AIR COMMANDO JOURNAL

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

Vol 12: Issue 3

2023 HOF INDUCTEES

The SOF Truths Provide Stability in Turbulent Times

Hurlburt Field Heritage...Revisited

Operation Firm Response: 1997 Mackay Trophy Awarded to 7th SOS Crew

Foreword by Greg Lengyel
Maj Gen, USAF, Retired

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C-146 Family Cannon AFB, (Photo courtesy of Lt Col James "JW" DeLoach, USAF (Retired))

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Inside This Issue

ON THE COVER:

The Air Commando Hall of Fame (HoF) display in the ACA's headquarters in Mary Esther, Florida was handmade by one of the first HoF inductees from the class of 1969, Jimmy Ifland, Col, USAF (Retired). Jimmy passed away 2 December 2023.

Foreword

As we stand at the threshold of a new year, it is with great pleasure and pride that I welcome you to the January 2024 issue of the *Air Commando Journal*. In the ever-evolving tapestry of military service, the Air Commando Hall of Fame serves as a hallowed repository of valor, leadership, and dedication. Within these pages, we are honored to introduce five remarkable individuals whose indelible contributions have left an enduring mark on the legacy of Air Commandos.

As we unveil the stories of these extraordinary Hall of Fame inductees, we also delve into the annals of history to bring you a riveting account of a heroic rescue mission during the war in Southeast Asia. Through the tale of then-Maj Phil Conran's courage and leadership, this narrative captures the essence of the Air Commando spirit and the unwavering commitment to the principles that define our profession. Fittingly, Colonel Conran is also a member of the Air Commando Hall of Fame—Class of 1998.

Another highlight of this issue is a wonderful interview with Lt Col George Hardy, who began his military service during World War II as an 18 year old Tuskegee Airman flying "Red Tail" P-51s escorting USAAF bombers. By 1950 he was a bomber pilot flying B-29s during the very early days of the Korean War and after a number of staff jobs and academic assignments, Colonel Hardy completed his military career as an Air Commando flying AC-119 gunships with the 18th Special Operations Squadron.

This issue further explores the enduring relevance of the Special Operations Forces Truths – timeless wisdom that continues to guide the men and women of the Air Commando community in their pursuit of excellence. In our journey through Hurlburt Field street namesakes, we discover the significance behind the names that adorn the thoroughfares of our home base, paying homage to the trailblazers and heroes who paved the way for future generations.

Looking back at our more recent Non-Standard Aviation history, we uncover the ingenuity and adaptability that have characterized our community. Through innovative approaches and unconventional solutions, Air Commandos have always risen to the occasion, leaving a noteworthy mark on the history of SOF aviation.

Rounding out this issue we revisit the compelling narrative of the 1997 Mackay Trophy mission, a testament to the Air Commandos who rescued 56 people from destruction and civil war in the Republic of the Congo; Special Operations Command-North leading joint airpower exercise in the Arctic; and Chief Lou Orrie's experience at the Warrior Games. Through the lens of these stories, we gain insights into the broader impact of our community on the global stage.

As we embark on this literary journey, may the narratives within these pages inspire and resonate with the indomitable spirit that defines Air Commandos and this Association. Thank you for joining us on this exploration of valor, heritage, and the unyielding commitment that binds us as America's Air Commandos. Here's to a year filled with new achievements, shared camaraderie, and the unwavering pursuit of excellence.

I'm humbled to have served in this great community, and I thank the *ACJ* staff for all they do to recognize Air Commandos, past and present, while nurturing their legacy and our heritage for those who will follow.

Maj Gen Greg Lengyel, USAF (Retired)
Former Commander, Special Operations Command-Europe
ACA Life Member #4267

Air Commando Association

The *Air Commando Journal* publication is free to all current members of the Air Commando Association.

Membership is open to persons who served with or supported USAF Air Commando/Special Operations units. To include Guard and Reserve Special Operators. Other interested parties may join as non-voting associate members with the approval of the Board of Directors. To join our association visit www.AirCommando.org and click the membership link or call our office Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

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Meet the Newest Director of ACA

Col Rene Leon, USAF (Retired)

Air Commandos,

I am honored to have been chosen to serve as a member of the Board of Directors for the ACA and I want to take a quick moment to say "Thank You" for placing your trust in me and to tell you a little bit about myself.

I am a 31-year Air Force veteran, retiring in summer of 2022 after serving as the AFSOC A4, the Director of Logistics, Engineering, and Force Protection for over 5 years. During my career as an aircraft maintenance officer, I have supported over 25 types of fixed, rotary, and tilt-rotor aircraft. I have served across four different major commands, Headquarters Air Force at the Pentagon, and USSOCOM in Tampa. My command tours have all been either war-time commands in USCENTCOM or within AFSOC, and like many recent retirees, I have accumulated several years of deployed experience mostly in the USCENTCOM AOR. I have spent 12 of my last 15 years in the special operations community serving in squadron and group command, Headquarters AFSOC, and Headquarters USSOCOM.

Hurlburt has been the only base our family has ever been back to and I want to serve our Air Commandos in order to give back to the community with whom I've served almost half of my Air Force career. A community that has borne the brunt of over 20 years of conflict and who stand ready to answer our nation's call…today and well into the future.

I think the Air Commando Association is an outstanding organization that helps to preserve an important part of Air Force heritage while directly supporting our Air Commandos and their families in times of sacrifice and need. I'm committed to helping the ACA grow and become the "go to" resource for Air Commandos past, present, and future. Thank you again for your trust and support. Looking forward to serving you all!

Hotwash

OP BAT Issue

Paul,

Thanks so much for the link [to the *Air Commando Journal*], didn't realize the *Journal* was available online. I'll be on the road until sometime in October and didn't think I'd get to see the OpBAT issue until then. Instead, I got to read the issue today online and am very impressed with the entire issue. The Op BAT stories were superb! They were loaded with detail and very accurate. The lead article you wrote from Rich's (Shurtleff) material really provided valuable background and defined the mission for the reader(s). Great job! For me personally, I greatly appreciate you and the other writers telling the story of Op BAT and especially remembering the crew of 44 Alpha. The article brought back many memories of those times and was a healing remembrance. Again, thanks so much for the issue and the Air Commando history and spirit you pack into every issue.

Sincerely,
Warren "Smokey" Hubbard,
Lt Col, USAF (Retired)
OpBAT Mission Commander

Candy Parachute Drops

Hello. I am writing to thank Col Philip J Conran, USAF (retired) and the *Air Commando Journal* staff, as a whole, for something they have done for me that I am sure no one could have imagined when telling a story or putting out a magazine. My dad, Rev. Dr. Richard Bingham, was in the Air Force before I was born. He was not a career military man, although he may have been had it not been for my mom's wishes. He went to VMI and then enlisted. He was honorably discharged when he decided to pursue a career in the church. He was always very proud of his VMI history, his service in the military, and the service of almost all of his eight brothers.

My father passed away this past January as a result of injuries sustained in an accident when he was hit by a drunk driver. Dad was 86, healthy and active. Losing him this way has been so difficult. He lived in a condo nearby that we are keeping, and still gets mail delivered there. My Dad was an engineer and never served in a combat zone. Regardless, he received the *Air Command Journal* regularly. It may be silly, but it brings me some comfort to read things he would have read, even things I know nothing about or am not really interested in. Comfort has been hard to come by since his death so I will take it anywhere I can get it.

This week Vol 12 Issue 2 arrived. I have read it over the course of the last two days. I don't know a lot of the acronyms or military lingo, but I have enjoyed reading it. It especially made my heart smile reading the story that Col Conran told about dropping candy parachutes to children during his mission in the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis. I have learned other stories about history, heroism, and loss as well. I will continue to read the magazine for as long as it comes. The story about the candy parachutes is one I will never forget. So, thank you for making one of my days this week, and likely many others in the future, a little bit brighter. Thank you, especially, Col Conran for sharing your stories. Thank you all, and your families, for your service.

Sincerely,
Heather Bingham Smithson

Ms Smithson

First, please accept our condolences on the loss of your father. He sounds like a wonderful man and Air Commando. We are very proud of the Air Commando Journal, and I have cc'd the team that makes it happen. Yours is a great testament to just how far reaching an

"The *Air Commando Journal*...
Massively Successful!
I save all mine."

Marshall "Brad" Webb, Lt Gen (Retired)
Former AFSOC Commander
(Used with permission by Lt Gen Brad Webb)

impact it has and that it is bringing at least a bit of comfort to you during this difficult time means a lot to us. Thanks for sharing that. Also, would you be willing to allow us to publish your very nice note in an upcoming Journal or possibly one of our electronic newsletters? I know that it would be very well received.

Thanks again,
Dennis Barnett
President ACA

***ACJ* Editor,**

Finished reading the latest *Air Commando Journal*, and I thought Lt Gen Wurster's article about how far AFSOC has come from the days after Desert One was outstanding. It is a great recap of the growing pains, sacrifices, and hardware acquisitions needed to birth a new MAJCOM on the fly (which is what Air Commandos do).

I hope and pray that the young men and women of AFSOC today appreciate those efforts to bring special operations its rightful place in the USAF. The *ACJ* is the best place to read about AFSOC history and learn about our successes and mistakes.

Very Respectfully,
Harold "Butch" Gilbert (S-78)
Major, USAF (Retired)

Mackay Trophy

Dear *Journal* Editor,

I'm afraid that you have an error in the article Mackay Trophy 1964, The crew of SC-47 "Extol Pink." That mission and crew received the 1963 Mackay Trophy. The 1964 Mackay Trophy went to the 464th Troop Carrier Wing for Operation Dragon Rouge, the airdrop on two cites in the then Democratic Republic of the Congo, in November of that year. This involved a squadron of C-130Es of the 464th, then deployed to Evreux AB, France, transporting the 1st Bn of the Belgian Para-commandos from Klinebrogel, Belgium, to

HOTWASH continued

the DRC via Ascension Island and performing two airdrop insertions on the airfields at Stanleyville and Paulis. "Simba" rebels were holding several hundred American and European hostages and threatening to kill them. The story was on the front page of *Time* magazine at the time.

1964 464th TROOP CARRIER WING (TAC) For its participation in the humanitarian airlift of some 1,500 hostages and refugees from rebel held territory in the Republic of Congo during November 1964.

1963 CREW OF C-47 "EXTOL PINK" For the evacuation of wounded troops in Vietnam at night under enemy fire.

The operation was a lot more than a "humanitarian airlift" but the political sensitivities at the time resulted in the rather plain vanilla description.

I was then assigned to the 777 Troop Carrier Squadron as a navigator and played a very small role in the operation.

Bill Whitaker, Col, USAF (Retired)
ACA Life Member

Colonel Whitaker,

Thank you for pointing out our error in the most recent edition of the Air Commando Journal.

You are correct, the Extol Pink crew was awarded the Mackay Trophy for the most meritorious flight in July 1963 and not 1964. I was so happy that we found a picture of the crew that I missed the incorrect year we placed at the top. General LeMay made the presentation in July 1964 for the 1963 mission and we will edit the online version of the Journal to make it right.

Not to miss an opportunity for potential Air Commando Journal stories, perhaps you would consider writing a short article about your experiences supporting Operation Dragon Rouge? We have several editors that can assist. Hope you will consider it.

With your permission, we would like to use your note in our next Hot Wash of the Journal.

Thanks for being a loyal Life member of the ACA...and keeping us straight.

Best Regards,
Paul Harmon, Colonel, USAF (Retired)
Editor, Air Commando Journal

Dear Mr. Barnett,

I have received your "Offer of Gift" dated 19 September 2023, by which you, on behalf of Air Commando Association, Inc. transferred the painting of Master Sergeant

John Chapman, a Medal of Honor recipient, painted by Brian Bateman of Bateman Art, to the United States of America as a gift. The painting is to be displayed at the 58th Special Operations Wing Medal of Honor recipient hall.

By authority of the Secretary of the Air Force, I accept with pleasure your gift of the MSgt Chapman painting, pursuant to 10 U.S.C.2601. Thank you for your kindness and generosity.

Sincerely,
Clark J. Quinn
Major General, USAF

The *Air Commando Journal* wants to hear from you!! Send in your comments or thoughts about our publication for the HOTWASH section

Email: info@aircommando.org

Sean M. Corlew

Technical Sergeant Sean M. Corlew distinguished himself through meritorious achievement as a MC-130E/H Combat Talon Loadmaster and made the ultimate sacrifice in the

TSgt Sean M. Corlew

service of his nation. He embodied the Combat Talon motto of "The Guts to Try" and could be counted on to be the first to volunteer for any mission or operation. During his military service, he contributed to major combat and contingency operations across the globe. Because of his expertise, Sergeant Corlew was the first choice to preflight, configure, and load three MC-130E Combat Talon aircraft, which led to the on-time infiltration of U.S. Army Ranger tactical vehicles and a Forward Area Refueling Point supporting U.S. Army special operations AH-6 Little Bird gunships during the seizure of Rio Hato Airfield in the opening hours of Operation Just Cause in Panama. At the onset of Operation Desert Storm, Sergeant Corlew and his crew conducted multiple psychological operation leaflet drops. Additionally, Sergeant Corlew and crew air dropped three 15,000-pound BLU-82 bombs, which resulted in heavy casualties contributing to the surrender of over 80,000 Iraqi soldiers. In the first 100 days of Operation Enduring Freedom and the Global War on Terror, Sergeant Corlew flew some of the most difficult MC-130H missions. These included participating in the first major offensive of the war with the U.S. Army Ranger airborne raid on Objective Rhino in Afghanistan, and the first BLU-82 airdrop from the MC-130H in combat. This mission aided the U.S. supported Northern Alliance in regaining control of the city of Mazar-E-Sharif from the Taliban in northern Afghanistan. As the loadmaster, during that mission, Sergeant Corlew earned the distinction of being the only Combat Talon crewmember to drop the BLU-82 in separate conflicts. Sergeant Corlew and two others were lost in a mishap while exfiltrating a U.S. Special Forces team in Afghanistan. Technical Sergeant Sean M. Corlew's legacy of exemplary leadership, personal endeavor, and devotion to duty reflect great credit upon himself, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Air Commandos of all generations.

Paul L. Fremstad

Master Sergeant Paul L. Fremstad, USAF (Retired) has served our nation with honor and distinction for 48 years, including active duty and government employee service. Early in his military career Sergeant Fremstad supported the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) in Vietnam, and on a subsequent tour monitored the Son Tay prison camp for intelligence activity prior to Operation Ivory Coast, the attempt to rescue American POWs from the site. As an intelligence expert, he wrote the book supporting the Air Force special operations forces introducing radar predictions for the MH-53H Pave Low, and establishing standardized

MSgt Paul L. Fremstad

target materials to support operational planning. During Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada, Sergeant Fremstad was the lead intelligence planner supporting the operation, where he assisted in tactics development, enabling aircraft to avoid known air defenses. Further, he was a critical team member in the stand-up of four special access programs for the special operations community, and augmented the 21st Special Operations Squadron

for missions during Operation Desert Storm, launching operational missions from Türkiye. Upon retirement from active duty, he spent more than 20 years working as a government employee, providing signature management, operations security, and force protection plans training for our combat aviators. His efforts contributed to the success of some of U.S. special operations forces' most successful, and closely-guarded clandestine operations. Master Sergeant Paul Fremstad's long and distinguished career assigned to, or supporting, both Air Force and joint service special operation units is unmatched. The singularly distinctive accomplishments of Master Sergeant Paul Fremstad reflect great credit upon himself, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Air Commandos of every generation.

Lt Col Daniel G. Schilling

Daniel G. Schilling

Lieutenant Colonel Daniel G. Schilling distinguished himself through meritorious achievement as an Air Force Combat Controller and Special Tactics Officer over a 30 year career. Assigned to the 24th Special Tactics Squadron during Operation Desert Storm he operated the control tower at Ar'Ar Airport in Saudi Arabia supporting joint special operations task force air operations and ensuring the smooth landing and departing helicopters and fixed wing aircraft during intense combat operations. As a Staff Sergeant, Colonel Schilling was a planner for and supported Operation Gothic Serpent in Somalia and was assigned as the communications link for the Ranger battalion commander during the Battle of Mogadishu. Later, he served as an instructor at the Combat Control School at Pope AFB, North Carolina. Leaving the Air Force, he spent time serving with the National Guard's 19th Special Forces Group and earned his Bachelor's Degree and eventually applied to become an Air Force officer. He returned to the blue uniform with the Oregon Air National Guard's 125th Special Tactics Squadron and became its commander as a captain leading his men through a number of natural disaster deployments. Colonel Schilling also served as the Director of the Oregon State Partnership Program for the nations of Bangladesh and Vietnam supporting programs at the ambassadorial and foreign ministerial level. Because of his experience, then-Major Schilling returned to active duty to staff, standup, and become the first commander of a Special Mission Unit deploying to multiple locations around the world. Later, Colonel Schilling became the unofficial voice of the Combat Control community with the book *Alone at Dawn*, which he co-authored. He also created and narrated a video documenting the heroism of Master Sergeant John Chapman, which has been viewed over 20 million times on social media platforms. Finally, Colonel Schilling is a strategic planning partner and voice for the nascent Combat Control Foundation which supports Combat Control Team members and/or their families in times of need. He is a 2022 Air Command and Staff College Air Force Gathering of Eagles (Eagle) inductee and a 2023 recipient of the Freedom Foundation's national award for public service. Lieutenant Colonel Daniel G. Schilling's exemplary leadership, personal endeavor, and devotion to duty reflect great credit upon himself, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Air Commandos of all generations.

CMSgt Joseph S. Stanaland

Joseph S. Stanaland

Chief Master Sergeant Joseph S. Stanaland, United States Air Force (retired), served our nation with honor for over 30 years. Chief Stanaland's first assignment was to the 37th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS) at Da Nang AB in South Vietnam, followed by an assignment as an instructor at the USAF Pararescue School Eglin AFB. Completing his instructor assignment in late 1970, Chief Stanaland deployed back to the war zone and was assigned to the 40th ARRS at Udorn AB, Thailand, where he flew combat missions into North Vietnam and Laos and was awarded the Silver Star for gallantry during a rescue operation. Completing his second tour he returned to the USAF Pararescue School, now at Hill AFB, Utah where he was the NCOIC of flight training. Chief Stanaland returned to Thailand in 1974 for a third combat tour as NCOIC of Standardization and Evaluation. During this tour of duty, Chief Stanaland participated in Operation Frequent Wind, the evacuation of Saigon and also the rescue and recovery of the American flagged cargo vessel, SS Mayaguez, off the coast of Cambodia in May 1975. During what has become known as the Battle at Koh Tang, Chief Stanaland earned his second Silver Star medal for gallantry. Returning to the United States, Chief Stanaland completed several staff jobs

including NCOIC of CombatTactics at Headquarters Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service, followed by moving up to Headquarters, Military Airlift Command's Inspector General Team—Rescue Operations. Reassigned back to the squadron and teams, Chief Stanaland became the NCOIC of the Pararescue Team act Detachment 5, 39th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Wing at Patrick AFB, Florida where he was instrumental in the continued development of launch pad recovery techniques and enhanced medical capabilities unique to the space-launch environment. In the summer of 1990, Chief Stanaland joined the 1720th Special Tactics Group command staff and deployed to Saudi Arabia during Operation Desert Shield, where he served as a special tactics planner on the Special Operations Command-Central staff ensuring Special Tactics assets were appropriately included from planning through execution of a mission during Desert Storm. As Air Force Special Operations Command began creating special tactics squadrons, with both combat control teams and pararescuemen under one roof, Chief Stanaland was named AFSOC's Pararescue Functional Manager. Through his leadership, foresight, and determination, he overcame objections from both the pararescue and combat control communities and was ultimately successful in integrating the pararescue career field into the special tactics community. Believing special tactics was the way ahead for the future, Chief Stanaland helped pave the way to bringing other Air Force specialties, such as combat weather, tactical air control, medical, intelligence, and more into the fold, aligning the force for the future. Chief Stanaland's career was characterized by foresight and firm-action combined with fairness that inspired respect from superiors and subordinates alike. His outstanding professional expertise and individual style of leadership inspired a generation of pararescuemen. The singularly distinctive accomplishments of Chief Master Sergeant Joseph "Ranger" Stanaland reflect great credit on himself, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Air Commandos of every generation.

William W. Turner

Chief Master Sergeant William W. Turner, United States Air Force (retired), distinguished himself by exceptionally dedicated service to the Air Force and Air Force Special Operations Command from July 1986 to August 2016. Chief Turner demonstrated extraordinary leadership throughout his career—as a special operations enlisted aviator, Squadron Superintendent for the 4th Special Operations Squadron, Command Chief, 27th Special Operations Wing, and Command Chief for Air Force Special Operations Command. As a young Airman and non-commissioned officer he established himself as a trusted crew member and leader and upgraded to an AC-130 Lead Gunner, well ahead of his peers. He deployed to support operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina enforcing the Dayton Peace Accords flying armed overwatch combat missions. Following multiple combat deployments, then-Technical Sergeant Turner was upgraded to evaluator gunner. As a junior evaluator, he demonstrated superior tactical proficiency and was a role model for newly assigned personnel. Serving in this role for over three years, Chief Turner consistently modeled the role of an Air Commando leader in garrison and combat, and ensured squadron combat readiness by instructing and qualifying more than 40 new aerial gunners. In 2000, Chief Turner moved up to Headquarters, Air Force Special Operations Command where he was made the Superintendent of Deliberate Plans and Programs and led in the update and revision of multiple operational plans, which included a realignment of the command's combat posture for Korea. In 2001, Chief Turner served as the Operations Superintendent for the 4th Special Operations Squadron and led the first crews into combat following the devastating attacks of 9/11, as well as the initial deployments to Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Later, Chief Turner moved to Headquarter Air Force to lead the Secretary of the Air Force and Chief of Staff's Executive Group. Completing his staff tour, Chief Turner returned to AFSOC as the Command Chief of the 27th Special Operations Wing at Cannon AFB, New Mexico, where he help guide the wing through its rapid growth to more than 5,000 personnel with 84 aircraft. In 2010, Chief Turner was selected to be the Command Chief for Air Force Special Operations Command. He served as the commander's liaison for over 19,000 personnel exhibiting quintessential leadership and devotion to our Airmen who were executing non-stop combat operations, assorted contingency operations, and humanitarian assistance missions. During his tenure Chief Turner met with families of the fallen and injured Air Commandos and was the linchpin for the creation of the Air Force Wounded Warrior program which reintegrates wounded warriors into new career fields and providing opportunities for continued honorable service while capitalizing on the expertise of these Airmen. In more than 36 years of service and into retirement, Chief Master Sergeant William W. Turner's exemplary leadership, personal endeavor, and devotion to duty reflect great credit upon himself, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Air Commandos of all generations.

CMSgt William W. Turner

The SOF Truths

By Lt Col Clifford Lucas, USAF

Editor's note: The footnotes for Lt Col Lucas' article have been removed for space within the *Air Commando Journal*. His footnotes are available upon request.

Lt Gen Jim Slife, the twelfth commander of Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC), noted in 2021 the formation had reached a "strategic inflection point." The implication being as the United States finds itself leaving behind an era focused on international terrorism and entering an era of strategic competition, AFSOC must adapt to the new realities or risk finding itself irrelevant. As the current AFSOC commander, Lt Gen Tony Bauernfeind echoed the sentiment at the 2023 Special Air Warfare Symposium saying in part, "although change can be difficult, irrelevance is worse."

As the United States transitions back into a geopolitical era that is increasingly multipolar, it offers an opportunity to reevaluate the value proposition of Air Force Special Operations Forces (AFSOF, all missions and forces that are organized, trained, and equipped by AFSOC) in how they provide specialized airpower to the joint force. The nearly doubling in size of special operations force (SOF) personnel and capability during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was required to maintain the steady-state deployments of SOF units that were never designed for such sustained operations. Care and balance are essential to ensure AFSOF readiness for crisis response while modernizing to stay relevant for the unknown requirements of future operators. Following the vision of the SOF Truths can help guide the formation through the uncertainty of change, provide the "why" for a compelling narrative, and may offer validation for tough choices that are certain to emerge.

As AFSOC sets a strategic trajectory to maintain relevance, the SOF Truths provide the foundation from which to anchor for charting the course ahead. In April 1987, as a retired U.S. Army colonel and a Senior Specialist for National Defense working at the Congressional Research Service, John Collins authored a study report titled *United States and Soviet Special Operations*. There are five findings in this report that are meant to capture the essence of SOF organizations. By the next year, four of these findings became what is known as SOF Truths, with the fifth "truth" re-added in 2009 by Admiral Eric Olson, then commander of United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM).

Humans are more important than hardware.

"People – not equipment – make the critical difference. The right people, highly trained and working as a team, will accomplish the mission with the equipment available. On the other hand, the best equipment in the world cannot compensate for a lack of the right people."

As AFSOF adapt to new realities, it is crucial that focus remains on the human rather than the hardware. Unfortunately, that is easier said than done within the service that prides itself on being at the forefront of technological advancements. Development of Air Commandos is, and ought to be, the priority for change as AFSOF maneuvers this era of strategic competition. Budget constraints and political realities drive the modernization of equipment and technology for use by Airmen, to which AFSOC now maintains some of the youngest fleets in the Air Force. It is with that realization that AFSOF must continue to adapt current platforms and capabilities to meet the joint force requirements, while persistently advocating for the next generation technology that may alter the character of war. The Doolittle Raid of 1942 provides a supreme example of the idea behind this SOF Truth. The aviators and

PROVIDE STABILITY in Turbulent Times

maintainers adapted the B-25 for the mission requirement through innovation, teamwork, and mission focus instead of waiting for the technological answer. A specific innovation for a specific mission of extreme risk by highly-qualified humans—that is "Specialized Airpower."

Whether in competition or conflict, access and placement are critical for AFSOF's ability to create dilemmas for our adversaries. Much like a prize raffle, one must be present to win. Highly trained and competent Air Commandos need the necessary opportunity to engage with allies and partners to ensure global access and placement. Within these engagements, it is the person-to-person relationships that matter, not the gadgets and equipment with which we train and fight. Indeed, in times of competition below the level of armed conflict, Mr. Collins argues that "brainpower replaces firepower as the foremost implement." Relationships take time to develop and are susceptible to fractures without proper maintenance. It is the continual development and growth of these relationships with allies and partners that Air Commandos can garner access and placement for the joint force to respond rapidly to crisis or conflict.

Quality is better than quantity.

"A small number of people, carefully selected, well trained, and well led, are preferable to larger numbers of troops, some of whom may not be up to the task."

If consensus is reached that SOF Truth #1 should underwrite the evolution of change, then it stands to reason that more investment in the quality of said humans is necessary. Often heard in joint circles is the question of what makes an Airman into an Air Commando? Unlike other SOF communities, an assignment into AFSOF aviation does not require an assessment and selection process. The Special Tactics community being the exception, other operators in AFSOF are assigned through the normal Air Force assignment processes. This puts the burden of risk on AFSOC to ensure Air Commandos are deliberately developed to deliver specialized airpower to the joint force. To accomplish the effort of creating Air Commandos of elite quality begins with defining a common framework for what makes an AFSOF operator.

Experience built through focused training, joint exercises, and operational employment—bracketed by educational opportunities—defines the lifecycle of an Air Commando. Becoming experts in a specific airframe or mission set is not enough to define the quality of an AFSOF operator. High-end training and joint exercises, such as Joint Readiness Exercises, Emerald Warrior, Red Flag, and the U.S. Air Force Weapons School Integration (WSINT) event provide the necessary repetitions to build mature Air Commandos for future joint force requirements. Furthermore, educational opportunities designed to develop critical-thinking skills and build foreign-language competency help create the whole-person concept needed to lead in AFSOF. Maturity and self-motivation are fundamental characteristics needed for AFSOF operators to execute mission-type orders anywhere on the globe. These and other traits are honed through such deliberate development that builds Air Commandos capable of answering the nation's call.

Special Operations Forces cannot be mass produced.

"It takes years to train operational units to the level of proficiency needed to accomplish difficult and specialized SOF missions. Intense training – both in SOF schools and units – is required to integrate competent individuals into fully capable units. This process cannot be hastened without degrading ultimate capability."

This SOF Truth was put to the test in 2005 when Congress authorized a massive plus up to the size of USSOCOM ballooning from approximately 30K to over 50K personnel in less than two years. Now with approximately 70K personnel and the renewed emphasis on competition, the question is whether the command is right sized for adjudicated requirements. For context, in the same timeframe (2005-2023) the total joint force has decreased by approximately 180K, which increased the percentage of SOF from 1.3 to 3.4 percent of the joint force. During this unprecedented evolution, AFSOF saw substantial growth from roughly 11K forces to approximately 17K forces today, not counting the brief couple of years in which AFSOC took ownership of search and rescue assets. The growth was accounted for in additions of new capabilities and increased force structure to maintain the continuous deployments supporting the wars against transnational terrorism.

Unfortunately, the fiscal reality is this growth utilized resources that were not intended for long-term use or have now shifted to higher priorities. Without sustained deployments demanding increased manpower and force

structure, efforts must be taken to ensure stewardship of the limited resources for AFSOF while meeting the requirements of USSOCOM and the joint force. This inflection point insists on an objective look at the requirements to ensure the conditions exist for the most efficient and effective use of AFSOF in strategic competition. An agile force specialized in solving complex problems and resourced with exquisite tools could provide the right flexibility throughout the competition continuum. When considered in context with SOF Truth #2, perhaps this truth was meant as a statement of fact rather than a warning for future force planning. Or perhaps the previous twenty years may prove that mass production is possible when a specific requirement is coupled with the correct application of resources.

Competent Special Operations Forces cannot be created after emergencies occur.

"Creation of competent, fully mission capable units takes time. Employment of fully capable special operations capability on short notice requires highly trained and constantly available SOF units in peacetime."

While prudence for why grounding needed change in the timelessness of the SOF Truths is the theme, this truth helps remind one that the niche capabilities AFSOF provides cannot be neglected through its adaptations. The nation will always need a force that can respond to emergencies that threaten U.S. national interests at home and abroad. The events of 7 Oct 2023 in Israel provide a concrete example of why any changes in AFSOF must stay aligned with these truths. The time to train for a non-combatant evacuation operation or hostage rescue mission is not when the phone rings to alert the force. Therefore, maintaining exceptional skill in AFSOF core activities, and its support to other SOF entities, is truly a no-fail imperative.

It is in this truth that current Air Commandos must embrace the strategic path of AFSOF and invest in the new generation of Airmen. The days of relying on constant deployments to "train" and gain experience are largely over. Building competent operators from the ground up begins with initial skills training but is honed through deliberate development of Air Commandos driven at the tactical level of execution. Lt Gen Bauernfeind released the 2023 strategic guidance for AFSOC with a specific message that it will take "every Air Commando to implement this guidance." It is in this calling that experienced AFSOF operators must take personal and team ownership of the narrative, and coach, mentor, and develop the next generation of Air Commandos.

Most special operations require non-SOF support.

"The operational effectiveness of our deployed forces cannot be, and never has been, achieved without being enabled by our joint service partners. The support Air Force, Army, Marine, and Navy engineers, technicians, intelligence analysts, and the numerous other professions that contribute to SOF, have substantially increased our capabilities and effectiveness throughout the world."

Little more need be said for this SOF Truth during this strategic adaptation period. It continues to ring true as AFSOF acts as a pathfinder for new ways to complicate adversary decision-making. AFSOF is in a unique position to test and validate innovative ideas for projecting airpower, but the solution may not require SOF specialization and could be better accomplished through conventional means. Additionally, logistical and sustainment efforts outside of small-unit dynamic employment continue to require the reach and scale of non-SOF support. AFSOF should continue to advocate for non-SOF capabilities that enable rapid reaction to global crises and contingencies. Career broadening and immersion opportunities are one way to ensure that "Big-Blue" stays connected with AFSOF and understands its value as the SOF component of the Air Force.

Conclusion

Change can be frightening and often creates tension and anxiety when implemented. Having a methodical plan of execution coupled with a solid structure from which to anchor provides the necessary relief during times of transformation. Human capital and advanced technologies are both resource-intensive investments that will require prioritization and strategic choices. Understandably, there is an impetus to move fast and break things as AFSOF adapts to the current inflection point. However, staying true to the SOF Truths should provide the motivational basis for the Air Commandos' pathfinding into unknowable terrain. Seeking relevance should not result in "generalized airpower" and must not overtake the mission of providing "specialized airpower."

The SOF Truths have withstood the test of time during the Cold War, through the United States' unipolar era, the Global War on Terror, and now into the "return" to strategic competition. Whether the focus of AFSOC is on being the air component of USSOCOM or the SOF component of the Air Force should not matter when providing air-minded solutions to problems in support of national defense and joint force objectives. The SOF Truths are the perfect underpinning from which AFSOF can adapt for strategic competition while also being prepared for the nation's call to execute "Unconventional airpower…Any Place, Any Time, Anywhere."

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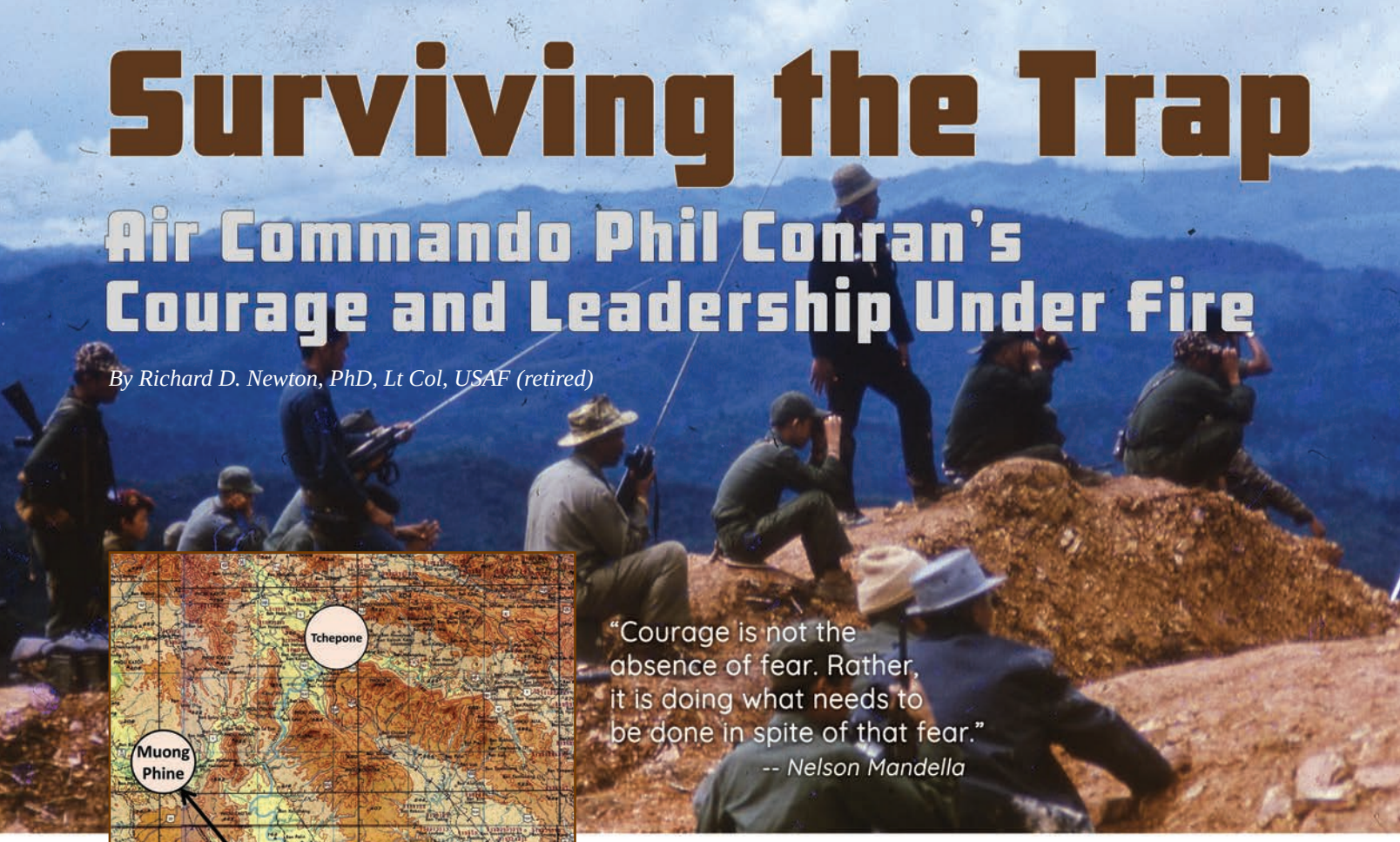
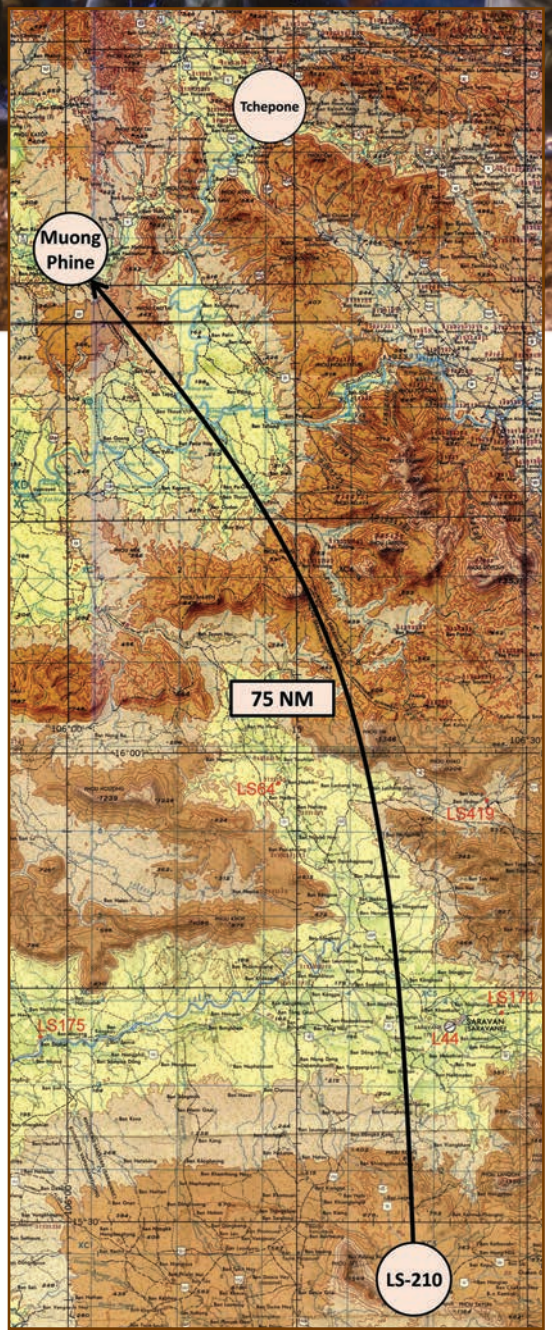
The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the United States Air Force or Department of Defense.

Surviving the Trap

Air Commando Phil Conran's Courage and Leadership Under Fire

By Richard D. Newton, PhD, Lt Col, USAF (retired)





On 6 October 1969, five Sikorsky CH-3E helicopters from the 21st Special Operations Squadrons (SOS) and the 20th SOS were tasked to insert 125 Lao irregulars from a Special Guerrilla Unit (SGU) into Lima Site 300 (LS-300, one of many remote airfields in Laos, usually fortified and cached with fuel and limited supplies for covert air operations) near Muong Phine (Muang Phin), in the panhandle of southern Laos. The SGU's mission was to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail as part of Operation Junction City Junior. Unfortunately, the garrison at Muong Phine had been abandoned by the Royal Laotian Army (RLA) two days earlier – without telling the Americans – and the helicopters flew into an ambush. This is the story of Air Commando Philip Conran's bravery, leadership, and courage during the successful rescue of eight Americans and their Lao allies from imminent capture and likely death at the hands of the North Vietnamese.

Background

In July and August 1969, RLA forces and Lao irregulars from CIA-trained SGUs began converging on Muong Phine, the only communist controlled village in the central Lao panhandle. Muong Phine was the communist Pathet Lao's headquarters in the region and the site of a prisoner-of-war camp. It was also a communist supply, maintenance, and medical depot along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Allied ground operations by Lao regular and guerrilla forces in the region were supported by Royal Laotian Air Force T-28s and USAF A-1 Skyraiders from the 56th Special Operations Wing at Nakhon Phanom (NKP), Thailand. By 6 September, the critical road junction on the west side of Muong Phine, where Routes 9 and 23 crossed, had been occupied. The next evening SGU battalions seized the village and the airfield,

capturing 45 communist soldiers and freeing 165 Lao citizens that the communists were holding hostage. The SGU also captured 2,000 small arms and 2,000 tons of enemy supplies.

Flush with success, the Lao, with U.S. concurrence, decided to press on to Tchepone, a major transshipment point on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, North Vietnam's transportation and logistics network that supplied communist forces

CH-3E at unidentified Lima Site. (Photo provided by Bob Arnau)

fighting in South Vietnam. Because Tchepone was defended by five North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regular battalions from the 968th Infantry Division, CIA planners realized it was unlikely friendly forces could capture the town. Instead the plan was to occupy critical road intersections north and east of Tchepone so as to isolate the NVA garrison and cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

By the end of September the Lao units had failed to achieve their tactical objectives around Tchepone. Worse, NVA counterattacks had pushed the RLA and SGU units into defensive positions around the airfield at LS-300. On 4 October, the Lao defending Muong Phine made a catastrophic error and mistook an approaching group of refugees for NVA troops and fled, leaving the village and the airfield undefended. That word never made it to the CIA planners who were arranging to send reinforcements to relieve the Lao battalions at Muong Phine. When the U.S. helicopter crews landed at LS-210 for their local intelligence updates and to pick up their passengers, they were briefed that the airstrip at Muong Phine was still in friendly control. Also unknown to the Americans was that the enemy had hidden heavy weapons in the hills around Muong Phine as a "flak trap" hoping to shoot down any U.S. aircraft sent to relieve the Muong Phine garrison.

The Mission

On the morning of 6 October the flight of five CH-3Es and a UH-1 landed at LS-210 near Thateng on the Bolovens Plateau, 75 nautical miles south of Muong Phine to pick up 125 Lao irregulars from the SGU's Red Battalion (the irregular Lao battalions were designated by colors, red, black, green, etc.). The Lao soldiers were broken up into single-file "sticks" of 25 soldiers each, one stick per CH-3. Their weapons were a mish-mash of M-16s, AK-47s, and a few ancient bolt-action rifles. They had ammunition belts crisscrossing their chests and bags of rice hanging from their belts. About half the soldiers carried live chickens. Just before boarding the helicopters, they broke their chickens' necks, tucked the now dead birds up under their belts with the head above the belt to secure it in place, and then climbed aboard.

After loading the troops, the formation was led north to LS-300, the airstrip at Muong Phine, by a Beech Baron from Air America. Lt Col Ted Silva, commander of the 21st SOS, flew as the mission commander and copilot in Knife 61, the lead helicopter in the formation. Maj Claret D. "CD" Taylor was Knife 61's aircraft commander. Knife 62 was the number two helicopter in the formation, piloted by Maj Philip Conran with Capt Pete Costa as the copilot.

At about noon, the formation arrived over the dirt landing strip near Muong Phine. The standard procedure was for the CIA case officer on board the Air America airplane have his Lao interpreter get voice confirmation and a colored smoke signal from the SGU contact on the ground notifying him that the area was safe for the helicopter formation to land. On this particular day, however, after several unsuccessful attempts to establish communications with the ground and making multiple low passes over the airstrip, the case officer assumed there was a problem with the radios and made the decision to authorize the landing without verbal confirmation that the airstrip was safe. He had been into Muong Phine a few days earlier, and with no reports telling anyone the Lao had abandoned the site, he assumed it was still safe.

Major Taylor in Knife 61 lined up and began his approach into the airstrip, with Major Conran and the other CH-3s close behind in assault landing formation. As the helicopter was on short final to land, Major Taylor's helicopter was riddled with small arms fire. Enemy rounds took out the helicopter's auxiliary hydraulics servo and the number one engine. H-3 helicopters are unflyable without the auxiliary hydraulics, so Taylor turned 180 degrees and crash landed Knife 61 on the western edge of the runway.

Observing the lead helicopter's crash, Major Conran in Knife 62 went around, assumed command of the formation, and led the other three aircraft to a holding point west of Muong Phine and away from danger. At that point, he asked the UH-1 gunship crew to try and rescue the crew of Knife 61. The danger from NVA anti-aircraft weapons was too great, however, and after trying to get into the airstrip, the Huey was forced to abandon its efforts.

Major Taylor's semi-controlled crash onto the airstrip made it possible for the crew and passengers of Knife 61 to exit the aircraft and take up hasty defensive positions in ditches and bomb craters off the side of the runway. Only one Lao soldier had been killed by enemy fire into the helicopter. At that point Major Conran directed two A-1E Skyraiders from the 602nd SOS, call sign Hobo, that had been accompanying the helicopter formation, to suppress the NVA threats to Knife 61's crew and the Lao guerrillas.

Refueling CH-3E at LS-210. (Photo courtesy of USAF)

Now, Major Conran had some urgent decisions to make. Because the special operations CH-3s were not air refuelable, Major Conran had to balance his remaining fuel and time available to loiter in the local area against the danger facing the survivors on the ground. Returning to LS-210 to refuel would take about an hour's flying time each way, plus the time on the ground needed to pump fuel from 55-gallon drums into the helicopter. Realizing that a single platoon of SGU fighters on the ground with the Knife 61 crew would not be enough to fight off the large numbers of NVA regulars, Conran made the decision to insert the platoon of guerrillas from his aircraft into LS-300 to reinforce the defenders on the ground and also to extract the four Americans from the site. An added concern was that unlike Knife 61, Knife 62 was unarmed. Only the lead helicopter had been equipped with M-60, 7.62-millimeter machineguns, for protection. After discussing his options with the Hobo pilots who had been providing suppressing fires, Conran chose what they collectively assessed to be the best possible and least dangerous, approach path, from the south flying a northerly heading.

Knife 62 lined up for its approach and started down. As Major Conran's aircraft approached the landing zone (LZ), enemy small arms fire took out his CH-3E's primary hydraulic servos. This is an emergency situation but does not disable the helicopter nor cause the flight controls to go into an extreme hard-over condition. Major Conran pressed his disabled aircraft's approach into the LZ, knowing that the friendly forces on the ground would not likely survive without the reinforcements from his helicopter. Heavy North Vietnamese fires continued without letup, killing one of the SGU guerrillas in the back of the aircraft. Despite the withering NVA defenses and a partially disabled helicopter, Conran landed and unloaded the platoon of SGU irregulars. As the crew from Knife 61 was attempting to board Major Conran's CH-3E, continued enemy fire damaged the helicopter's main rotor blades and the transmission. With escape no longer an option, the two American helicopter crews abandoned the second CH-3 to join their Lao allies on the ground.

Once the helicopter crews and Lao soldiers made it to the relative safety of the ditches and bomb craters at the edge of the airstrip, Colonel Silva and Major Taylor coordinated air strikes with the A-1Es while Major Conran organized the ground defenses. In the rush to evacuate Knife 61, however, the crew had left the M-60s and ammunition on board. Colonel Silva did escape with his camera, though, which is why a few pictures survive today.

Realizing that it would be impossible to defend themselves without the weapons and supplies on the two wrecked helicopters, and without regard for their own safety, Major Conran and an SGU fighter, nicknamed Charlie, ran back to the two helicopters. The two men exposed themselves to heavy enemy fire while crossing the 50 yards of open ground to retrieve the machine guns, remaining ammunition, and other needed supplies such as the water jugs, food, and parachutes to use as gun platforms and safety barriers against enemy fire. While Conran was inside the helicopters, NVA bullets sprayed the cabins and ricocheted back and forth until falling to the floor when their energy was spent. By sheer luck, Conran was not hit.

It took multiple trips for Conran and Charlie to retrieve everything they needed from the helicopters. The effort required multiple, increasingly dangerous, crossings of the 50 yards of "death ground" between their defensive positions and the helicopters. They continued, though, because they knew that without those weapons and supplies their chances of surviving were dismal. Before one of those trips, Colonel Silva took pictures of Conran and Charlie. In retrospect, Phil Conran remembers that moment as being comically surreal.


Conran and Charlie at Muong Phine. (Photo courtesy of Ted Silva)

While Conran and Charlie were retrieving the weapons and supplies, Colonel Silva was hit in the back by an enemy round. The bullet went in on the left side, missed his spine, and exited the right side of his body. Once the last of the weapons and supplies had been moved from the crashed helicopters, Major Conran took charge of the defenses. Moving between the different defensive positions to direct friendly fires, he continually exposed himself to the enemy gunners. When, from inside the defensive perimeter, the six-foot-tall Conran stood up he could see the attackers' positions. After a couple of hours of attacking, the North Vietnamese brought rockets and mortars up to use against the Americans and the Lao. By using his survival radio to communicate with the Hobos, Conran used the compass from his survival vest to direct aerial fires onto the NVA and disrupt the mortar attacks. Unfortunately, the enemy also could see Conran whenever he stood up and in the late afternoon Conran was hit in the leg by an NVA round. He

did not mention the wound to anyone until later, when he lost all feeling in his leg and realized that if another rescue was attempted it was unlikely he would be able to run to the helicopter without help.

Once the call went out that the two Knife helicopters had been shot down and that the crews were fighting for their lives, 7/13th Air Force in Saigon directed overwhelming air support into the area. The Air Force and Navy fast-movers that showed up attacked without respite, but because of their high speed they were unable to precisely deliver their munitions. The FAC had them drop their bombs away from the downed crews' position. The result was lots of noise, but ineffective fire support. It was the slow moving A-1s that proved to be the crews' lifesavers.

Over and over again the A-1s flew into the "hornet's nest," precisely dropping their bombs and strafing the NVA positions. Despite horrific fires, the North Vietnamese kept advancing to close the circle tighter and tighter around the American and Lao defenders. It seemed that no matter how much ordnance the A-1s delivered, the NVA ignored their losses and kept pushing more soldiers into the fight, many of whom were destined to become casualties.

Jolly 19 and a second HH-3E rescue helicopter were scrambled from alert by 7/13th Air Force. They arrived on scene about an hour after the two Knife helicopters had been shot down.

The two rescue birds and their escorting HC-130 tanker orbited nearby, listening to the battle rage on the ground, while the on-scene commander, Lt Col John Vargo, Hobo 22, worked out the recovery plan.

After orbiting for almost three hours, and with more NVA troops arriving in the area, permission was finally given for Charlie Langham in the low bird, Jolly 19, to attempt a rescue.

After Jolly 19 was shot off the LZ, the on-scene commander decided to wait for the larger and more capable HH-53s before authorizing another rescue attempt.

At about 4 pm, a rescue HH-3E, call sign Jolly 19, from the 40th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron at NKP, flown by Capt Charles D. Langham, valiantly tried to rescue the Knife 61 and 62 crews. By that point, though, NVA anti-aircraft defenses were fully established. When Jolly 19 landed to pull out the eight Americans the helicopter was struck numerous times in the engines and transmission. Captain Langham had to abort the rescue attempt before the survivors could board the aircraft. Jolly 19 then limped home to NKP.

After Jolly 19's unsuccessful rescue attempt, things were starting to look desperate on the ground. Sunset was little more than an hour away, ammunition was running low, and one of the two M-60 machine guns was out of commission. C-123 Providers, call sign Candlestick, had arrived on station and were overhead and ready to drop LUU-2 illumination flares for any close air support aircraft helping to defend the survivors on the ground. In addition, 7/13th Air Force had scrambled four "Sawdust" A-1Es from NKP, just in case.

The Sawdust A-1s were equipped and trained to drop CBU-19, cluster bomb munitions containing 528 canisters each of CS-gas, a short duration form of tear gas that incapacitated any humans not wearing gas masks. The CBU-19 was originally designed for delivery from helicopters, so the munitions had to be delivered from below 600 feet AGL (above ground level) to ensure the aerosol powder reached the ground. Use of the weapon by the Air Force was restricted to slower aircraft, like the A-1, because the cluster munitions could not survive the air pressure when delivered by faster aircraft.

There were also political restrictions on the use CBU-19. Concerned about charges of chemical warfare, authorization to use CBU-19 was held at 7/13th Air Force. Even though the Sawdust A-1s were on station, there was no guarantee they would be allowed to use their controversial weapons to help rescue the Knife crews.

Just before nightfall, with the situation looking grim, two HH-53, Super Jolly Green Giants, Jolly 71 and 72, attempted another rescue. Col Daryle E. Tripp, the 56th SOW Director of Operations, made the decision to use the A-1s' CBU-19 munitions and accept the consequences. That decision did not seem to hurt him as he retired in 1983 as a major general. With permission granted, the Sawdust A-1s dropped their CBU on all four sides of the survivors as other A-1s strafed the known enemy positions. The plan was for the first HH-53 to land and pick up the Americans and any wounded Lao. The remaining Lao were to then make their way overland to join other SGU battalions.

The USAF did not have chemical personal protection equipment for helicopter aircrews in 1969. Instead, the crews carried the same gas masks used by ground soldiers. If the helicopter crew knew they were flying into a chemical environment, they would take off their flying helmets and

don the gas masks. What this meant, though, is that they had no protection for their heads and they were disconnected from the aircraft communications systems. The crew could not talk to each other or to entities outside their aircraft.

The alternative, though, was much worse. One American pilot who was saved when the rescue force used CS-gas told what it felt like when he was hit with the debilitating aerosol powder, "… I ran into a tree and was wrapped around the tree urinating, defecating, and retching all at the same instant ... It also made me want to sneeze.... It goes into effect instantaneously. Physically and mentally you can't control yourself." In 1970, a war correspondent erroneously reported that the U.S. was using sarin nerve gas against the NVA. The charges were fully investigated and it was found that CS-gas had been used. The nerve agent story was retracted and the reporter and producer were fired. Years later, Phil Conran would tell of lingering effects from having been subjected to the gas … but it helped save his and Ted Silva's crews' lives.

When Jolly 71 landed the survivors ran to the ramp at the aft of the helicopter. The Americans were among the last to arrive, slowed down by Colonel Silva and Major Conran's wounds. By the time the Americans got to the aft ramp the helicopter cabin was full of Lao irregulars. Thinking quickly, Conran yelled, "Let's go to the side door." When the two crews got to the right side door, though, they realized it was not the same as what they were familiar with on their CH-3s. The HH-53 has a Dutch door that splits in half. The helicopter's minigun is mounted above the bottom half of the door and the opening is about six feet above ground level.

It was impossible for Colonel Silva to climb up to the opening because of his wounds, so Major Conran got down on all fours to give Colonel Silva a step. The other Americans pushed and the HH-53 door gunner pulled the wounded pilot into the helicopter. Three more Americans climbed up and into the aircraft and then they pulled Major Conran inside. At that point, Jolly 71, with 46 Lao guerrillas and 5 Americans on board, could not take on any more passengers and the aircraft commander, Capt Holly Bell, made the decision to take off. With 51 survivors and 5 crewmembers on board, Jolly 71 established a record for the number of people safely rescued by one helicopter.

As the overloaded Jolly 71 lifted off the airstrip, Captain Costa and two Knife flight engineers, SSgt Clarence Cossiboom from Knife 61 and MSgt Homer Ramsey from Knife 62, were left behind. One of the Americans used his survival radio to broadcast that there were still three survivors on the ground. Capt Gary Nelson, the pilot of Jolly 72, landed immediately and retrieved the three stranded Americans. It took a little more than an hour for the two HH-53s to deliver the survivors to NKP. Maj Conran's leg wound was treated at the base hospital and Colonel Silva and the two wounded Laos were transferred to the regional hospital at Udorn AB in Bangkok.

Aftermath

That was Phil Conran's last combat flight. He returned to the U.S. and his family shortly after the mission and was assigned to the 6594th Test Group at Hickam AFB, Hawaii. Colonel Silva recommended Major Conran for the Congressional Medal of Honor because of the bravery, leadership, and selfless acts of courage he exhibited that day. In 2017 Col Taylor, the aircraft commander on Knife 61, wrote to the Secretary of the Air Force stating he "lived to see another day because Conran risked his life to save me and my crew."

Domestic U.S. politics in 1969, however, prevented the award of the Medal of Honor to Major Conran. The war in Laos was still a "secret" war and President Nixon was not willing to admit to the American public what the U.S. was doing in what was supposedly a neutral country. Both before and after the incident at Muong Phine, the President stated that there were no American troops in Laos. A public award ceremony would have forced the President's hand. Instead, Major Conran received the Air Force Cross, the nation's second highest medal for courage under fire, and one that did not risk the publicity of a medal ceremony in the White House.

In 1995, U.S. operations in Laos were finally declassified and a number of awards for heroism during those operations were upgraded to reflect the original recommendations. One of those upgrades from Air Force Cross to Medal of Honor was for CMSgt Richard Etchberger, awarded posthumously in September 2010 by President Obama. (*Air Commando Journal*, vol. 1, no. 3, Spring 2012) Sadly, Major Conran's award has yet to be upgraded to truly recognize his selfless act of courage.

The upgrade of Major Conran's award has been sponsored by Conran's representatives in Congress and is strongly supported by those who were at Muong Phine that day and witnessed the Air Commando's courage. The upgrade effort continues.

About the Author: Lt Col (Retired) Rick Newton volunteers as an editor for and occasional contributor to the Air Commando Journal and to Air Commando Press, while also researching. writing about, and teaching air power and the multiple dimensions of irregular warfare.

Epilogue

When Capt Charlie Langham and the crew of Jolly 19 first approached Muong Phine, he could have no idea that in a few more weeks he would be back near this same area to attempt another combat rescue.

On 24 October, this time flying Jolly 28, tail number 66-13281, he was the low bird sent to rescue the crew of Misty 11, a 2-seat F-100 Fast-FAC that had been directing air strikes against interdiction targets on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. At about 8 am, the two pilots, 1Lt Alvin D. Muller and Capt Jack K. Clapper, ejected at low altitude and then landed in a small valley under the triple canopy jungle. Their MAYDAY call was picked up by Nail 07, an OV-10 Bronco FAC, who called for the rescue.

Jolly 28 and the high bird, Jolly 04, were scrambled off alert and were overhead the Misty pilots by 10 am. When the accompanying A-1 Sandy fighters trolled the valley to try and get the NVA to reveal their positions, the enemy refused the bait. Thinking the area was safe, the Sandy pilots, one of whom, Lt Col Dick Michaud (Sandy 04), had been with Charlie Langham on 6 October, cleared Jolly 28 for

Wreckage of Knife 61 (64-14222), on display at Muong Phine, 2004. (Photo courtesy of Skip Chervak)

the rescue attempt. During discussions between the Sandy pilots, the two survivors, and Charlie, the decision was made to pick up Lieutenant Muller first because he had broken his leg during the ejection. At about 11 am, Jolly 28 began its approach to pick up Muller. Jolly 04, flown by Coast Guard Lieutenant Butchka (the USCG did exchange tours with the USAF back then) in the high bird was orbiting at 3,000 feet, out of harm's way and ready in case something went wrong with the low bird. What the rescue crews and Sandy pilots did not know was that NVA troops were hidden in the hills on both sides of the two survivors, armed with heavy weapons and machine guns, some as close as 50 feet from the two Misty pilots. Those North Vietnamese troops had had the discipline to not reveal themselves when the Sandys trolled the valley.

Jolly 28 entered a hover above the triple canopy jungle and lowered pararescueman (PJ) Don Smith down to Lieutenant Muller using the jungle penetrator. In less than a minute, Smith had Muller onto the penetrator and gave the flight engineer the signal to begin hoisting the two up to the helicopter. When the penetrator was about 10 feet off the ground, the North Vietnamese opened fire. From overhead, Lieutenant Butchka could see gunfire flashes erupt from three sides of the valley. The enemy had used the Misty pilots to set a flak trap. The Sandys rushed in to suppress the anti-aircraft fire, but the enemy's initial fires shot the hoist assembly off its mount and the PJ and Misty pilot fell to the ground. Realizing the hoist was useless at that point, the flight engineer cut the hoist cable and told Captain Langham to get Jolly 28 the heck out of there. The helicopter had also been hit in the main rotor gearbox and engines, plus it was trailing smoke and streaming fluids.

At that point, Lieutenant Butchka in Jolly 04, punched off his external fuel tanks and directed Jolly 28 to a clear spot where Langham could put the crippled HH-3 down. Butchka went into a full autorotative descent and as the crew exited their crashed helicopter, Jolly 04 appeared 25 feet overhead with the hoist already on its way down. As Langham and his crew were being hoisted aboard Jolly 04, a chunk of still spinning rotor blade from the wreck of Jolly 28 flew off and hit Jolly 04. The flying debris created an 8-inch hole in the fuselage, but luckily did not hit the fuel tanks or any critical system. Langham and crew were on board Jolly 04 within minutes. Another forward air controller, Covey 297, escorted Jolly 04 to Lima Site 61 where they shut down to check for damages. Once additional rescue helicopters arrived in the area, the crews of Jolly 28 and Jolly 04 were released to return to Da Nang AB, South Vietnam.

As Jolly 04 exited the valley, taking heavy fire from the North Vietnamese, there were still three Americans on the ground, the PJ, Don Smith, and the two Misty pilots, who needed to be rescued. The PJ was reporting enemy contacts and began directing air strikes from the Sandy A-1s. Meanwhile, an HH-53, Super Jolly Green Giant, made three unsuccessful tries to rescue the three Americans still on the ground. It sustained severe battle damage from the flak trap, lost one of its hydraulic systems and had its tail rotor damaged. It then limped to Lima Site 44 where it shut down.

Later that afternoon, more Jollies tried again to rescue the Americans. Sandy A-1s made multiple strafing runs to suppress the enemy gunners and then Sawdust A-1s dropped CBU-19 cluster bombs with CS-gas and also set up a smoke screen using white phosphorous air burst weapons to block the enemy gunners' vision. Jolly 15, an HH-3E, quickly picked up Smith and Muller, suffering only minor damage while in the hover. When Jolly 15 moved to pick up Captain Clapper, the North Vietnamese gunners had adjusted and were ready. The helicopter was met by heavy anti-aircraft fire. Jolly 15 broke off the attempt and the A-1s came back in to suppress the enemy. On his third try, Jolly 15's hoist was disabled by enemy fire and he also had to break off the rescue attempt. Jolly 15 departed the valley, refueled from an HC-130, King 03, and landed at Lima Site 61 for some expedient battle damage repairs. He then returned to Da Nang AB.

Capt Clapper was finally picked up in the early evening by an HH-3, Jolly 19, that had been the same HH-3 Captain Langham was flying three weeks earlier while trying to rescue the crews of Knife 61 and 62.

Of note, years later, Charlie Langham got a letter from the Museum of the U.S. Air Force in Dayton, Ohio, asking if he knew the whereabouts of Jolly 28. According to USAF records, Charlie was the last pilot to fly 66-13281. The museum was hoping to add that specific aircraft to its collection because it had been the lead helicopter during the first non-stop transatlantic crossing by helicopters on 1 June 1967. Charlie, unfortunately, had to report that he knew exactly where the helicopter was—wrecked in the jungles of southern Laos.

Tuskegee Airman to Air Commando...A Life of Service

An Interview with Lt Col George Hardy USAF (Retired)

By Ron Dains, PhD, on 17 July 2023

I was privileged to visit with Lt Col George Hardy, USAF (Retired) to discuss his U.S. Army Air Force and U.S. Air Force career that began with the Tuskegee Airman in World War II and ended in retirement from active duty after serving as a detachment commander and AC-119 gunship pilot during the Vietnam War. Colonel Hardy flew the P-51, B-29, and AC-119 aircraft in combat and served as an aircraft maintenance officer and electrical engineer. Colonel Hardy grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and presently resides in Sarasota, Florida. He frequently travels across the country speaking about the Tuskegee Airmen, segregation, and the many opportunities for young men and women in the science, technology, engineering, and math fields. Although our meeting was originally planned as a formal interview with structured questions, it became a conversation about the life of one of our nation's true heroes. Our visit was enjoyable, enlightening, and encouraging. I hope you will approach this as if you are sitting at the kitchen table with me, while Colonel Hardy reminisced about the good and not so good of his 98 years, 28 of which were dedicated to serving his United States of America. During his service, Colonel Hardy flew 136 combat missions earning the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with 11 oak leaf clusters, among other awards. He was also awarded the Congressional Gold Medal.

— Ron Dains

ACJ: *Colonel Hardy, on behalf of the Air Commando Journal, I appreciate your hospitality and desire to continue sharing your remarkable story of service to our nation. U.S. Air Force members are quite familiar with the Tuskegee Airmen and "Red Tails" legacy, but many of our readers may not be familiar with your personal journey. You joined the U.S. Army Air Force in 1943. Can you share with us what the atmosphere was like in Philadelphia and the impetus behind your decision to join the military?*

Lt Col Hardy: Of course, the war had already begun, but the United States was not quite in it yet; it was my brother who inspired me to join. There were seven of us kids in our family and he was the oldest. He was born in February of 1923, and I was born in June of 1925 as the second of seven children. When I first went outside to play, my mother asked him to keep an eye on me. When I walked out the door with him, it was like the whole world opening up. He and his buddies would walk all over Philadelphia, and I usually was with them. I learned so much about the city and I just loved being with him. I loved him and he was always taking care of me. We grew up together and then the war came along. I never thought about going into the service. I started high school in 1939, around the time the war started in Europe. I never thought about it because I was such a skinny kid and I loved going to school. I wanted to become an engineer and that was always on my mind. But then in 1941

ACJ Editor's note: Dr. Dains' extensive interview with Lt Col Hardy had to be edited in length due to page limitations in this issue. The full interview is available upon request.

my brother and two of his friends joined the Navy and it upset my father because we were Afro-American and the Navy was very segregated. Both services were segregated actually, but in the Navy, as an Afro-American, all you could be was a mess attendant dealing with food and things like that. But my brother and his friends joined anyway…to see the world and have a girl in every port, that type of thing, you know. It caught everybody by surprise, and I wanted to be with him. So, when I graduated from high school in May of 1942 and I turned 17 a month later. I realized the Navy would take me if my parents would sign for me. I asked my father to do that so I could be with my brother on the USS *Dallas*, a cruiser out on the North Atlantic escorting ships going to England with Lend-Lease equipment. He said, "No". He told me what I would be doing in the Navy, and once he explained it to me, I decided that he was right. So, I decided to wait until I was 18 and make my own decision. But then in early 1943, the Navy changed the rules to say if you were 17 and a high school graduate, you can take a flying exam. And what did I do? I rushed over to the Navy recruiter [laughing]. I passed the written test, but the doctors said there was something wrong with my teeth; my wisdom teeth weren't in completely. So, I went to a dentist and he told me that there was nothing wrong with my teeth… maybe it's just that you're Afro-American. So, I decided to try the Army because it already had Tuskegee. I took the flying test and passed it. The Army swore me in as a Private in the Reserves on Saint Patrick's Day 1943 and told me to go home and when I turned 18, I'd get orders, which is what happened in June. I was told to report in 30 days with enough clothes for three days and started basic training in July down at Keesler Army Airfield in Biloxi, Mississippi. I finished basic training at the end of August and went up to the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to take college courses dealing with flying and whatnot. It was supposed to be five months long, but after [about] three months they terminated the courses and I went over to Tuskegee Army Airfield and entered Class 44-H Aviation Cadet Training. I went right through with no trouble and graduated in September 1944 and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Army.

ACJ: *You trained in single-engine aircraft. How did they determine who would train on single- or multi-engine airframes?*

Lt Col Hardy: Well, in general, the Army usually put the bigger guys into bombers; some guys preferred bombers and could do that if they wanted. For me, I wanted to be a single engine pilot, so I did that and graduated in September 1944. Ou class started training in the P-40 Warhawk and then we went to Walterboro Army Airfield in South Carolina, where we received combat training in a P-47 Thunderbolt. While I was at Walterboro, around Christmas time, I drove an automobile for the very first time. I had my pilot's license but had never driven a car [laughing]. My family didn't have a car…a lot of families didn't have cars in Philly back in those days because we had good public transportation. When I finished training, was shipped overseas, and joined the 99th Fighter Squadron. I flew 21 combat missions in the P-51 Mustang before the war ended… I was still just 19 years old!

ACJ: *What drew you to the flying piece of military service? How did how did you approach flying training at Tuskegee? Was it just the war or what you were being told?*

Lt Col Hardy: It was the fact that it was offered, I'd never thought about flying until I saw this offer…"Pass the flying examination, be 17, be a high school graduate, and you get direct entry into flight training" and that's what happened. I passed the test, went to basic training, spent three months at Tuskegee Institute, and then over to Tuskegee Air Field, which was just a few miles away. It was a fast-track process.

ACJ: *You've spoken and written about the social conditions of that time that were not favorable to African-Americans. Can you describe the difference, if any, between your experiences growing up in Pennsylvania and what you experienced in Alabama, or was Tuskegee isolated in that regard?*

Lt Col Hardy: The thing is, the racial conditions were entirely different. In Philadelphia, we had racial problems wherever you went, but when we got to Alabama it was really rough…totally different. The town of Tuskegee was run by whites and so there was no place to go there. However, there was one place, outside of the college, where Afro-Americans would gather, to get food and things like that, and we would go there quite often. Tuskegee Army Airfield was built close to Tuskegee Institute because, during World War II, we didn't have enough pilots in the Army to train everybody. So, the

Army contracted out the primary flying phase to colleges and universities, like Tuskegee. At the time, primary flying had little to do with military flying. The Army just wanted people who could fly an airplane, then the Army instructors took over. After Tuskegee received the contract, they hired black instructors to teach us. We lived at Tuskegee Institute in barracks under control of the military, and half of the day we would spend at Moton Field learning to fly.

ACJ: *You finished training at Tuskegee and left for Walterboro Army Airfield, South Carolina. Can you describe your feelings and those of your fellow pilots about preparing for combat flying overseas and did you know where you were being stationed?*

Lt Col Hardy: Well, we were going to Italy and that's what I was looking for and I wanted to go. I wanted to learn. My idea was that I've got to listen to the instructors and everything they say because I didn't know anything [chuckling] about war and that sort of thing. So, I paid attention to them and followed what they said, and it seemed to work out.

ACJ: *You were going to war and given the racial sentiments in America at the time, did you find any irony in the fact we were fighting fascism and an enemy that was trying to rid the world of a specific ethnicity or race of people? Or, or did that fact help cement what you wanted to achieve?*

Lt Col Hardy: I didn't pay much attention to it. America was our country too and that was all I knew and cared about. We got to fight for our country, and we just had to live with the other things. Nothing we could do about it, that was the main thing. So, we put it aside so we could do what we had to do…focus on the mission. That was it.

ACJ: *You described, in a previous interview, that one of the commanders in Korea didn't care for you, but then said later that you were one of his best pilots. Did anything similar happen while you were in Europe?*

Lt Col Hardy: No, not over in Europe. It was great to be in Europe because we were part of the 99th Fighter Squadron. We got to travel all over Europe, do things, and life was good over there. We could go anyplace we wanted to, within reason. It was a different world over there. Once we got back to the United States, we were back to segregation again.

ACJ: *Can you describe what was perhaps the most memorable mission that you flew with the 99th during World War II?*

Lt Col Hardy: Well, the mission that really got me was a strafing mission. Our mission was primarily to escort the bombers—B-17s and B-24s. But, by the time I got to Italy the Germans didn't have that many airplanes left and those were defending the Fatherland. I never saw an ME- 109 or any of their fighters, except we did see the new German ME-262 jet fighter a couple of times, but we never got close enough to have any contact with them. The only time I fired my guns was on strafing missions. We would go up to support the bombers and if the mission wasn't too long, and we had extra fuel, we would go back over Germany and look for targets of opportunity and strafe supply trucks or trains, things like that that might be moving equipment around. While we were out there hunting, if you saw even just one German airplane on an aerodrome you hit it just to make sure they couldn't train pilots, The Germans were running out of pilots because we had mastery of the air.

ACJ: *What was it like and what were your thoughts once you realized that the war was ending, and you would be returning home to the United States?*

Lt Col Hardy: When the war was over we were ready to come back home. We didn't think too much about the segregation issues. We just wanted to get back home and see our families and friends…things like that.

ACJ: *Was it at that time that you decided to go to New York to go to college?*

Lt Col Hardy: Well, the fighting was finished in Europe and as we were traveling back to the States Japan finally surrendered and the war was completely over by August 1945.
I went back to Tuskegee initially, because I loved to fly and signed on to extend my service until June 1947. I wanted to stay in the service and fly a lot and did that at Tuskegee. I figured if I got out in June of 1947 I could start college courses in September…that was my plan. But then Tuskegee was closed in 1946 and I was transferred to Lockbourne Army Air Base (near Columbus, Ohio). In the fall of 1946, the Army wanted me to sign an 'indefinite contract' to stay in the service, but I declined and stuck with my plan. I was discharged in November of 1946 and went back to Philadelphia. Shortly after, I decided to apply to NYU (New York University) and was accepted. I started classes in 1947.
I also met a wonderful girl in New York and we got married. I was taking classes at NYU for about a year when the Air Force became a separate service from the Army. I was transferred into the Air Force as a pilot. Col Benjamin O. Davis, one of the original Tuskegee Airmen, helped the now U.S. Air Force secure a larger funding budget and he had several vacant pilot positions to fill. The Air Force personnel department sent letters to some of us to come back on active duty. I didn't think anything about it until my wife got pregnant and I realized that life was changing, and I was only in the first year of college and wasn't sure if I could continue for the full four years. So, I agreed to go back into the service, provided I could finish that first year at NYU. The Air Force personnel managers agreed, and I finished the year at NYU and was back in uniform by June 1948.
ACJ: *At NYU were you working toward becoming an electrical engineer?*

Lt Col Hardy: I went to school, wanting to be a civil engineer, building buildings and bridges and things like that. When I went back into the service in 1948, I realized that I'm a pilot, and that's all. If for some reason I couldn't fly, I had nothing to offer them. The Air Force was building a new plane for defense and it had a lot of electronics on it.I thought that if I go back into service and I can't fly for whatever reason, I could be reassigned to a job

that no one else wanted. I want to be around airplanes. Electronics was a relatively new field, at the time, and the Air Force was installing radars and other electronics on its aircraft. I figured I would apply for electronics school as soon as I went back in. I was accepted and started classes in September 1948 at Keesler AFB in Mississippi.

ACJ: *The North Koreans invaded the South in June 1950. Can you explain how you became a B-29 pilot and then based at Guam?*

Lt Col Hardy: As I mentioned, I started school in September 1948. A few months earlier, President Truman signed an order directing the the Services to submit their plans for racial integration. It really shook up the country and he almost lost the election. Truman was a Democrat and a lot of people in the South left the Democratic Party. Truman still eked out a victory, so his Executive Order remained in effect and the Services submitted their plans for racial integration; the Air Force's plan was approved in May 1949. The Air Force was ready to implement it by deactivating the 332nd Fighter Group in June and all the Afro-Americans received orders, transferring them to white operations groups in the States and overseas. I graduated school in August 1949, just after the racial integration program began, and received orders to go to Guam as an aircraft maintenance officer.

ACJ: *You went to Guam as a maintenance officer, but when did you get qualified as a B-29 pilot, how did that happen?*

Lt Col Hardy: I was assigned as a maintenance officer but was still a pilot and I asked to get checked out in the B-29 Superfortress. Most of my experience was in single engine fighters, but I demonstrated that I could fly the B-29, so I was put on a combat crew as a copilot.

ACJ: *While on Guam you were training, getting ready for the war, but then they transferred you to Kadena. Is that correct?*

Lt Col Hardy: I got to Guam in October 1949 and started my B-29 check out and in the spring of 1950, I became a copilot and regular crewmember and that took priority over my maintenance job. During this process, I got a new squadron commander, and he didn't seem to want to speak to me. More about that later, but when the Korean War started on 25 June 1950, we moved forward to Okinawa joining several other U.S. based bomb groups from Strategic Air Command (SAC)—some other groups went elsewhere in Japan. My crew flew our first combat mission over Korea on the 30 June. On 12 July, my squadron commander pulled me off the mission just before takeoff for some reason. As fate would have it, that B-29 was one of the first U.S. aircraft shot down over Korea. My crew was lost, but I wasn't with them.

PHOTO HAS BEEN REMOVED

ACJ: *Do you believe it was simply that this commander wanted you off the mission or was there possibly another reason?*

Lt Col Hardy: I don't know, for sure, why he pulled me off this mission; he just did. We were scheduled for the mission and did all the pre-mission work. I pre-flighted the airplane and we were getting ready for the final pre-takeoff meeting, and he replaced me. I heard him call my name, I got out of the airplane, we had a few words, and I said, "But, Sir, we're going to…", he said, "You're not going on this mission, so-and-so is going in your place…" just like that…it was an awful day for me.

ACJ: *I can only imagine your shock when you heard about the shoot-down. Did you did fly other missions over Korea? How many missions in total?*

Lt Col Hardy: I flew a total of 45 combat missions in the B-29 during the Korean War.

ACJ: *Were these generic bombing missions or were there any special missions?*

Lt Col Hardy: Our missions were mostly standard bombing missions, but we also had three B-29s that were modified to carry special bombs that were called 'Tarzon.' It was a huge bomb, similar to the one the British had during World War II, which they called 'Tallboy'. It weighed more than 10,000 pounds and designed to penetrate the German sub-pens and then blow up. For us, Bell Aircraft modified the bomb by adding big fins and a radio receiver on it. Normally on a bomb run, you drop your bombs and turn away. With the Tarzon, we had to stay on course, because when the bomb cleared the aircraft, a flare would ignite in the bomb's tail and then the bombardier would use a hand-controller to guide the bomb to the target electronically. The biggest problem with that bomb was that it was too big to go in either of the bomb bays. The engineers modified the bomb bay doors, so the weapon could hang beneath the front and rear bomb bay doors. The doors would close around the bomb leaving almost half the bomb hanging below the fuselage. After we dropped the bomb the hole in the bomb-bay doors disrupted the air flow beneath the aircraft causing some light turbulence. The hole also presented another problem, if the crew had to ditch the bomber. The normal B-29 was a good aircraft if you had to ditch, but the modified birds were

never tested to see what would happen if someone had to ditch. There were only three crews qualified to fly the Tarzon mission with the specialized airplanes. We had flown about 9-10 missions dropping that big bomb and one day the new wing commander got in a heated discussion with our aircraft commander about whether or not you could safely ditch the aircraft. The wing commander thought you could and my pilot did not. Our crew discussed the possibility of ditching and came up with our plan to bail out if the need arose. One day, the wing commander flew a Tarzon mission with another crew and we learned that their modified B-29s lost two engines and went into the ocean. No survivors were found, only debris in the water. After a second mishap the program was cancelled.

ACJ: *The heavy fighting in Korea lasted about three years. How long were you there?*

Lt Col Hardy: The war started in June 1950, and I returned to the United States in early 1951 having flown 45 combat missions in the B-29. That was okay, because I had fractured my elbow and couldn't fly anyway. When I got back, I was assigned to Walker AFB, near Roswell, New Mexico. My chain of command saw my maintenance experience and put me in a maintenance squadron. In SAC the maintenance squadrons were separate units from the flying squadrons. SAC had armament electronics maintenance squadrons and not too long after, I was sent to a 7-month armament school and became a fully qualified armament electronics maintenance officer. I spent a good part of my career doing that.

ACJ: *What did you do when you finished the armament school?*

Lt Col Hardy: I worked electronics maintenance while I was at Walker AFB, but then the Air Force started receiving the new B-36 Peacemaker strategic bombers into the inventory. Initially, everything for the B-36 was located at Carswell AFB in Texas. So, I was sent to Carswell for about five or six months near the end of 1952 to learn B-36 maintenance. The Consolidated Aircraft Company/ Convair was building the B-36 on the west-side of the base and the aircrews, were also training there. When the aircraft were finished, the aircrews flew them to other bases.

While I was there, I experienced a racial issue. My training was scheduled to continue into June or July of 1953. All my classmates were white officers, and we would have lunch together, but we lived in a segregated area of Fort Worth.In February, one of my classmates wanted to move into base housing and I went with him to the housing office only to find out that I was number two on the housing list. My wife and I had a nice place in Fort Worth, but we were considering on-base housing. We never got the chance because that afternoon I got a call from Base Housing Office and was asked, "Are you colored?" I told them, "Yes", and was told I couldn't move into base housing. Base housing was authorized, but due to the large number of people assigned to Carswell, there weren't enough houses on the base. The Air Force had additional housing built west of Carswell in a town called White Settlement, Texas. Apparently, the laws of White Settlement didn't allow white and colored families to live together. I pointed out that it was still military housing. We had three meetings on the subject and during the final meeting the Carswell Base Commander, Colonel Chambers, couldn't understand why I couldn't see his position; I kept shaking my head "No." To shorten the story, I received orders to move to Limestone AFB (later known as Loring AFB) in Maine with a reporting date 15 March—just two weeks away! So, I had to rush to get my family relocated back to Mobile, with my in-laws, and get my stuff all packed up and shipped out by the 15th of March.

ACJ: *How long were you stationed at Limestone?*

Lt Col Hardy: I was stationed at Limestone from 1953 to 1955 and then I applied to attend school at the Air Force Institute of Technology, Wright-Patterson AFB. I was accepted and started classes in August 1955. I graduated in August of 1957 with a bachelor of science degree in electrical engineering.

ACJ: *Where did you go after AFIT?*

Lt Col Hardy: I was assigned to the 3rd Bomb Wing in Japan for three years; it was a wonderful assignment. I was a captain and a supervisor in the Armament Electronics Maintenance Squadron. I was promoted to major in

Lt Col Hardy, Air Commando

1960. Shortly after, I was reassigned to the Air Refueling Wing at Plattsburgh AFB, New York. The wing commander made me the maintenance squadron commander; electronics maintenance was our specialty. Ironically, the wing commander, a full colonel, was the same officer who pulled me off the B-29 mission back in Okinawa. I worked for him from late 1960 until the beginning of 1963 and we had gained a lot of respect for each other—he had changed completely as far as I was concerned.

ACJ: *That is an interesting follow-up story about someone who apparently had a change of heart—he pulled you off a combat mission for seemingly the wrong reason, which actually saved your life, and then you meet him 10 years later with a very different outcome. So, where did you go after your assignment was up at Plattsburgh?*

Lt Col Hardy: I loved being a squadron commander but, in October 1962, just after the Cuban Missile Crisis, AFIT contacted me because

there was a new graduate-level reliability-engineering program going to start in a couple of months, so they asked prior graduates first. I spoke with my wing commander, and he thought it was a good idea, so I accepted the offer to go back to AFIT and began classes in February 1963. I graduated in August 1964 with a master of science degree in systems engineering-reliability. So, in the period between 1955 and 1964 I earned two engineering degrees from AFIT.

ACJ: *It appears that, overall, the Air Force was good to you.*

Lt Col Hardy: You know, a lot of people say that. I did get a lot out of my Air Force career. When I hear these people talk now about their college debt and other issues I think, well the Air Force provided me with housing and everything, so it was good.

ACJ: *How did you put your systems engineering-reliability degree to work?*

Lt Col Hardy: In the fall of 1964 I went to the Air Force Systems Command, a large command at the time, and was assigned to Electronic Systems Division (ESD) at Hanscom AFB in Massachusetts for five and a half years.

ACJ: *What did you do at ESD?*

Lt Col Hardy: I was with the Director of Communications, which was a big field. I was responsible for design, development, installation of communications and other types of electronic systems world-wide. I was there about a year and was promoted to lieutenant colonel, and was given additional responsibilities. I was responsible for installing communications "switches" or hubs for the new Department of Defense Automatic Voice Network, or AUTOVON in several overseas locations. AUTOVON was a world-wide direct dial telephone system. I ended up being program manager and chief of engineering. By mid-1969 we successfully installed several "switches" in Europe and Panama and they worked well, but I never got to see the fruits of my labor.

ACJ: *Can you elaborate on that?*

Lt Col Hardy: While I was at the 42nd Bomb Wing at Limestone AFB, I learned to fly to C-119 Flying Boxcar. The C-119 provided logistic support for the B-36 bombers. Because of the size of the cargo compartment, the C-119 could carry a fully built-up B-36 engine and could deliver one anywhere it was needed. Over the course of two years, I accumulated several hundred hours in the aircraft and I loved flying it… very comfortable seats! During this time, the Air Force Special Operations community was converting C-119s and making them airborne gunships or AC-119s. In order to fill the cockpits, the Air Force Personnel Center staff went looking for aircrews who had time in the C-119. My name popped up and I had to go. I hadn't flown for seven years, so I had to get re-qualified in the C-119, go back through survival school, and then learn about the special operations mission and the basics of employing the aircraft as an aerial gun platform— flying around the target, employing the weapons, avoiding friendlies on the ground, and how to hit a moving target using side firing weapons. Remember I was a fighter pilot and knew how to strafe with forward firing guns, but the side-fire aspect required a little different technique. I finished my training in April of 1970 and then left for Vietnam.

AC-119K Stinger

ACJ: *I assume all this came as a surprise to you and your family.*

Lt Col Hardy: I wasn't happy with it because I was enjoying what I was doing. My wife wasn't happy either. I got back into it while I was going through the training. Besides, after 25-plus years in the service, I felt it was my duty.

ACJ: *If I recall correctly, you said that the unit was in Vietnam, but you were in Thailand. How did that work?*

Lt Col Hardy: I trained with the crew at Lockbourne AFB, then we headed overseas. While we were en route, we stopped off in the Philippines to go through the jungle survival school there. During the training, the instructors put you out in the jungle to survive and after a day or so, they sent indigenous Philippine people, known as Negritos, out to look for you. The instructors gave us three chits and if one of the Negritos found you, you gave him a chit. They got rewards from the government for catching us. The field training began during the day and it was very hot! I went looking for a hiding place and finally found one. I thought I was safe, then suddenly, I became sick…something I ate I guess. I had to get up and leave my hiding place to get some relief. I was really sick! When I got my act back together a Negrito was standing there looking at me [laughing]. I gave him a chit and then gave him the coins in my pocket, which I wasn't supposed to have. He was friendly enough and told me where to go hide. I said OK and I went the other way and hid. No one else caught me that night.

When we finished survival school we went to Phan Rang, Vietnam, and my crew was reassigned to another pilot. All the airplanes were at either Udorn in Thailand or at Da Nang in

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the northern part of South Vietnam. The Udorn planes usually flew toward North Vietnam then head back south looking for trucks along that route up there. The planes from Da Nang went looking for trucks and supplies moving along the Ho Chi Minh trail. I was in Phan Rang about three months to get briefed and up to speed on operations so I could run maintenance. I was also a detachment commander at each of the other bases. Phan Rang was nice and we stayed in hotels in the city. Then I went to Da Nang and it was much different. Even though we lived on-base, we were attacked quite often by the Vietcong shelling the base. After a time, I went over to Udorn in Thailand. It was very nice up there living in the city. In fact, we used to post the flying schedule in the lobby of the hotel, quite a different operation.

ACJ: *During your time in Southeast Asia, you were assigned to the 18th Special Operations Squadron (SOS). From a pilot's perspective, how different was it flying special operations missions?*

Lt Col Hardy: Well, they were very different operations. Our primary mission in the P-51s during World War II was to escort the bombers and strafing as I mentioned earlier. In the B-29, dropping bombs was our main thing and we had that one special mission. The AC-119 was different because the plane had other capabilities. It had mini guns, a big searchlight on it, and other capabilities, like dropping flares. We had 10 or 11 crew members and they had to learn different jobs and equipment, so we could employ the capability if we needed.

ACJ: *You said that the C-119 was a comfortable plane to fly, but did you find these missions in the AC-119 version challenging?*

Lt Col Hardy: Getting into the firing position and holding the firing orbit, wasn't the easiest thing to do. Especially on that airplane, you had to work as a team. The pilot flying the airplane had to fly the orbit, and the copilot was also on the controls to help maintain the altitude in order to maintain the proper angle. The pilot focused on instruments and used the gun sight in order to get rounds on target. The trigger was on the pilot's yoke and he fired it for two or three seconds to avoid overheating the gun barrels. Even with that short burst, there were several hundred rounds that went to the target.

ACJ: *How many combat missions did you fly and was there a target number for the special operations crews?*

Lt Col Hardy: I was a detachment commander, so I didn't fly every day; I flew 70 combat missions. Most of the other guys flew over 100 missions during their tours. We did not have a target number of combat missions to fly. In general, the crews were over there for a set period of time. Very different circumstances than in the World War II era when the bomber crews had to fly 25, later 35 missions, before they could go home.

ACJ: *You came home from SEA in April 1971, where did you go? What was you next assignment?*

Lt Col Hardy: I got back to the States in April 1971 and was assigned to the Inspector General's office at Andrews AFB in Maryland. For me, that IG office was worse than being overseas because you would go out and do a five- or six-week inspection at the big bases, come home to write the report and then you're out to do another inspection. You were away from the family quite a lot on a regular basis. When I was with ESD, I was gone a lot, but I enjoyed the work. I just decided that the IG office was not the place for me, so, I retired in November of 1971.

ACJ: *What did you do when you retired?*

Lt Col Hardy: I had a neighbor who was a high-level manager in General Telephone & Electronics Corp. or GTE; our daughters were good friends. When he heard I was going to retire, he told me to write a resumé and he took it to GTE. I retired on a Friday at Andrews AFB and drove back to Massachusetts. This friend had set me up with an interview the following Monday and a couple of weeks later, GTE offered me a job. My office was about 20 minutes from my house, so I took them up on the offer and worked for GTE about 18 years and then fully retired.

ACJ: *When we scheduled this visit, you said you were going to the Oshkosh Air Show in Wisconsin mid-July. Can you tell us what you do at this and other air shows and how did you get involved in them?*

Lt Col Hardy: Well, it's primarily because I'm a Tuskegee Airman. I got involved after my second wife passed away in 2008. People asked me to comment on my time in the service, particularly when talking with kids. So for the Oshkosh event, we'll have the Red Tail Squadron trailer with its displays that tell the story of the Tuskegee Airmen. There will also be a Red Tail airplane that if you want to pay a couple hundred dollars, you can get a 40-minute flight around the area. The Red Tail trailer has several different video clips that tell the story of the Tuskegee Airmen. In fact, one of the videos shows me speaking to a group of people. After the kids watch the movie, one of us will go in and talk to them and answer any questions they might have. I always mention that girls make just as good of a pilot as the boys. I tell them about the WASPS [Women Airforce Service Pilots] I met back in the day. I don't think any of those ladies are left now because they were all older than I was. I was once invited to a homecoming down at Sweetwater, Texas where the WASPS learned to fly, and they did a fantastic job. The WASPS flew everything we had in World War II and then when the war was nearing its end were told "We don't need you anymore" because they didn't have official status!, It was sad. I've worked with them for many years.

ACJ: *When you talk to the young men and women at these air shows, what is the one message you want them to take away?*

Lt Col Hardy: I tell them that opportunities are out there! Take myself, I never flew growing up, heck I hadn't even driven a car, but I got into aviation and loved it. I was able to do well and succeed because I

listened to my instructors. I listened to what they had to say and then applied myself to it. So, anybody can fly, if given the chance and if they apply themselves. I'm not saying flying is for everyone, but the opportunities are there for those who have the desire and are able to absorb everything they get and apply it properly.


Photo courtesy George Hardy

ACJ: *As our visit draws to an end, and given your experience with the 18th SOS, do you have a message for the readers of the Air Commando Journal?*

Lt Col Hardy: Yes, I was only in the 18th SOS that short year toward the end of my career, but I've always admired the Air Commandos and the things they have accomplished over the years. There is a lot of training involved, and you've got to apply yourself and learn a lot. One of the things I admire them so much for is their ability to adapt. I never pictured myself as a soldier because I wasn't a very big guy, but I was able to adapt and could fly any airplane that they gave me to fly! Big differences between the P-40/P-51fighters and the B-29 bomber and the C/AC-119 aircraft, that's for sure. It is one of those things that you've got to have the will, and desire, to want to do—that's the main thing. I can honestly say that I am one of those people that nothing frightened me. I always felt that when you're scared of a situation, you need to just adapt to it because your training prepares you for many different situations and usually there is a positive solution and outcome. So long as you follow those rules, you'll make out OK, and the Air Commandos seem to do that very well.

ACJ: Colonel Hardy, on behalf of the *Air Commando Journal* staff and our readers, thank you, again for a wonderful visit. You continue to inspire so many to reach for higher goals and I can honestly say that we all thank you for your service to our nation and persistent outreach to America's youth.

About the Author: Dr. Ron Dains serves as Dean of Education Support and Associate Professor of Military and Security Studies with Air Command and Staff College, Maxwell AFB, Alabama. He holds a Ph.D. and M.A. in Political Science from the University of Alabama, and an MS and BS in Aeronautical Science from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. Dr. Dains has presented ACSC core courses in international security, war theory, warfare studies, regional and cultural studies, and joint air campaign planning along with elective courses in U.S. civil-military relations and the history of logistics. Ron served as an enlisted member of both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force and retired as a U.S. Air Force aircraft and munitions maintenance officer.

Operation Firm

MC-130H 86-1699, Merlin's Magic

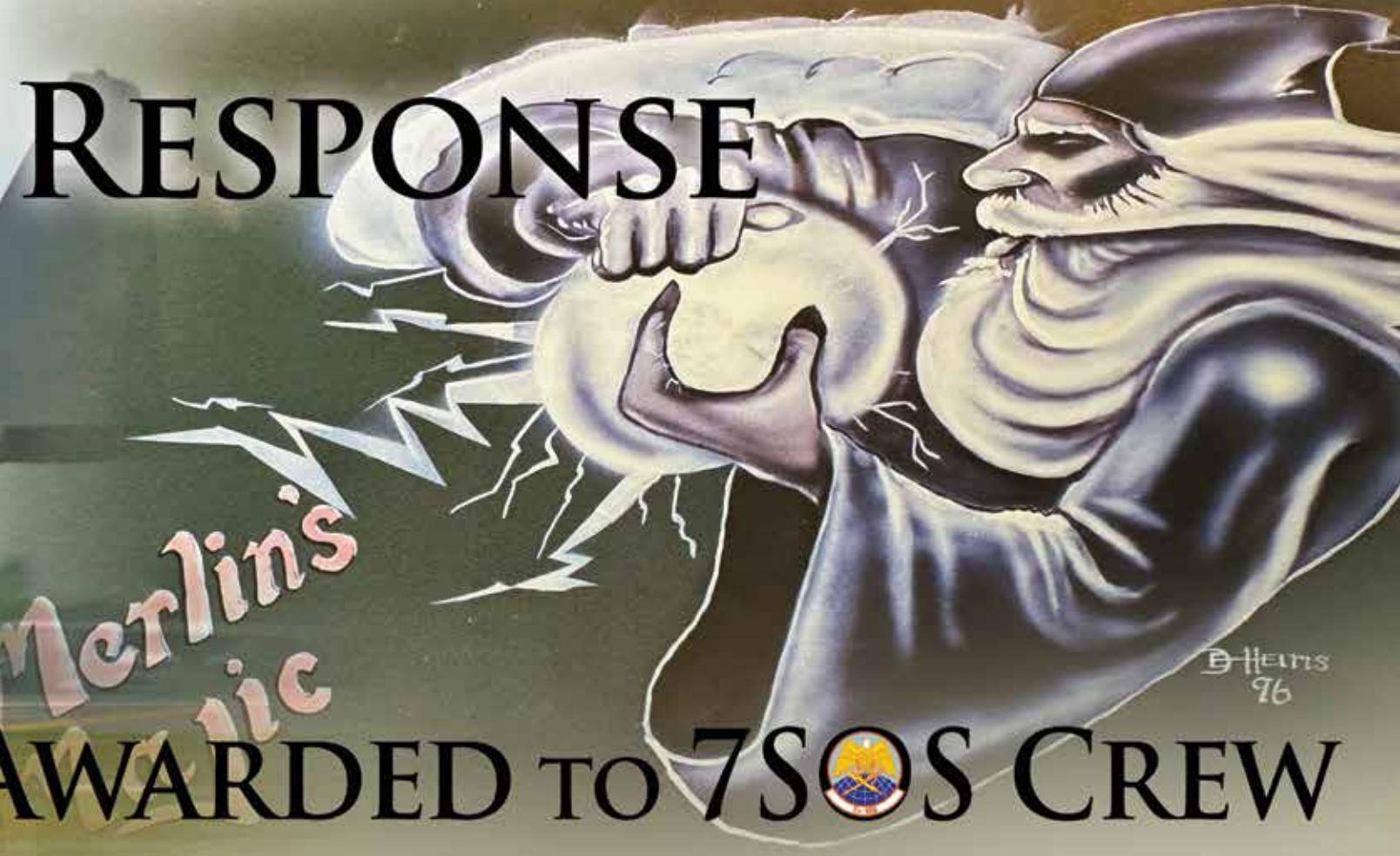
1997 Mackay Trophy A

The spring of 1997 was a turbulent and challenging time for AFSOC units assigned to U.S. European Command (USEUCOM). This was 10 years before U.S. Africa Command was created so Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR) had responsibility the entire hemisphere. Elements of the 352nd Special Operations Group (SOG) were heavily committed to support NATO's Stabilization Force (SFOR) in the Balkans, preparing for an operational readiness inspection (ORI). In response to ethnic fighting in Rwanda almost 1.5 million refugees fled into eastern Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo). In and around Kinshasa, the capital of Zaire, on the west side of that country, civil war had thrown the country into chaos. At the State Department's request, the 352nd SOG deployed a package of MC-130P Combat Shadows and MH-53J Pave Lows to Libreville, Gabon, on alert for a possible non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO). In April 1997, after a month deployed on alert, the crews and aircraft were released to return to RAF Mildenhall, UK.

In May, across the Congo River from Kinshasa, in what had been the relatively stable Republic of the Congo, civil war suddenly broke out around the capital, Brazzaville. The State Department was correctly concerned for the safety of U.S. citizens in the country and for the embassy staff. The embassy team expended all possible efforts to avoid a military operation, but by the first week of June it became clear to decision-makers at USEUCOM that U.S. military forces would likely be needed to evacuate any Americans from Congo. Even though Ambassador Aubrey Hooks in Brazzaville had not yet requested military assistance, on Saturday, 7 June, Col Mike Planert, the SOG's commander, got a call to begin planning for a possible NEO. Two aircrews were placed into crew rest and the SOG's maintenance team was called in to prepare two MC-130H Combat Talon IIs for possible launch. The mission would be known as Operation Firm Response.

At Patch Barracks in Stuttgart, Germany, the SOCEUR planning staff began developing a variety of possible courses of action (COA) to evacuate about 78 Americans. Without knowing the full extent of the tactical situation in and around the embassy, Brig Gen Lambert, the commander of SOCEUR, decided to send in a 12-man ESAT (European Security and Assessment Team, Army and Navy special operators with a dedicated secure communications package) to the embassy to give the commander of USEUCOM a trusted, ground-truth assessment of the situation. Once armed with that information, the commander could then tailor any additional forces needed to protect the embassy and evacuate American citizens.

On 8 June, when SOCEUR's initial planning began, the French had about 1500 soldiers with both armored and commercial vehicles and a small headquarters in place at Maya-Maya International Airport (IAP), about a mile and a half north of the U.S. embassy. Those soldiers were already helping French citizens evacuate and they were conducting armed patrols in the government controlled area of the city, trying to maintain some degree of safety and stability. As SOCEUR's planning continued, their concept eventually solidified into deploying the ESAT to Maya-Maya IAP via MC-130, linking up with the French and then



RESPONSE

AWARDED TO 7SOS CREW

moving to the embassy, assessing the situation, and offering recommendations for any additional support that might be needed. SOCEUR also prepared a 16-man team from 1/10th Special Forces Group for deployment on the second Combat Talon II to augment the embassy's U.S. Marine Corps security force should the situation deteriorate further. Planners also considered deploying additional Special Forces soldiers and a maintenance team from the 352nd SOG should the ESAT's assessment affirm the need.

Back at RAF Mildenhall, Lt Col PR Helm, the 7th SOS's commander, appointed his operations officer, Lt Col Frank Kisner as the air mission commander. On the evening of 8 June, two MC-130s deployed from RAF Mildenhall to Stuttgart, Germany, so they could marry up with the ESAT and the 1/10th SFG security team. The Combat Talon IIs arrived just before 03:00 on Monday, 9 June. The aircrews immediately went into crew rest while the maintainers refueled the aircraft and prepared them for possible immediate launch.

The first report from the embassy on 9 June suggested that the situation was quieting down and so SOCEUR sent the planners home for much needed rest. But, by about 20:30 that night, new reporting indicated that fighting had resumed and the embassy team was growing concerned. Still, the ambassador had not requested the NEO. General Lambert made the decision to launch both Talon IIs with the ESAT and the security team as a precaution. Between 21:45 when the two crews departed from lodging to arriving at their aircraft the plan had changed. The embassy was concerned that the presence of two large American cargo planes was too large a "footprint" and would cause negative repercussions in the press. Instead, a single Talon II, 86-1699, nicknamed Merlin's Magic, would fly to Brazzaville with both airplanes' loads: 30 passengers and their gear, two Humvees, the communications equipment, weapons, ammunition, food, and water. When the loadmasters, MSgt Gordo Scott and TSgt Tom Baker, recalculated the weight and balance, they realized they were over the allowable peacetime takeoff weight. Permission was granted to use the emergency war planning weight—175,000 pounds.

While the loadmasters and ground forces were moving people and equipment onto Merlin's Majic, the pilots and navigators worked the new flight plan and crossed their fingers that clearance would be granted to overfly Algeria, Niger, Nigeria, and Cameroon. They also needed USEUCOM to deploy KC-135 tankers from the 100th Air Refueling Wing to provide gas enroute. When 86-1699, call sign Whisk 05, finally launched, after midnight, they still did not know if they had overflight clearance and where they would meet the KC-135s. The pilot, Capt Reed Foster, took off into the dark skies of central Europe, headed towards Algeria and trusting that clearances, tankers, and tanker tracks would fall into place. Somewhere between the south coast of France and the coast of Algeria, the SATCOM radio delivered the welcome news that overflight clearances had been granted and they were to join up with two tankers in a single refueling track over Algeria. That was the good news, but as we all know, good news often comes with a share of bad news.

Because the Talon II was so much heavier than normal and the high outside air temperature over the Sahara Desert

made the aircraft controls sluggish, inflight refueling was going to be a challenge. The lack of suitable divert airfields also meant that the MC-130 had to take on gas up to 175,000 pounds during each of the three planned refuelings. For the last 10,000 pounds of fuel, the Talon II and the tanker needed

Evacuees on board Whisk 05. (Photo courtesy of USAF)

to execute a "toboggan maneuver," where both aircraft entered a controlled descent at 500 feet-per-minute so that the heavy and slow MC-130 gained enough airspeed to stay connected to the tanker.

The KC-135 was flying at just above stall speed to ensure Whisk 05 could take on all the fuel it needed. On the third, and final, refueling, the maneuver took place over the mountains of southern Algeria. As the two aircraft began the toboggan, with rising terrain below them, the tanker crews did what they needed to do to ensure mission success. The tankers stayed with the MC-130 right up to the Algerian border, where they had to turn back because they had not been cleared by the government of Niger for overflight. Brazzaville was more than six hours flying time away.

About two hours later, the crew received a call from "Lowdown," the European Theater Command Center, asking how many seats they had available. After a laborious search in the jam-packed cargo compartment, they reported 40 troop seats available. The rest had been left at Stuttgart to help lighten the aircraft weight. The crew was never told why Lowdown wanted the information, but speculation was that it was possible they would be picking up passengers after they landed. Because the aircraft was so full, it was impossible for the crew to prepare the aircraft for passengers. Whisk 05 flew on, figuring that if they did need to take on passengers there would be time to reconfigure the cargo compartment after landing.

About 90 minutes out from Maya-Maya IAP, the crew and passengers began preparing the aircraft to enter what was expected to be hostile airspace. The electronic warfare officer (EWO) armed the Talon II's countermeasure systems and the loadmasters and maintainers spread Kevlar mats on the cargo floor and along the walls. Thirty minutes later, Lowdown called again and let the crew know that rebel forces had secured the mountains north of the airport and they were also attacking the airport near the control tower. Whisk 05 began orbiting at tree-top height about 15 miles northwest of the airport while the crew tried to contact the French forces on the airfield. Lt Col Kisner asked Lowdown for permission to continue the mission and if cleared by the French, attempt a landing. Almost immediately, Lowdown gave the crew permission to make the decision, saying something along the lines of the crew "accepting responsibility for the risk associated with their actions." The French controllers informed the crew that runway 24 was too dangerous and that the first, southern, half of runway 06 was secure. Whisk 05 was cleared to land on runway 06 if they chose to. The only caution was to "not land long." That was all they needed. Whisk 05 was inbound.

The navigator and EWO planned a low-level turning approach route from the back side of the mountains and along the Congo River that ran along the eastern side of the airport. Captain Foster recalls hugging the river and looking up at tall buildings in the city as Capt John Baker, the copilot flew the ingress. As Captain Baker climbed up from the river to the higher terrain of the airport, Captain Foster took the controls and landed on runway 06. The French marshalled the Talon II to a safe spot about halfway down the runway, where the MC-130 did a 180-degree turn, dropped the ramp, and began an engine-running offload (ERO). The French

Flight route of Whisk 05.
(Photo courtesy of ACJ)

provided a forklift to assist with the offload. They also created a security cordon in the tall grass around the airplane, and the crew remembers small arms fire, machinegun tracers, mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades impacting the grass where the French soldiers were positioned.

The 3-man combat control team, led by Capt Bill Collins, orchestrated the tricky ERO, especially getting the

heavily loaded Humvees safely off the aircraft, ensuring the forklift did not harm the aircraft, and then conducting a rapid assessment of the airfield environment. During the offload, the driver assigned to the second Humvee failed to show up. A quick-thinking combat controller noticed the problem and jumped into the driver's seat to keep the offload moving. Even before the ESAT, security team, and the equipment were off the Talon II, the loadmasters and maintenance team were reconfiguring the aircraft to accept passengers. As the offloading and reconfiguration were going on, the French soldiers escorted a group of 56 civilians and a pet dog to the airplane from the security of a concrete building on the edge of the runway. There were about 100 French soldiers protecting those civilians as they walked the four hundred meters to the MC-130.

After 40 evacuees had been loaded onto the aircraft, the French officer-in-charge ordered the remaining 16 people to head back to the concrete building. There was no explanation given to the crew. At that point, the navigator, Capt Rob Toth, asked another French officer why the remaining people were not being allowed to board. He was told that because the aircraft only had 40 seats USEUCOM had only authorized 40 passengers. The mystery call from Lowdown four hours earlier now made sense. If the crew had been asked "how many people can you take out," instead of "how many seats do you have," the answer to Lowdown would have been "as many as there are." At that point, Captain Toth left the aircraft, caught up with the group that had been turned away, and turned them around. "We're taking everyone," he ordered, "we're not leaving anyone behind."

Once the passengers were on board, the flight surgeon and crew distributed hearing protection and water. The remaining crewmembers stowed the passengers' bags. Twenty-three minutes after landing, the loadmasters had everyone on board and secured, and began closing the aft ramp and cargo door. Captain Foster pushed the throttles to maximum and began his descending "climb-out" up off the runway plateau and down to the river, again flying a tree-top low-level route south and west around the mountains and out of harm's way. Once safely away from Brazzaville, the Talon II climbed to normal cruising altitude and headed towards Libreville in Gabon. A cheer erupted from the scared, exhausted, and shell-shocked passengers. Two and a half hours later, Whisk 05 landed at Libreville where they were met by the U.S. embassy staff. After traveling over 3,500 miles, having been awake for more than 26 hours, and flying a total of 16.8 hours, the crew was exhausted. While Colonel Kisner and Captain Foster went over to the French command post on the airport to thank them for the support at Brazzaville, the embassy staff got the crew into lodging so that they could go back on alert for possible additional evacuations as soon as they were rested. One of the evacuees, a female Peace Corps volunteer who had recently arrived in Congo, thanked the crew, saying,

> I used to hate the military and what you stood for. But when we were in that embassy and the Marines were shielding us from the bullets, they were so polite. They weren't arrogant, they actually cared for us, gave us their food, and risked their lives for us. And then you guys came in here and rescued us when I had lost all hope. I was wrong about the military.

Back in Stuttgart, the second Talon II, Whisk 21, remained on alert until 14 June. On 17 June, the warring factions in Brazzaville agreed to a ceasefire. On the 18th, a DC-3 chartered by the Department of State took out the ambassador, his staff, sensitive materials, and a Peace Corps volunteer who had been missing during the first evacuation but was later safely delivered to the French embassy and then to the Americans. An hour later, Whisk 05 returned to Maya-Maya IAP to pick up the ESAT, security team, the two Humvees, and the director of the Peace Corps, Chris Kosnik. The Talon II then returned to Libreville, dropped off Mr Kosnik, and picked up the combat controllers and the maintenance team. From there Whisk 05 flew to the Royal Air Force base on Ascension Island and waited until a new liquid oxygen converter could be delivered and installed. On 23 June, after dropping the ESAT off at Stuttgart, Whisk 05 was home. Their 2-week mission had been a resounding success.

Crew members of Whisk 05.

In 1998, the National Aeronautic Association awarded the crew of Whisk 05 the Clarence Mackay trophy for the most meritorious flight of 1997.

About the Authors: This story is a compilation of after-action reports, personal histories, personal photographs, and official histories provided by those who executed Operation Firm Response. They include: Capt Reed Foster, aircraft commander, Capt John Baker, pilot, Capt Rob Toth, navigator, Capt Mark Ramsey, EWO, SSgt Jeff Hoyt, flight engineer, MSgt Gordo Scott, loadmaster, TSgt Tom Baker, loadmaster, Lt Col Frank Kisner, air mission commander, SSgt John Hensdill, direct support operator, Maj (Dr.) Rob Michaelson, flight surgeon, Capt Bill Collins, special tactics team leader, SrA Nielsen, combat controller, SrA Risnear, combat controller, SSgt John McAlister, dedicated crew chief, SrA Bryan Zdancewicz, engine specialist, A1C Burghardt, security police, A1C Evans, security police, Capt Ben Jones, logistics planner, LCDR Alex Krongard, USN, ESAT team chief.

A Short History of Non-Standard Aviation in AFSOC

By Lt Col James "JW" DeLoach, USAF (Retired)

Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC), its predecessor units, and commands have a long history of devising and fielding unique capabilities and technologies to meet changing needs and requirements of our special operations community. The staff dynamics of a small and relatively new major command, like AFSOC, and the need to deliver niche capabilities in a timeline not usually possible in the normal Department of Defense and U.S. Air Force acquisition processes means that new capabilities are often birthed with little direction, support, or even the awareness within the conventional Air Force. Air Commandos will recognize many of the challenges experienced while bringing the Non-Standard Aviation (NSAv) program to life; lessons learned, which are similar to those from the AC-130, MC-130 acquisitions; and the current light strike aircraft (Armed Overwatch program) which have been endlessly debated throughout and since the Global War on Terror (GWOT). Most of these programs had memorable, and sometimes tragic, incidents and high-profile failures at their inception. The initial cadre and General/Flag Officer sponsors have often had to overcome headwinds to propel the new and niche capabilities into full-size, fully-resourced fleets that can execute missions like Credible Sport (joint project of the U.S. military in late 1980 to prepare for a second rescue attempt of the hostages held in Iran.) and Neptune Spear (successful operation to get Osama bin Laden), etc. These Airmen are typically honored long after as Air Commando heroes, but in real-time, their drive to address SOF capability gaps required them to have a general disregard for their own lives and careers. The NSAv community is a proud member of this esteemed AFSOC club.

In the early 2000s, AFSOC personnel assigned to various Joint Special Operations Air Components (JSOAC), providing specialized and focused support to U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM)-assigned special operations forces began

to notice key capability gaps. The GWOT was unique because USCENTCOM was given such high priority over nearly every airpower capability, leaving other Geographic Combatant Commands and their special operations components, known as TSOCs or Theater Special Operations Commands, bereft of assets required to accomplish their own missions. The concentration of resources suddenly available to JSOACs, and the ground and maritime special operations forces they supported, exposed both opportunities and shortfalls in capability. While TSOCs were being deprived of nearly all airpower tools, unit leaders were learning of capabilities they had not experienced before while supporting USCENTCOM. Around 2004, an Air Force team led by then-Col Michael Kingsley organized conversations between Airmen and the joint users. These ideas rapidly went from Aviation Test and Evaluation Group (AVTEG) whiteboards to joint planning group (JPG) briefings, then ultimately up the U.S. Special Operation Command (USSOCOM) chain of command to be formalized — requirements validation, funding, and rapid delivery of new capabilities.

Out of Kingsley's drive to close airpower gaps, the U-28A Draco program was born. This was a very high priority requirement and had influential USSOCOM and USCENTCOM sponsors, so the first airplanes were delivered on a much shorter timeline than NSAv. While the U-28 program merits its own standalone history it must be mentioned within the context of NSAv because the two requirements intersected at several points during their respective births, childhoods, adolescence, and similar parents. As the U-28 requirement moved through USSOCOM, it caught the attention of TSOCs who were well aware of the lack of resources supporting their respective theaters. Non-USCENTCOM TSOC mission sets did not go away, they just executed them with dramatically less access to airpower. As a second-order effect of U-28 rolling through the rapid fielding process, Admiral Eric Olson, former USSOCOM commander, championed the "Gray Aviation" concept as a tradeoff to the under-resourced TSOCs who desired responsive, available, low-visibility airlift. Admiral Olson directed his staff to articulate the new requirement, with a proposed solution, to be included in the budgeting process. As a result, the requirement was validated and gained limited initial funding. Out of Olson's efforts, the "Gray Aviation" concept of operations (CONOP) arrived at AFSOC with approximately $200,000 of funding around 2006. This budget, while meager, signaled the USSOCOM commander's intent not only to the USSOCOM and AFSOC staffs, but also to the 645th Aeronautical Systems Group, also known a "Big Safari," which exists to rapidly field urgently needed capabilities. The initial budget was immediately available for the systems program office (SPO) to conduct studies, market research, and possibly execute an initial proof of concept.

The Gray Aviation CONOP was given to AFSOC's fixed wing requirements office for staffing, most notably then-Lt Col Karl Rozelsky. Some action officers, already familiar with the capability gaps and aircraft types suitable to fill those gaps, were assigned to lead the program. When the effort began to pick up steam, then-Brig Gen Bradley Heithold formed the irregular warfare (IW) branch to oversee the existing 6th Special Operations Squadron's aviation foreign internal defense (AvFID) program, and the new NSAv programs. The IW branch's initial staff efforts focused on obtaining sufficient funding, selecting aircraft, coordinating world-wide bed down, home station basing, and deconflicting with other aircraft programs.

As a concept, the "Gray Aviation" requirement's similarity to other programs was a blessing and a curse. While employing aircraft types (e.g., Pilatus PC-12, Beechcraft King Air, etc.) that were in use by other programs could yield training and maintenance efficiencies. Those similarities also complicated matters. Since King Air variants could meet some NSAv requirements, one group proposed offloading aging C-12s (a military version of the King Air) and other King Air variants. Given that the basic mission was to move people and cargo, the emerging Air Mobility Command's C-27J program was offered as an option. Early on, C-27J variants were proposed for Air Mobility Command and AFSOC. U.S. Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM) proposed eliminating the NSAv program in favor of supporting special operations forces requirements by using the normal Air Support Request (ASR) process. Aging, unmodified aircraft would not stand up to the rigors of the intended mission; C-27Js really did not meet USSOCOM's low-visibility airlift requirement; and USTRANSCOM's failure to support TSOC airlift requirements, via the ASR process, is what drove the NSAv requirement in the first place. With the support of a key, senior Pentagon sponsor, $2.2 billion was ultimately secured to ensure NSAv could meet user needs.

524th Special Operations Squadron pilot boards a C-146 Wolfhound on Duke Field. (Photo courtesy of TSgt Michael Charles)

Securing funding was only the beginning of making the NSAv program a reality. The program went through multiple name changes—from "Gray Aviation," to "LSA (Light Support Aircraft)," to "NSA," to "NSAV," to "NSAv"… with the small "v" ultimately being chosen to show a connection to the 6th SOS's AvFID mission, which also used


Cannon AFB

rather non-standard aircraft. Air Force heritage also posed a challenge, in that the proper 318th patch was the famous "Blackbird" motif, which was already coveted by the 8th SOS, so the 318th was directed to find a new design. The time, expense, and external dependencies required to convert a civilian aircraft into the military weapon system had to be methodically staffed. Additionally, aircraft basing and beddown brought local and national politics into the picture. While the original plan of collocating the 319th and 6th SOSs at Hurlburt Field in Florida for mutual support made great military sense in terms of synergy, a complex set of very senior-level military and political decisions led to the NSAv fleet being directed to beddown at Cannon AFB in New Mexico. [Editor's note: articles about the standup of Cannon AFB as an AFSOC base can be found in the *Air Commando Journal* Vol 12-1, April 2023.]

With the above issues resolved, the staff could shift to selecting an aircraft—or, in this case, multiple aircraft. No single aircraft could meet the key requirements for types and lengths of runways for proposed operations, range, cargo capacity, and non-military appearance. The team also needed to meet the (possibly more critical) requirements of "speed to the field" and maximizing fleet size to support non-USCENTCOM TSOCs. The IW team proposed a mixed fleet of three aircraft (light, light "rugged," and medium). The Pilatus PC-12 was chosen for the light aircraft. The procurement, support, training, etc for the PC-12 was much more mature and was therefore more or less the "pre-season" winner to be delivered to theaters as soon as possible. The PC-12 was also favored because if the program and fleet changed in the future, the PC-12s could be pulled into the U-28 program, which is what eventually happened. For the "light rugged" aircraft, the USSOCOM/AFSOC preference, albeit not formal requirement airdrop and true short takeoff and landing (STOL) capabilities made the Polish PZL M-28 the clear choice. The Dornier-328 was selected for the medium aircraft requirement. The team expected the Dornier to deliver on a slower timeline due to availability, complexity, and aircrew training. The Dornier-328s would support some of the required user loads/ranges/speed which far-exceed light aircraft capabilities. The SPO's analysis of the expected acquisition and delivery of the Dornier-328s led AFSOC senior officers to seek and approve a leasing agreement for the De Havilland Canada DHC-8 aircraft, until Dornier-328s could be procured and delivered.

The timing and influence of key supporters, notably two Joint Special Operations Command commanders, was a double-edged sword. The GWOT urgency, funding, and success of other new USSOCOM programs (mainly the U-28 program) paved the way for NSAv. A lot of the shock value, which would have normally hampered or killed a non-standard, rapidly-fielded, commercially procured fleet had worn off thanks to previous efforts (hat-tip to Col Mike D'Argenio & crew [Editor's note: See the *Air Commando Journal* Vol 8-1, July 2019].) USSOCOM's intellectual property was reusable at all levels across Air Force and theater commands up to the Office of the Secretary of Defense. On the flip side, there was a hangover from yet another "new and urgent program". Headquarters Air Force staffs, who manage the rated pipeline and inventory, the Air Force Personnel Center, which controls assignments; and other Air Force commands, which had lost experienced Airmen to other "high priority" AFSOC needs were ill-disposed to support an additional new NSAv requirement for aircrew members to fly the new aircraft.

To field the NSAv fleet, AFSOC senior leaders agreed that based on old and new lessons learned, as well as basic airmanship and logic, that the best way to rapidly stand up this new capability would be an experienced initial cadre. Throughout most of the staffing process, the manpower and personnel plan included a heavy mix of experienced non-standard aircraft pilots, who would be based at Hurlburt Field to maximize synergy between the 319th and 6th SOS. First-assignment pilots would be needed to seed the "next generation," but during the initial, urgent build-up phase, the bulk of the squadron pilots needed to be those comfortable with civilian aircraft training, multi-aircraft qualifications, decision-making in low-visibility austere operating

A parachuted bundle soars out of the back of a C-145 Skytruck from the 919th Special Operations Wing during an airdrop mission over the Eglin Air Force Base. (Photo courtesy of USAF)

AFSOC Fixed Wing Requiements NSAv Team

A U-28A aircraft flies over a deployed location. The U-28A provides a manned fixed wing, on-call/surge capability for Improved Tactical Airborne Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (Photo courtesy of USAF)

MC-146 Wolfhound Kinshasa Airport, Democratic Republic of the Congo

environments, far away from well established civilian aerodromes, and general professionalism and maturity. Late in the game, as the unit neared standup, the reality was much more dire. Due to competing Air Force-wide personnel requirements, to include the standup of the U-28, the 319th SOS was over-represented by first-assignment, inexperienced pilots. Further complicating matters was the belief that the NSAv was basically Operational Support Airlift, like the USAF's C-21 Learjet and Beech King Air/C-12 executive transports for conventional forces. Further exacerbating the experience/youth mix of the initial cadre was virtually all the other existing AFSOC units were already "tapped out" on experienced aviators from earlier efforts. At an AFSOC rated force briefing, a senior AFSOC leader notably said that between U-28, NSAv, and 6th SOS growth, the "small airplane mammals [would] soon eat the eggs of the legacy AFSOC fixed and rotary wing reptiles." An additional concern for aircrew management was the potential negative career impacts for those Airmen who left their primary aircraft to go to NSAv, and thus deviated from normal career paths and progression. Manning the units safely during this period was truly a challenge.

In real time, the above issues seemed like normal staffing challenges, but were later found to be links in the error chains that will have to be discussed in other articles or venues. The NSAv aircraft choice, "users" urgent need for rapid support, the general perception of NSAv across the USAF, manning, training, and experience challenges, unique civilian training and tactics limitations (leased and non-US aircraft), and basing decisions also deserve to be told in a later NSAv story. Those portions will be written by those who lived it as squadron commanders and operations officers of the new units which stood up rapidly at a base, which was itself being stood up. Regardless, the fact that NSAv came into being, and continues to be a key AFSOC capability, is a testament to innumerable commanders, staffers, and operators, who persevered through the challenges, overcame the obstacles proving the nay sayers wrong, and just made it happen. Any Time, Any Place!

About the Author: Lt Col James W. DeLoach, USAF (Retired) began his career as an acquisitions officer at Brooks AFB, Texas, and later became a navigator. His flying assignments included the 40th Airlift Squadron at Dyess AFB and the 7th Special Operations Squadron at RAF Mildenhall, United Kingdom. His staff assignments include: Headquarters USAF, Directorate of Operations (A-3), Defense Language Institute, Headquarters AFSOC, Aviation Test and Evaluation Group where he became involved with the initial requirements and programmatic aspects of the NSAv program. Lt Col DeLoach is now a nostalgic, retired Air Commando living in Nashville, Tennessee, where he works as a government contractor in the IT industry.

By Col Paul Harmon, USAF (Retired)

Part of the *Air Commando Journal's* mission is to preserve and promote our Air Commando heritage so future generations understand the blood, sweat, and tears of earlier generations in creating what we have today. As we drive through the Hurlburt Field gate and navigate the streets and roads to get to our destination, we are reminded of those who have given their all for our Air Force special operations mission. Some people may know a few of the names, but as time marches on and the further away from when the individuals lived, the names just become "street names" and the meaning and sacrifice of the service members get lost. So to help preserve the memories of those Air Commandos who went before us, I wanted to provide a list of the Hurlburt Field street namesakes for all to read.

HURLBURT FIELD

First Lieutenant Donald W. Hurlburt was not an Air Commando per se, but over the last 60-plus years, his name has become synonymous with Air Force special operations. Today's Air Commandos see his portrait on the wall whenever they go to the Soundside Club. Some know that he died in a plane crash on Eglin Field's main base, but there is more to his legacy.

Donald Hurlburt enlisted in the U.S. Army in August 1941. After basic training, he became an aviation cadet at Maxwell Field, Alabama. He completed Advanced Flying School at Moody Field in Georgia in June 1942; was commissioned a second lieutenant; and assigned as a B-17 pilot with the 358th Bomb Group at Alamogordo Army Air Base, New Mexico.

Lieutenant Hurlburt, a member of the 358th Bomb Squadron, 303rd Bomb Group, departed for the European theater of operations in October 1942 and was assigned to RAF Molesworth, United Kingdom. Hurlburt flew his first credited combat mission on 17 November 1942 to bomb the German submarine pens near St. Nazaire, France. His 25th, and final combat mission, was completed with the bombing of a synthetic rubber factory in Huls, Germany, on 22 June 1943. He was promoted to first lieutenant one month before he returned to the United States.

When Hurlburt returned to the United States, he passed through Headquarters, 1st Air Force at Mitchel Field in New York, and then moved to Eglin Field in Florida and the 1st Proving Ground Electronics Unit. Donald Hurlburt died of injuries sustained when his AT-18 aircraft crashed on takeoff during a local mission at the Eglin Field Military Reservation on 1 October 1943.

Lieutenant Hurlburt was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal with three oak leaf clusters for his actions overseas and his military service. He was also authorized to wear the World War II Victory Medal, the American Defense Service Medal, the European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with one Bronze Star for participation in Air Offensive Europe Campaign.

HURLBURT FIELD'S STREETS

Most are named in honor of past Air Commandos who gave their all in the service of the United States.

Kissam Street, Letourneau Circle, Hartson Street, Frazier Street, and Westfall Circle

Dedicated to Capt Edward K. Kissam Jr, 1Lt(s) Jack D. Letourneau, Stanley G. Hartson, TSgt Floyd M. Frazier, A1C Robert L. Westfall. All perished on 11 February 1962 when their C-47 aircraft crashed while flying over South Vietnam.

Simpson Avenue

Dedicated in the memory of Capt Robert L. Simpson who was killed on 28 August 1962 when his T-28 aircraft crashed in the water approximately 15 miles south of Soc Trang, South Vietnam, after being hit by enemy fire.

Booth Circle and Foxx Street

Capt Herbert W. Booth Jr and TSgt Richard Foxx were killed on 15 October 1962 when their U-10 aircraft crashed 14 miles north of Ban Me Thuot, South Vietnam, after sustaining damage from Viet Cong small arms ground fire.

Bennett Avenue and Tully Street

Capt Robert D. Bennett and 1Lt William B. Tully were killed on 5 November 1962 when their B-26 aircraft crashed 20 miles southwest of Ca-Mau, South Vietnam, after being shot down by Viet Cong guerillas.

Bartley Street

Dedicated to Capt John P. Bartley Jr who died on 3 February 1963 when his B-26 aircraft crashed 30 miles northwest of Soc Trang, South Vietnam, while conducting a combat strike against Viet Cong guerillas.

O'Neill Avenue

Maj James R. O'Neill was killed on 6 February 1963 when his B-26 aircraft crashed approximately 22 miles northwest of Pleiku, South Vietnam, after being hit by enemy fire.

Campaigne Street and Mitchell Road

Capt(s) Jerry A. Campaigne and Andrew C. Mitchell died on 8 April 1963 when their B-26 aircraft crashed approximately 33 miles northwest of Pleiku, South Vietnam. They were conducting a combat support mission and inbound to the target on a strafing pass when the left wing came off due to unknown causes.

Terry Avenue

Capt Condon H. Terry was killed on 27 June 1963 when his T-28 crashed approximately 62 miles west, southwest of Saigon while on an air-cover mission.

McClean Avenue and Bedal Street

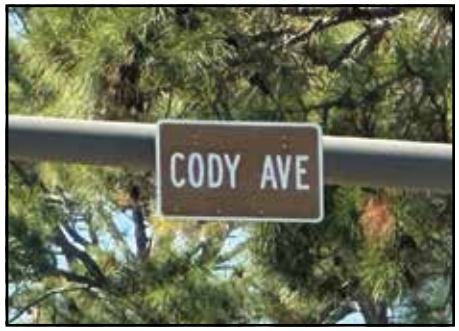
Capt John H. McClean and 1Ltt Arthur E. Bedal died on 16 August 1963 when their B-26 aircraft crashed approximately 23 miles south, southwest of Quang Nhai, while on a combat support mission.

Purcell Drive and Cruz Avenue

Capt Howard P. Purcell and SSgt Raphael Cruz were reported missing in action when their B-26 aircraft failed to return to base as scheduled. They had completed their air cover mission and were last observed departing the target area by the crew of the relief aircraft. Their missing in action status terminated on 3 September 1964, by a presumptive finding of death under the provisions of the Missing Persons Act.

Cody Avenue and Lielmanis Avenue

Capt Howard B. Cody and 1Lt Atis K. Lielmanis. On 24 November 1963 both were reported missing in action when their B-26 aircraft crashed near friendly forces. The B-26 was engaged in a close air support mission and following their third tactical pass over the target, when Captain Cody reported smoke in the cockpit, and departed the target area. Other aircraft operating in the area reported encountering small arms fire. Evidence of Lieutenant Lielmanis' death was received on 27 November 1963 and confirmation on Captain Cody 17 December 1963.



Lukasik Avenue

Capt Bernard F. Lukasik was killed on 19 February 1964 when his T-28 aircraft crashed approximately 14 miles west of Can Tho, South Vietnam. Captain Lukasik was the lead aircraft in a two aircraft formation on an air strike. The aircraft had expended its bomb load and was on its sixth strafing pass when Lukasik's wingman and a forward air controller observed him crash and burn upon impact.

Hume Drive

Col Harlan B. Hume, was the Vice Commander of the 1st SOW. As a fighter pilot, he flew more than 100 missions in Vietnam and earned four Distinguished Flying Crosses. Colonel Hume died on 15 September 1977 when his EC-135 crashed outside of Albuquerque, New Mexico, while participating in a joint training exercise.

McMillan Street, Bakke Street, McIntosh Court, Lewis Drive, and Mayo Street

Captains Charles T. McMillan, Richard L. Bakke, Lyn D. McIntosh, Harold L. Lewis, Jr, and TSgt Joel C. Mayo were killed on 25 April 1980 during Operation Eagle Claw, the rescue attempt of the American hostages held in Iran.

Whitbeck Street, Hamby Place, and Acha Drive

Capt Dyke H. Whitbeck, 1Lt Thomas L. Hamby, and SSgt Edgardo L. Acha were killed on 9 January 1984 when their UH-1N, callsign 44 ALPHA, crashed off the coast of Nassau, Bahamas, while participating in the counter-drug operation known as Operation Bahamas and Turks or Op BAT.

Brims Road

Lt Col Dick Brims was killed on 21 May 1986 while participating in joint special operations training Exercise Eldorado Canyon was the attack on Libya in 1986. in Utah. Colonel Brims was an Air Force Cross recipient for his actions during the SS *Mayaguez* recovery mission near Koh Tang island, Cambodia, on 15 May 1975.

Weaver Avenue, Grimm Lane, Galvan Street, Walters Drive, Bland Street, Buege Boulevard, May Street, Hodges Street, Oelschlager Street, Harrison Drive, and Schmauss Lane, Blessinger Drive, Kanuha Drive, and Clark Road

Maj Paul J. Weaver, Captains William D. Grimm, Arthur Galvan, Dixon L. Walters Jr., 1Lt Thomas C. Bland Jr., SMSgt Paul G. Buege, MSgt James B. May II, TSgt Robert K. Hodges, SSgt John L. Oelschlager, SSgts Timothy R. Harrison, Mark J. Schmauss, John P. Blessinger, Damon V. Kanuha, and Sgt Barry M. Clark all perished on 31 January 1991 when their AC-130H gunship, callsign SPIRIT-03, was shot down while flying a combat mission over Khafji, Saudi Arabia, in Operation Desert Storm.

Servais Way

SrA Adam Servais, a combat controller assigned to the 23d Special Tactics Squadron, was attached to a U.S. Army Special Forces team training Afghan soldiers while deployed to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. On 19 August 2006, an estimated force of 100 anti-coalition militia attacked his unit and while returning fire and calling in an air strike, a rocket-propelled grenade detonated nearby fatally wounding Airman Servais.

Corlew Road and Shero Circle

TSgt Sean Corlew and SSgt Anissa Shero were both MC-130H Combat Talon II loadmasters. On 12 June 2002 while supporting Operation Enduring Freedom, Sergeants Corlew and Shero completed the upload of a 3-man Special Forces team and their equipment onto their MC-130H. The Combat Talon II crashed shortly after taking off from the unimproved landing zone and Corlew and Shero, along with Army SFC Peter Tycz were killed. Five other crew members and two team members survived the mishap.

Kerwood Road, Howie Walters Road, and Walkup Way

Dedicated to MSgt William Kerwood, TSgt Howard Walters, and SSgt Thomas Walkup, all members of the 20th SOS, perished when their MH-53M crashed east of Bagram AB, Afghanistan, on 23 November 2003. Maj Steven Plumhoff, the pilot from 58th Special Operations Wing, Kirtland AFB, New Mexico, and U.S. Army SGM Philip Albert from Ft Drum, New York, also perished in the mishap. Plumhoff Street on Kirtland AFB, New Mexico, is dedicated Major Plumhoff's honor.

Downs Road

Maj William Downs, a member of the 6th SOS, died in an aircraft accident while supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom. Special Tactics Airmen Captains Derek Argel, Scott Fresques, and SSgt Casey Crate also perished in the mishap. The 24th Special Operations Wing commander dedicated the Advanced Skills Training Center in memory of Sergeant Crate. The Crate Advanced Skills Training Center's auditorium was dedicated to Captain Fresques and the aquatics facility was dedicated to Captain Argel.

Voas-Lackey Traffic Circle

Maj Randell D. Voas and SMSgt James B. Lackey, both members of the 8th SOS, were killed on 9 April 2010 in a CV-22 mishap while supporting ground operations during Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. A U.S. Army soldier and a civilian employee also died in the mishap.

Lest we Forget…

About the Author: Col Harmon retired in 2010. During his career he held several command positions in operations and training, and served three deployments as the Director, Special Operations Liaison Element in the U.S. Central Command's Combined Air Operations Center during Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

SPECIAL OPERATIO

Leads Joint Airpower and Special Operations IN THE ARCTIC

By Maj Helen A. Annicelli, Public Affairs, Special Operations Command North

Special Operations Command North executed Operation Polar Dagger, a demonstration of rapidly deployable joint special operations forces in the Alaskan Arctic and subarctic regions from 15 August to 10 September 2023. In a show of joint airpower out to the furthest reaches of the U.S. Northern Command area of responsibility, the 17th Special Operation Squadron (SOS) employed an AC-130J Ghostrider aircraft, a first for the unit to this austere location, alongside the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment MH-60 Blackhawks, and 207th Aviation Troop Command, Alaska Army National Guard, UH/MH-60 Blackhawks

For the first time, the 17th SOS operated an AC-130J Ghostrider out of the furthest reaches north, conducting air to ground integration over St. Lawrence Island and providing aerial overwatch and close air support for ground SOF forces over Shemya Island. (Photo courtesy of DoD, by Specialist Cody Williams)

East-Coast-based U.S. Naval Special Warfare Operators (SEALs) fast-rope from U.S. Army MH-60M helicopters, assigned to the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR), while an AC-130J Ghostrider provides overwatch on Attu Island, Alaska, 31 August 2023, as part of Operation Polar Dagger. During the operation, special operations forces enhanced all-domain awareness, demonstrated operational reach, and strengthened our understanding of competitor activity in the Arctic. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Navy, by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Matthew Dickinson)

ONS COMMAND NORTH

and CH-47 Chinook helicopters. The joint SOF and total forces air components supported the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) Green Berets and East-Coast-based U.S. Naval Special Warfare Operators (SEALs) with helicopter insertion and extraction, validating search and rescue capabilities, air to ground integration, aerial overwatch, fast-roping onto Attu Island, and close air support.

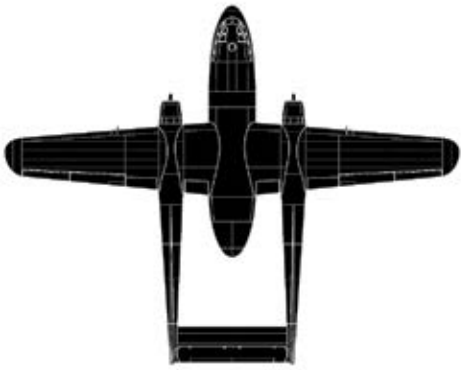
"SOCNORTH demonstrated throughout Operation Polar Dagger that SOF can effectively compete in the Arctic and will continue to identify challenges and develop creative solutions to detect, deter, and disrupt threats in the region and throughout the U.S. Northern Command's area of responsibility," said U.S. Army Col Matthew Tucker, SOCNORTH commander. "Our greatest competitor in the Arctic is the environment. This year's operation provided SOF the opportunity to learn from challenges with the movement of forces and capabilities, test and assess communication systems, and sharpen the skills necessary to defend the northern approaches of the homeland."

Polar Dagger leadership

"Operation Polar Dagger provided our joint and total forces the opportunity to operate together and conduct in-person communications," said CMSgt Clint Grizzell, SOCNORTH command senior enlisted leader. "The ability for our forces to look each other in the eyes, in real-time, provides unmatched value, especially in the austere environment of the Arctic. We've had some great lessons learned but it is about how we work together, joint SOF and total force, to evolve from the previous operation. We already found lessons that we're going to build upon for the next iteration."

Artwork by Zaur Eylanbekov

C-119 Flying Boxcar



The C-119 Flying Boxcar developed out of the World War II-era C-82 Packet. The Fairchild-designed transport aircraft performed well in the Korean War, in which, for instance, it dropped 2,011 parachute troops and 201 tons of supplies in a single day, March 23, 1951. In Vietnam, it flew first in the French Air Force and then with USAF. Conceived as a workhorse transport, the C-119 operated in a variety of roles, including satellite recovery, medical evacuation, aerial resupply, and gunship.

The Boxcar was built for close-in action. Its distinctive twin-boom design and low-slung fuselage with clamshell doors made it easy to load and unload. Still, the early C-119s suffered from structural problems and poor single-engine performance. It was an airplane you had to fly a lot before you loved it. Ninety-six C-119s carried cargo to Korea and supported major battles with parachute troops and supplies, and later resupplied besieged French at Dien Bien Phu. It eventually saw use with Troop Carrier Command, Tactical Air Command, Strategic Air Command, Military Air Transport Service, and the US Navy.

The need for gunships in the Vietnam War brought about Project Gunship III, in which 26 Reserve C-119Gs were modified into the AC-119G Shadow, and 26 C-119Ks were modified into the AC-119K Stinger. The Shadow supplemented the AC-47 in the troops-in-contact role. For the more firepower intensive attacks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the Stinger had a J85 jet engine under each wing, adding almost 6,000 pounds of thrust. The AC-119's size, relative maneuverability, and extended loiter time made it an effective supplement to the AC-47 and AC-130.

—Walter J. Boyne

This aircraft: C-119F Flying Boxcar—*#51-8146*—as it looked in the late 1950s when it was assigned as the support aircraft for the Thunderbirds demonstration team.

C-119s disgorging cargo in a paradrop.

In Brief

Designed by Fairchild ★ built by Fairchild, Kaiser-Frazer ★ gunship conversion Fairchild-Hiller ★ first flight November 1947 ★ number built 1,150 ★ **Specific to C-119G:** crew of six (pilot, copilot, navigator, radio operator, flight engineer, loadmaster) ★ capacity 62 troops or 35 stretchers ★ two Wright R-3350-89A radial engines ★ armament none ★ max speed 281 mph ★ cruise speed 186 mph ★ max range 1,630 mi ★ weight (loaded) 72,700 lb ★ span 109 ft 3 in ★ length 86 ft 6 in ★ height 26 ft 6 in ★ **Specific to AC-119K:** armament four MXU-470/A minigun modules; 24 Mk 24 flares; LAU-74/A flare launcher; two 20 mm Gatling cannons ★ crew of 10 (pilot, copilot, navigator, night obs sight operator, radar/FLIR operator, flight engineer, illuminator operator, three gunners).

Famous Fliers

R. W. Henderson, James McGovern, William Fairbrother, Charles Robertson, Richard Marr, John Williams, Larry Elton Fletcher.

Interesting Facts

Originally nicknamed "Creep" (gunship variant), changed to "Shadow" ★ used by 17 air forces in at least 21 variants ★ flew at 3,500 ft above ground level on CAS missions ★ suffered only five combat losses (gunships) ★ used up to 16 JATO bottles for quick takeoffs ★ used to snag capsules returning from orbit ★ recovered film capsule from Discoverer 14—first aerial recovery of an object returning from Earth orbit.

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2024 SPECIAL AIR WARFARE SYMPOSIUM

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- Industry Matchmaking
- Welcome Reception

DAY 2

WEDNESDAY, 28 FEB

- Educational Symposium Sessions
- Industry Exhibition Hall
- Networking Reception
- Son Tay Raid Documentary Screening

DAY 3

THURSDAY, 29 FEB

- Educational Symposium Sessions
- Industry Exhibition Hall
- Closing Beach Bonfire

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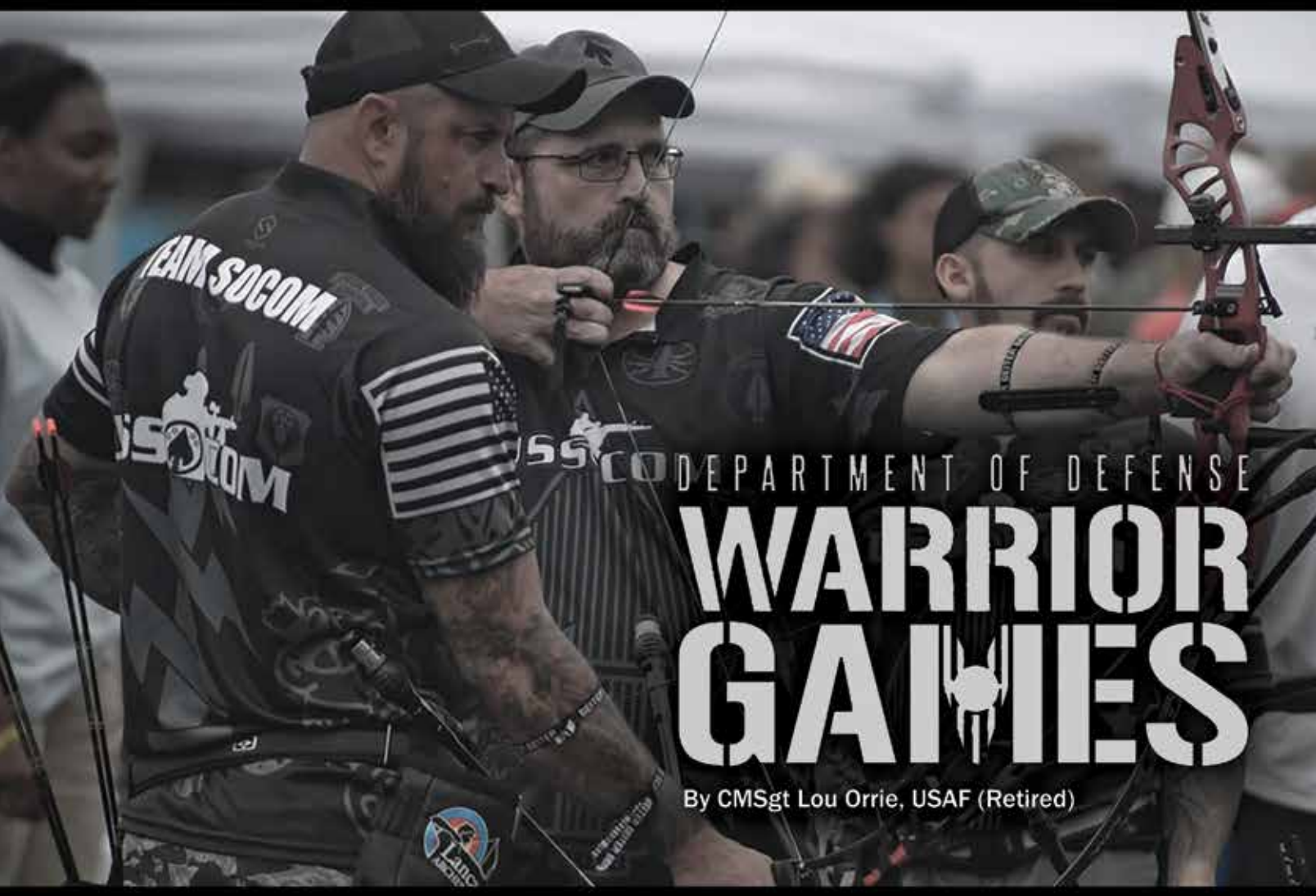
My Journey in the DoD Warrior Games



By CMSgt Lou Orrie, USAF (Retired)

Good day to all my fellow Air Commandos. My name is Lou Orrie and I am a retired Chief Master Sergeant serving on the ACA Board of Directors. I hope you and your families are doing well and enjoyed the holiday season. I would like to share with you my experiences in participating in the Department of Defense (DoD) Warrior Games. The Warrior Games, established back in 2010, is a military paralympic event held annually. These games are for wounded, injured, and ill service members, both active and retired, and consist of several events that are similar to the Olympic and Paralympic games. The events include track and field, swimming, shooting (both air pistol and air rifle), archery, and weightlifting, just to name a few. There are also team events such as wheelchair rugby, wheelchair basketball, and sitting volleyball. The teams come from all military branches including U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). There are also a few select international partner teams invited— Canada and the Netherlands are two. Each team has 50 athletes and a support staff made up of coaches, medical personnel, and others. Regarding the athletes, the ratio between active and veteran athletes is anywhere from 50/50 to 70/30, respectively. Being selected for a team, especially on the veteran side, is very prestigious and not an easy task to accomplish.

I became interested in participating when I was approached by the USSOCOM's Care Coalition. The Care Coalition hosts and oversees several training and selection camps for the command. The Care Coalition and the whole

Warrior Games came into my life at an opportune time because I was struggling with some demons that kept me in the house and uninterested in doing anything outside my home. The invitation to participate has changed my life in such a positive way. I was hesitant at first because I didn't know if I could overcome those demons or what to expect and I wasn't sure I could overcome my disabilities to participate at a competitive level. I found out rather quickly the support team takes those disabilities into account by using a classification system that levels the playing field. That classification system puts individuals into specific categories by assessing their disabilities and recommending specific actions for each athlete. I have been fortunate enough to have participated in a full-up Warrior Games in 2022, held in Orlando at the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex at the Walt Disney World Resort and again this year out in San Diego at NAS Coronado Island for the Warrior Games Challenge, representing USSOCOM in both. These games provide our wounded, injured, and ill service members the opportunity to have a sense of belonging once more, providing a much needed sense of purpose, which we enjoyed while serving but was stripped away when we took off the uniform for the last time. These events make it easy to get out of the house to practice and participate. This year, the events I participated in were archery, air pistol, air rifle, and sitting volleyball.

I entered this year's games with several goals in mind, which included making the finals in both archery and shooting; that means scoring in the top eight within the category out of roughly 120 contestants. Next, I wanted to increase my archery score from the previous year, and also make the USSOCOM three-person archery team. I am proud to say that I met and exceeded all of these goals. One of the biggest improvements came in archery, where I increased my score by more than 100 points from the 2022 event. This earned me a fifth-place finish in the individual category. Improving my score by over 100 points, also allowed me to qualify for a place on the three-person archery team. I finished the competitive archery events earning the bronze medal. I also had a big improvement in the air pistol competition. I increased my score by 50- plus points, allowing me to make the top eight and finishing seventh overall. I also helped the USSOCOM team earn a gold medal in sitting volleyball.

Overall, the USSOCOM team earned a substantial number of medals which is impressive, especially when considering how small the team truly is. This year the team achieved several milestones, like medaling in every team event available for the first time in the team's history. It was, and is, great to be a part of a winning team again!

There are several photos with this article, which include my wife Mona, my service dog Becker, and myself at different points of the competition such as after claiming bronze in the team archery event and with me earning the gold medal in sitting volleyball just to name a few. We also had a celebrity moment with Prince Harry attending the gold medal match against the Air Force in sitting volleyball. Prince Harry founded the Invictus Games in 2014, after he visited the Warrior Games competition in 2013.

After this year's events, I got right back into training so I am able to qualify for the USSOCOM team again for the 2024 Warrior Games, which will be back in Orlando at the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex. My training regimen consists of five to eight hours of training a day, five to six days a week for all of the events in which I compete. A typical training day consists of working with the bow and arrow for two to four hours, shooting anywhere from 30 to 200 arrows a day. The training for the air pistol and air rifle is similar, spending that time shooting anywhere from 50 to 150 pellets a day through each piece of equipment, spending another two to four hours of training in each discipline. I also practice for the sitting volleyball for roughly an hour going through the various drills we perform to get game ready. I am able to spend the time training because I am medically retired due to the numerous disabilities, and because I have

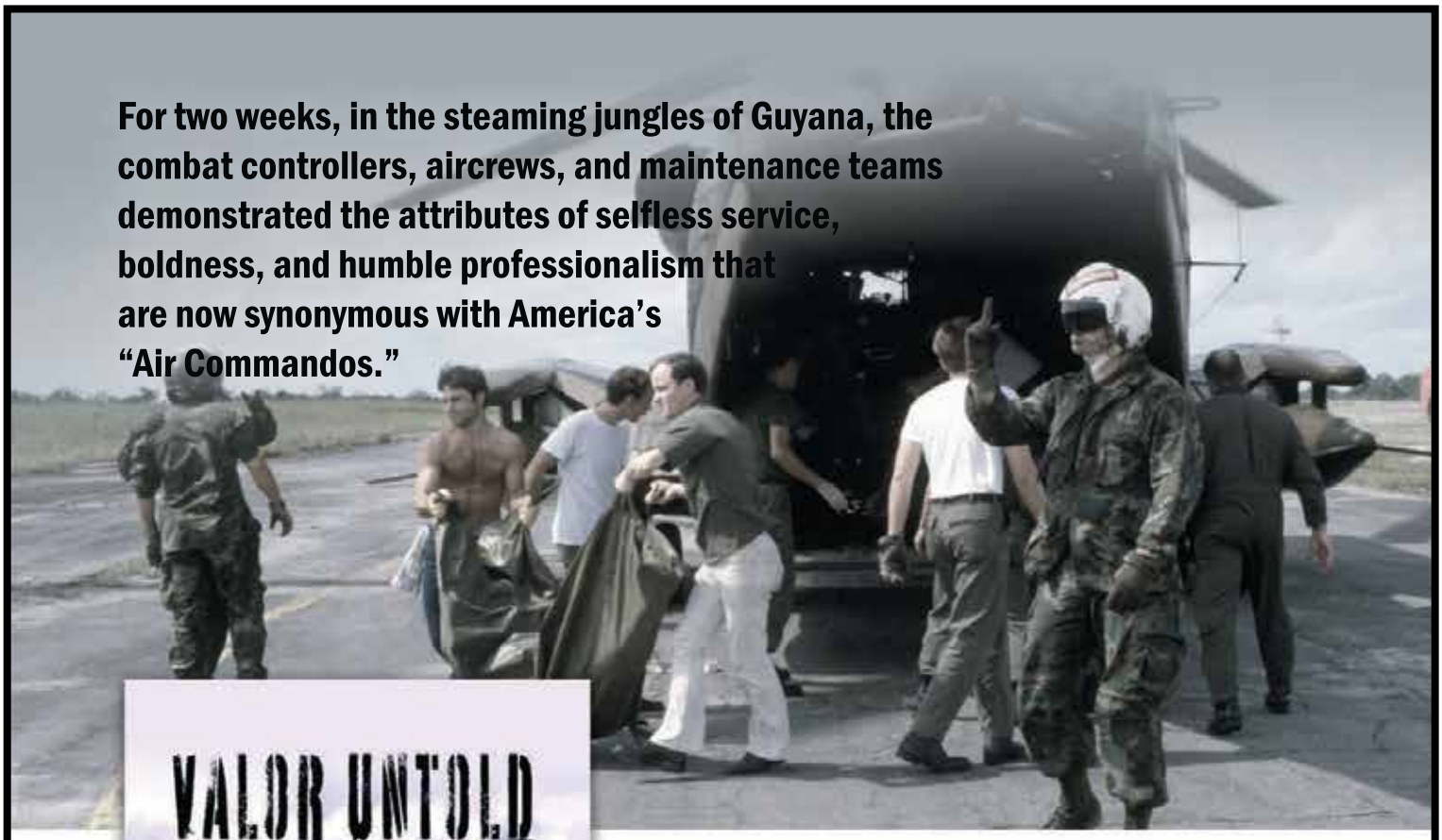
the tremendous support of my awesome wife, Mona. She is qualified to be my non-medical assistant, so she is able to travel with me to all of the camps and the Games. She is the rock upon which I am very reliant and it allows me to focus on maintaining a steady level of concentration and dedication to my training regimen. I am also fortunate to have high quality coaches for each of the events. I send them pictures and videos of me practicing so they are able to provide recommendations to my training plan and actually work on giving me pointers to improve in each of the respective disciplines.

The competition is fierce to earn one of the few spots available on the USSOCOM team. This is especially true in the veteran category, where only a handful are selected. I feel very fortunate and blessed to have had the opportunity to be selected to represent USSOCOM and Air Commandos around the world in this highly competitive experience and look forward to qualifying for the 2024 Warrior Games.

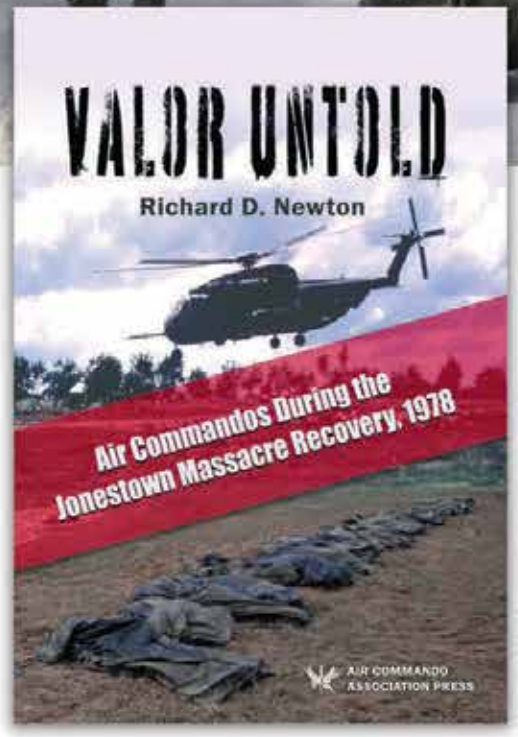
Finally, the Warrior Games are a steppingstone to the Invictus Games, where teams from around the world compete. The Invictus Games are held bi-annually, most recently, in Dusseldorf, Germany. I am working hard to increase my archery score by another 50 to 100 points with the goal of earning an individual medal in that discipline as a part of the 2024 SOCOM Games Team and all the training will pay dividends toward the goal of competing in the 2027 summer Invictus Games. The Warrior Games and the Invictus Games will provide the opportunity to see old friends and make new ones. This is one of the therapeutic benefits of the Games because it allows us the ability to bond with other brothers and sisters across the services who are also faced with similar physical and psychological challenges. This is one of the positive effects of the Games; the interaction which occurs between the individuals competing while sharing various aspects and lessons learned.

I appreciate your time as I share my experience participating in the various Warrior Games events and hope you have enjoyed the read. Hopefully, this encourages those active duty or veterans out there to become interested in trying out for either the USSOCOM or Air Force teams. The Warrior Games and Invictus Games are great events for service members, giving them the opportunity to come out of their shell and compete at a high level. If you are not interested in competing, you can follow the different events and competitions on the Warrior Games website, where the events are streamed for public viewing. For more information about the DoD Warrior Games—teams, events, results, and much more go to www.dodwarriorgames.com. Thank you again for your interest and I wish all Air Commandos out there a healthy and prosperous New Year!

About the Author: CMSgt Lou Orrie retired from the Air Force after 30 years of service. He began his career as a weapons technician and after 6 years crossed trained as a helicopter aerial gunner flying on the MH-53J/M Pave Low helicopter for 15 years. Later, he became a C-17 airdrop loadmaster before becoming a group superintendent. Chief Orrie finished his career in leadership roles as two-time Command Chief and finally at Headquarters Air Force Special Operations Command as the operations directorate Superintendent and Career Enlisted Aviator Career Field Manager. Chief Orrie and his wife Mona live in Fort Walton Beach, Florida.



For two weeks, in the steaming jungles of Guyana, the combat controllers, aircrews, and maintenance teams demonstrated the attributes of selfless service, boldness, and humble professionalism that are now synonymous with America's "Air Commandos."



FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER:
The untold story of Air Commandos responding to the Jonestown Massacre

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A PC-12 Pilatus parked on Cannon's flightline Jan 8, 2008 and was the first of several planned aircraft to be assigned to the 318th Special Operations Squadron over the next four years.
(U.S. Air Force photo by A1C Evelyn Chavez)