napkin sketch to operational demo in less than six months, since its inception the 27th SOW has never been a static organization. The only constant, in the 15-year history of this organization, has been change. Change is embraced, innovation is encouraged, and risk is appropriately managed. A failed attempt is nothing more than a spectacularly successful learning event. This ethos has always been the hallmark of an Air Commando, and it is definitely the identity now associated with the Western Home of America’s Air Commandos, Cannon AFB, New Mexico.

Epilogue and acknowledgments

I could not have written this article without the tremendous vision and impact of an all-star cast of wing commanders under whom I’ve been privileged to serve. They are: Maj Gen (retired) Timothy J. Leahy; Maj Gen (retired) Stephen A. Clark; Maj Gen (retired) Albert M. “Buck” Elton II; Lt Gen Tony D. Bauernfeind; Maj Gen Benjamin R. Maitre; Brig Gen (retired) Stewart A. Hammons; Brig Gen Robert A. Masaitis; and Brig Gen (select) Terence G. Taylor. Thank you one and all for your personal mentorship and unyielding support to each and every Cannon AFB Air Commando.



About the Author: Lt Col (retired) Rick Masters received his commission from the University of Southwest Louisiana AFROTC program in 1988. After completing navigator training at Mather AFB, CA, he was assigned to the 16th SOS at Hurlburt Field, FL, as an AC-130H Spectre Electronic Warfare Officer. He later transitioned to the MC-130H Combat Talon II, and served at Hurlburt Field, Kadena AB, Japan, and Kirtland AFB, NM. After completing Air Command and Staff College, he was assigned to Headquarters AFSOC where he led the implementation of AFSOC’s warfighting headquarters initiative. That experience made him an obvious choice to help stand-up a new special operations wing at Cannon AFB, NM in 2007. He retired from active duty in 2009, but remains as the civilian Director of Staff for the 27th SOW.

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MELROSE AIR FORCE RANGE

AFSOC's Training Enterprise & 'Crown Jewel'

By Andrew Walker, Capt, USAF



An MC-130J Commando II aircraft takes off from an austere runway on Melrose Air Force Range, NM. (Photo by SrA Christopher Storer)

Melrose Air Force Range, or MAFR, as it is commonly called, is a 70,000-acre plot of land located 25 miles west of Cannon AFB. Named after the nearby town of Melrose, the land was leased in 1952 from the state of New Mexico and local cattle ranch owners. The range has been used by the Air Force ever since. As the first and only range owned by the Air Force Special Operations Command, MAFR has had many uses. From its initial lease, the nearby 27th Fighter Wing would use the land for their day-to-day training flights which included bombing and strafing targets with live munitions. After a short closure, the range was reactivated to aid in the preparation of fighter and bomber aircrew prior to deployment in the Korean conflict. Since 2008 when AFSOC took over Cannon AFB, the range has been in continuous use by the Air Force: the ownership transferred to Air Force Special Operations Command from Air Combat

Command. With the change in ownership came a change in training conditions, from an air-to-ground munitions range to a dynamic air and ground training facility. The paradigm shift allows multiple special operations units to use MAFR in addition to conventional units to fulfill joint training requirements.

Since 2008, Melrose Range has become the preeminent AFSOC training range. MAFR's versatility is possible by the dedication and persistence of the large team required to maintain the vast area. The team includes the Range Operating Authority, the Director of Range Management; the Range Management Office, and many various support personnel. The Range Operating Authority of MAFR is the 27th Special Operations Wing commander, who operates and maintains the range through the Range Management Office or RMO. The RMO—currently part of the 27th Special Operations Air Operations Squadron—is tasked with oversight of all range administration, support, and operations. RMO's mission is to provide an environment where pilots, aircrews, and ground forces from all joint services (active duty, guard, and reserve) can train safely for combat in a realistic environment and provide live and inert air-to-ground munitions delivery training on the range.

In addition, the RMO provides government oversight and management of range scheduling, firefighting, emergency medical treatment, and air traffic and ground control. RMO is also responsible for the sustainment of numerous technical training facilities, vehicles, and other support equipment and utilities relating to the operation. Maintenance and support of the range are provided by personnel under government contract, currently: Altus

Technology Solutions.

The Director of Range Management leads two sections, range operations and range support. The RMO is staffed primarily by civil service personnel with staffing assistance by military personnel from the 27th SOW. The range operations personnel include the range officers, who oversee day to day operations and have operational control on MAFR; and the range inspectors, who assist the range officer in ensuring the safety, security, suitability and sustainability for all users. Finally, the range inspector functions as the primary point of contact for all ground users and ensures that training operations are conducted safely and in accordance with all applicable directives.

The RMO support section consists of a range safety officer, a data steward, an electronic warfare and countermeasures manager, and a facility operations project manager. The range safety officer oversees overall air and ground range safety, while the data steward develops ground firing ranges, air impact areas, and provides mapping of all range facilities and infrastructure. The electronic warfare and countermeasures manager is tasked with developing and maintaining all electronic warfare assets, to include threat emitters. These emitters can mimic various radars and weapons for air and ground users to train against and allow trainees to develop countermeasures and tactics to neutralize the threats. Lastly, the facility operations project manager is responsible for developing infrastructure to help meet the robust training requirements of everyone who uses the range.

The personnel that train at MAFR include aircrew, ground personnel from all branches, various special operations forces, as well as foreign SOF units from NATO and other partner nations. These users conduct joint and multinational exercises on MAFR, which allows them to practice complex scenarios that promote interoperability between U.S. and foreign forces during training missions or exercises. The experience gained during exercises allow for a better working relationship and more confidence in the capabilities between the users/warfighters. The training events that MAFR provides to the DOD, SOF, and multinational forces are the same mission sets these forces may conduct during contingencies operations or war.

Currently, MAFR has the capabilities for ground and air users to practice marksmanship and weapons qualification, simulate live combat, forward operating base or FOB sustainment and defense, aircraft landings, airdrops, ISR missions, SERE training, personnel recovery, ECM training, IR threat training, demolitions training, and door breach training. The substantial acreage of Melrose range currently includes 15 drop zones, 35 helicopter landing zones, 3 fixed-wing aircraft landing zones, 6 ground weapons ranges, 5 impact areas, and 15 Military Operations in Urban Terrain (MOUT) sites. These MOUTs include entire mock cities, complete with a faux U.S. embassy, supermarket, school, TV station, police station, prison, hospital, gas station, weapons cache and various other structures.

Various aircraft from the 27th SOW frequent MAFR, including: the MQ-9, CV-22, AC-130J, MC-130J, and PC-

12. AETC aircraft also train at MAFR, with MC-130s, and HH-60s that fly from Kirtland AFB. ACC sends the B-1, B-52, F-16, F-15 and the RC-135 to train at the range as well. These are just the most frequent visitors of the immense land, and it is not uncommon to see aircraft from many other commands or even different branches of service. For the 27th SOW Airmen, the quick 25-mile flight—~10 minutes—from Cannon AFB allows them to stay current on changing tactics, techniques, and technology in order to stay proficient for the battlefield. Even though MAFR has been used for bombing and aerial gunnery since the 1950s, the leadership of the 27th SOW and the RMO have strived to maintain MAFR's unique ecology, environment, and history.

The 27th SOW and the RMO are sensitive to the impact military training has on the local environment. Teams from Texas A&M University regularly conduct flora and fauna studies and historical site surveys and artifact preservation. Furthermore, RMO support personnel proactively work year-round developing programs to manage wildlife deemed overpopulated by the State of New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. The RMO is conscientious of MAFR's environment and the history of the local area. The leadership of the RMO always has an eye on the horizon and are engineering a better, more capable, more connected, more efficient MAFR for the future.

Melrose Range is designed intentionally to be able to respond dynamically to new or changing mission sets. Construction of an additional surface range will be complete in March 2023, which will add shooting lanes for 100m multipurpose pistol/carbine, 300m carbine/rifles, and 1000m sniper rifles. Further on the horizon is a shoot house for dynamic indoor tactical training and an improved breach training site. The proposed future addition of the Threat Representative Environment X (TReX) systems will provide simulated targets for aircraft to exercise various electronic warfare, electronic attack, and signals intelligence collection and exploitation capabilities. The proposed new system will replace the legacy ECM systems and provide more capable, flexible, and efficient operations.

Thanks to emerging capabilities, as well as the secluded location, Melrose Air Force Range is uniquely postured to meet the challenges of the ever-changing geo-political landscape and assure success on the battlefield for Air Commandos, our joint SOF partners, and the greater combat air forces. Melrose Air Force Range: Safe, Relevant, Professional.



About the Author: Capt Andrew Walker started his Air Force career in 2017 as Undergraduate RPA Training student at JBAS Randolph. After finishing his initial training for the MQ-9 in 2019, he became part of the 12th Special Operation Squadron where he specialized in Launch and Recovery aspect of the MQ-9 mission. He is currently working as a range officer for Melrose Air Force Range, which falls under the 27th Special Operations Air Operations Squadron. In this position, he is tasked with working with various ground units and aircraft that utilize the range for daily operations and exercises.

Mission Support Teams:



Developing Agile Operational Sustainment for AFSOC

By Daniel Graham, SMSgt, USAF

The United States has enjoyed near-complete air superiority in every major conflict since World War II, but in future wars against a peer competitor, air, cyber, and space domains will be heavily contested. The *Joint Operating Environment 2035* outlines, “Some adversaries might attempt to attack military bases and facilities to disproportionately degrade the ability of the United States to generate, deploy, and maintain the Joint Force,” dictating that the United States Air Force (USAF) make a strategic pivot from large interim servicing bases to dispersed operations over a wide battlespace. Mark Gunzinger, Director of Government Programs and War Gaming at the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace studies, states, “the best place to kill an enemy’s air force is on the ground. Especially if that air force is postured in bases that are few in number.” The USAF has reduced its global footprint since World War II by 65 percent, from 93 to 33 overseas bases. This vulnerability drives the need for the immediate, reactionary displacement of aircraft in the event of near-peer adversarial conflict to complicate the enemy’s targeting process and ensure survivability of the force. Agile Combat Employment (ACE) is a scheme of maneuver designed to provide these dispersed operations. To meet the needs of the ACE concept, Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) is shifting focus from highly specialized Airman trained in one technical proficiency to expeditionary and multi-capable Airmen (MCA) prepared to operate outside the main operating base to provide an array of capabilities, including mission generation, command and control, and base operations support.

Since the release of Chief Staff of the Air Force, Gen Charles Q. Brown’s action orders, *Accelerate Change or Lose*, the 27th Special Operation Wing (SOW) at Cannon AFB has been working diligently to pivot to “the AFSOC we will need” for these displaced operations. In January 2020, then AFSOC Commander, Lt Gen James C. Slife, tasked the 27th SOW to forge a 54-member team of multi-functional Airmen to provide the warfighting functions of sustainment, protection, and maneuver to AFSOF aviation and special tactics teams engaged in ACE around the globe. In March 2021, the 27th SOW answered that call, and fielded the command’s first mission sustainment team (MST), comprised of 26 Air Force Specialty Codes that span over 7 squadrons across the wing, all poised to provide short-term base operations support at austere contingency locations. These cross-functional Airmen undergo an intense six-month training regimen, encompassing 406 job qualifications standards made up of core expeditionary skills, targeted skills training, and formal training courses. Following this training cycle, MSTs enter a rigorous six-month joint and collective training phase, where they employ the skills they’ve acquired with Air Force special operations forces or AFSOF and joint service partners, showcasing the team’s abilities in degraded and austere environments. These exercises highlight the Airmen’s ability to embrace the MCA skills they’ve learned and employ them way outside of their normal garrison mission set.

An integral part of MST employment is the mission command philosophy, or the empowerment of all leadership levels to act decisively and with authority to execute the

commander's intent and enable faster decision making so that forces can control the initiative. The foundation of mission command is that commanders provide their intent, cultivate understanding, and trust subordinate leaders to make decisions without constant communication with higher command. This relationship is especially important for the MST, that stands ready for future conflict in GPS and SATCOM degraded or denied environments while operating at remote sites, disconnected from their command structure. Mission command principles deliver quick decision-making, enabling MST leaders to aggressively disrupt the enemy's observe, orient, decide, and act loop while integrating with other SOF partners towards mission accomplishment. The direct connection between establishing relationships, cultivating trust, and ensuring mission command success is apparent in situations where units have previously collaborated their capabilities in training and exercises. To date, MSTs have exercised with AFSOC, Army Special Operations Command, Naval Special Warfare, Joint Special Operations Command, and other United States Special Operations Command agencies, showcasing their ability to integrate and execute the mission with the various units using the tenets of mission command, as well as the joint planning and military decision-making processes.

Following their joint and collective training phase, MSTs spend their next six-months poised to deploy for purpose to support AFSOF aviation and special tactics units to provide "specialized airpower, anytime, anywhere." AFSOC has evolved the way it presents its forces from a joint special operations air component based model, to special operations task groups (SOTG) and special operations task units (SOTU). SOTGs, normally led by a lieutenant colonel, are comprised of a staff function that focuses on integrating the totality of AFSOF assets within the greater joint task force. Normally major led, SOTUs are subordinate to SOTGs and comprised of individual aviation, special tactics, or sustainment functions. The MST forces present as a SOTU-Sustainment or SOTU-S, to provide aviation and special tactics SOTUs the capability to generate, operate, and relocate in austere environments.

After their 18-month commitment to MST, Airmen return to their functional squadrons armed with the skills they've learned and valuable joint experience. Aside from learning core expeditionary skills and cross functional tasks, Airmen in the MST program learn how to think critically to solve problems and how to operate independently to accomplish the mission. The 27th SOW has found that MST program participation has produced Airmen who are not only multi-functionally competent, but have a greater understanding of what AFSOC provides the greater SOF community at the "tip of the spear." SMSgt John Spencer, former MST Senior Enlisted Leader explains, "Seeing an Airman who has transitioned back to a mission support role is enlightening. The lenses with which they see the world have changed and they have a much better understanding of where they fit in the overall scheme of maneuver." This illustrates that MST is not just helping AFSOC pivot to near peer competition, but is a testament to the value that MCA

can bring back to their functional squadrons to improve their garrison support missions.

Despite the MST's overwhelming success, many policy barriers exist to training Airmen in core tasks outside their Air Force Specialty. In *Action Order B: Bureaucracy*, General Brown explains, "Even with the best Airmen, poor organizational structure and bureaucratic practices can be a barrier to achieving effectiveness, driving innovation, and achieving success." Leaders within AFSOC and the 27th SOW are attacking this bureaucracy head-on by using operational risk management and methodic risk-taking to break down barriers and propel this pathfinding initiative. "The Air Commandos from the 27th SOW MST are pathfinders for the Air Force Special Operations Command and ultimately the Air Force," said 27th SOW commander, Col Terence Taylor. "Since their establishment, they have been successful in proving the importance of multi-functional and capable Airmen. The 27th SOW MST has built a culture of innovative thought necessary to tackle new and complex problem sets in various operating environment and in-garrison. The development of multi-capable airmen may bring its own set of challenges, but through conversations with senior leaders, such as CSAF Brown and CMSAF Bass, we are working to ensure we are removing any bureaucratic hurdles that hinder our Air Commandos from innovating and experimenting."

The inaugural MST created in March 2020 was such a success, it was replicated with similar success by the 1st SOW at Hurlburt Field, FL. With AFSOC fielding seven total operational MSTs to date, the program has drawn attention from senior USAF leaders, having been visited by CSAF Brown, CMSAF JoAnne S. Bass, Secretary of the AF the Honorable Frank Kendall, and multiple geographic and functional combatant commanders. In a recent visit by Lt Gen Brian Robinson, Commander of Air Education and Training Command (AETC), MST leaders at the 27th SOW were able to showcase the MST's capability and share specific lessons learned to aid AETC in their role to shape a force that meets the demand of the future operating environment. Because of these key leader engagements, this groundbreaking program is not only prepared to sustain future AFSOF operations but is playing a major role in the development of MCA programs AF-wide.



About the Author: SMSgt Daniel J. Graham is the Senior Enlisted Leader of the Mission Sustainment Team, 27th Special Operations Mission Support Group, Detachment 1, 27th Special Operations Wing, Cannon AFB, New Mexico. In his 20 year career, he has filled various roles including Watch Supervisor, additional-duty First Sergeant, Chief Controller, and Flight Chief. His assignments include bases in Japan, Arizona, New Jersey, Delaware, New Mexico, and one overseas remote tour in Turkey. He has also deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation United Assistance, Joint Task Force Matthew, and Operation Inherent Resolve. Prior to his current position, SMSgt Graham was the Chief Controller, Radar Approach Control for the 27th Special Operations Support Squadron.

BOOK REVIEW

Reviewed by Scott McIntosh

Fallen Tigers: The Fate of America's Missing Airmen During World War II

By Daniel Jackson

(University Press of Kentucky, 2021, 272 pages.)

About a decade ago, British historian Rana Mitter published *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937-1945*, a book that served to put the details on a complex theater of the war—one that FDR deemed essential to tying down roughly 800,000 Japanese soldiers while U.S. forces island-hopped westward toward Asia. Part of that complexity lay in the relationship between the Nationalist generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek, Brig Gen Claire Chennault of the American Volunteer Group (“The Flying Tigers”), and Roosevelt’s liaison officer to Chiang Maj Gen “Vinegar Joe” Stilwell; and Mao’s forces were a consistent factor in the whole endeavor. Daniel Jackson’s *Fallen Tigers* dives even further into the ends, ways, and means of assailing Imperial Japan by basing U.S. aircraft in China, and it is fitting that Mitter’s endorsement is right at the top on the back cover of Jackson’s book.

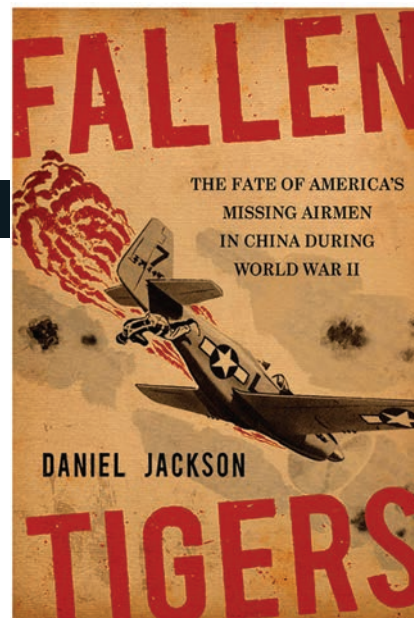
At the top of the SOF Truths, though, is “Humans are more important than hardware,” and while FDR’s Arsenal of Democracy could deliver replacement aircraft, fuel, ordnance, and parts from across the Himalayas, the effort to keep trained and experienced American aircrews flowing into in this fight was critical. Jackson highlights the practice of rotating battle-tested individuals home to the training establishment, but he places equal emphasis on the personnel recovery enterprise. He contends that of 1,832 “airmen... missing on combat missions in the China Theater,” 5% were capture by the Japanese, 31% are known to have died, and 22% remain listed as missing in action. That leaves about 42% successfully returned to base to fly more missions. As the corresponding data from the European Theater was 25%, Jackson aims in this work to elucidate why personnel recovery was more successful in China.

The aforementioned Mitter book is called *Forgotten Ally* for a compelling reason—the China Theater is not one many Americans think about when discussing the Second World War. Indeed, Jackson acknowledges on the first page of his prologue, that for “the Allies, China had always existed near the bottom of a long list of priorities and the end of a perilously long supply line,” and that Fourteenth Air Force

was the smallest numbered air force in the U.S. Army’s air order of battle. It was, in 1941, the sort of operation in which personnel recovery was easy—most of Chennault’s crews were shot down near enough to walk back to friendly airfields, and his maintainers could drive a short distance to pull spare parts off the wrecked airplanes. There is an implied turning point in this narrative, though, with the Doolittle Raid. Chennault, Jackson writes, did not know it was coming, but 15 of the 18 B-25s made it to mainland China, and of the 80 Raiders who launched from the USS *Hornet*, the Chinese managed to rescue 64. The Japanese, however, began a vengeance campaign in which, if it was believed Doolittle’s men passed through a village, it was burnt to the ground. Jackson argues that via reprisals against entire families, more than 200,000 people were killed in this orgy of reprisals. “Remarkably,” he writes, “despite the high price ordinary Chinese civilians paid for the raid on Japan, the rescues of over 700 China-based American airmen took place after the Imperial Army conducted this punitive campaign. In other words, the Chinese knew the cost, but they chose to help anyway.”

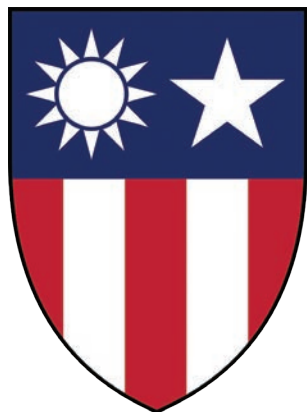
This is, of course, the phenomenon the book moves toward, passing through some first-person narratives about the missions themselves—the strike targets; the enemy in the air and on the ground; the geography; the mechanical limitations of distinct airframes; and the moment a pilot decides to unplug the headset, push back the canopy, and exit a doomed airplane. What distinguishes *Fallen Tigers* from other histories of the China theater is the account of what occurs after the imperiled airman hits the ground—often with injuries, gathers up the parachute, and evaluates the options for a safe return to base. About halfway through the work, summing up a chapter on a particularly bad day over the Japanese stronghold at Jiujiang, Jackson reminds the reader where the book is going, as well as the phenomenon it has described so far:

Their evasion experiences uncovered a dedicated and surprisingly active guerrilla movement deep in enemy territory that fought out of all proportion to its meager



equipment, manning, and training. The presence of American airmen in occupied China gave a needed boost to the long-suffering Chinese and created a rare opportunity for coordination. Their return from behind the lines brought critical intelligence information to the American command.

Indeed, Jackson puts some effort into describing the unity of effort on the ground toward the task of spiriting these valuable aircrews to safety, regardless of the ideology motivating the individual rescuers. He reminds the reader that in this theater, Chinese leaders were very much engaged in planning for the downstream effects of ejecting Imperial



China Burma India Theater of World War II insignia, formed by the combination of both the flag of the Republic of China and the flag of the United States. (Photo courtesy of www.wikipedia.org)

Japan from their country. By 1945, it was obvious that not only would Chiang's Nationalist and Mao's Communist armies soon be at war, but they were already engaging in open ground combat with each other. The impression is solid that while Chennault's crews were supporting Chinese forces against Japan from the air, as soon as they turned back to base those supported ground forces were turning on each other to duke it out over the question of who would own the victory after both Japan and the US went home.

Even Chennault—a historical figure known for his distaste for Communism—acknowledged that as the Japanese forces were pushed out of some areas, Mao's people had moved in and set up warfighting infrastructure; thus “he saw no alternative to working with the [Communist] New Fourth Army. Without them, he had no effective way to gather intelligence or recover his fallen airmen.” Readers may also be surprised to learn that as the war progressed to its conclusion Chennault also sat down with Ho Chi Minh and passed him an autographed photo. In the slim span of time between V-J Day and the Cold War, though, these remarkable events did occur.

The implication here is that if one is to acknowledge the essential work and risk undertaken by Chinese citizens to save American airmen, it is also essential to acknowledge *all* of these individual actors—whether they embraced Chiang, Mao, or any other belief system that drove them to do so. A good historian understands the complexity of these events, and strives to empathize (which does not mean to sympathize) with the actors inside them. As a USAF combat pilot, Jackson likely had little trouble empathizing with the

Americans he describes flying missions in this theater. What is notable here, though, is his affirmation and apt depiction of the other moving parts in this narrative.

To create that narrative, Jackson has delved into both Chinese and Thai sources, to include personal interviews with those who participated in the campaign. His bibliography also includes a list of superb secondary works such as the aforementioned history by Mitter, as well as Dennis Okerstrom's *Dick Cole's War: Doolittle Raider, Hump Pilot, Air Commando* (See book review in *Air Commando Journal* Issue 6 Vol 2 at aircommando.org) and others he researched in order to craft *Fallen Tigers*. While most postgraduate scholars (the book grew out of his 2017 masters thesis) delve into the archives at presidential or university libraries, Jackson accompanied a Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency team to Thailand to visit two of the pertinent crash sites. His prose is solid and concise, and his transitions between the cockpit, the austere airfields, and the various meetings between senior decision-makers are smooth. He has also provided maps and graphics that make it easy to follow the events described within the text.

If there is a single takeaway from this work, it occurs in Jackson's penultimate chapter—“The Final Offensive”:

Where most Americans saw only these caricatures, the veterans saw complexity. In their contact with individual Chinese, whether Nationalist or Communist, they witnessed courage, humanity, and selflessness. The numbers speak for themselves: of those airmen who survived the crash or bailout, over 90 percent returned to American control with the help of friendly Chinese, at least 726 in all. When it came down to it, an airman parachuting from his burning plane over an alien landscape did not care about the political beliefs of his rescuers. Chinese of all persuasions saved US aviators from the Japanese and gave them the best treatment possible on their way back to American control.

At the time this review goes to press, almost 80 years after the surrender was inked on the deck of the USS *Missouri*, one could argue the relationship between China and the United States is strained, to say the least, with accusations and counter-accusations about COVID, spy balloons, and Taiwan arcing back and forth across the Pacific. If it is *strained*, though, it is also *complicated*—likely as strained and complicated as both the theater itself or the Chiang-Chennault-Stilwell relationship Jackson describes in this exemplary book. If American decision-makers and diplomats are interested in improving the current state of affairs from a position of strength, picking up a copy of *Fallen Tigers* might be a good start point.



About the Author: Scott E. McIntosh, Maj, USAF (ret.), is a former Leadership and Command instructor at Air Command and Staff College, as well as former South-Central Asia Orientation Course Director at USAF Special Operations School. He is currently a doctoral candidate within the military history program at Kansas State University.



As my brothers and sisters before me, I am proud to step into history as a member of the Air Force Special Operations Command. I will walk with pride with my head held high, my heart and attitude will show my allegiance to God, country and comrades. When unable to walk another step, I will walk another mile. With freedom my goal, I will step into destiny with pride and the Air Force Special Operations Command.



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