



The Airlifter

Newsletter of the Troop Carrier/Tactical Airlift Association
Promoting and preserving the troop carrier/tactical airlift heritage
www.troopcarrier.org

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Finances

There is currently \$29,640.14 in the account. The only expenditures are \$12.60 per month for the web site.

Ralph Bemis, Treasurer

Chairman's Corner

CEO Comments

Greetings to all! Our planners are very involved in making October 21-24, 2020 a great Reunion. Mike Welch has recovered and is busy keeping our associations affairs in order. In addition to Mike, Brent Richburg, Ed Merck and Bill Kehler are making arrangements for everything we need in Branson, Missouri. We are happy to learn that Bill Kehler is making good progress after his serious medical condition. George Dockery is now our CEO Emeritis. It has been our great good fortune to have had George Dockery as our CEO these past years.

In Branson, our hotel will be the Lodge of the Ozarks located in the entertainment district. Many shows, restaurants and attractions are only a short distance from the hotel. Branson is known as the "Live Entertainment Capitol of the World". You can be entertained from morning to night with dinner shows, live entertainment and big name touring acts. There is really something for everyone.

Branson is military friendly. From my experience, in many shows you will be recognized as a proud service man/woman or veteran. A must see is the Veterans Memorial Museum, a national tribute to our brave men and women who defended our liberties during the 20th Century.

This will be a fantastic Reunion!!! Talk to your friends who are troop carrier/tactical airlift veterans. Encourage them to come. They will have a wonderful time in this entertainment capital while renewing old memories and enjoying the camaraderie we all enjoy. Persuade them to join our Troop Carrier/Tactical Airlift Association. Guide them to our website, www.troopcarrier.org. They will be

glad they did and we will be proud to have them as new members. Since Branson is not an airline hub I decided to look up some travel information that may be helpful in arranging your trip to our reunion. The airline travel experts say in the fall you get the best deals 69 days before you depart and that Tuesdays and Wednesdays are the best days of the week to fly. The nearest airline destination is Springfield (SGF). It is about an hour drive north of Branson. If you do not want to rent a car in Springfield, two services are available to take you to Branson at a current price of \$90.00 for two people. They are Ride with us, 417-336-2625 and The Branson Loop, 417-320-6035. Advance reservations are recommended. Come early and stay late, and have fun!! Register early to help our planners. Persuade your troop carrier and tactical airlift buddies to sign up and come. This will be the place to be on October 21-24, 2020. SEE YOU THERE!!

President's Message

Hey Troop Carrier and Tac Airlifters. Hope this message finds everybody's health in tip top shape. Sorry I did not make the 2018 Reunion in Fairborn, OH but after 147 days in the hospital I am ready for the 2020 Reunion in Branson, MO. Thanks to Brent Richburg and Ray Snedegar for filling in for me and making the Fairborn Reunion a success.

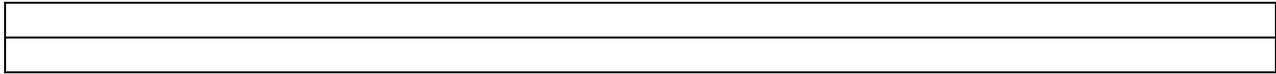
Speaking about our upcoming Reunion. It is scheduled for October 22 - 25, 2020 at the Lodge of the Ozarks for \$99 a night including breakfast. This rate is available if you register before September 22, 2020. Agenda is being coordinated now but here is a few items to wet your appetite. (1) Dinner Cruise on Branson Belle; (2) Lots of Country Western Music Shows in Downtown; (3) Military Museums in the area - Veterans Memorial Museum; Foster Museum at College of the Ozarks; and Air & Military Museum - Ozarks. All registrations will be handled by Taunya Lay, Branson Ticket & Travel, Phone 800.432.4202. Many ways you can pay this time - credit or debit card, check, etc.

Membership is now 406 but unfortunately we are starting to lose some of the "Veterans", as 31 now are Deceased. We now have 110 Ten-Year Members and 70 Life Members in which 50% of them are WWII (Free). If you are a regular two-year member, your dues are probably due to our Treasurer, Ralph Bemis. Please renew as soon as possible as our Secretary, Brent Richburg is starting to send out late dues notices. 10-Year Members – if you joined in 2008 or 2009 you are due to renew – why not go for the gold and up it to LIFE?

Thanks goes to Brent, Ed Merck, our Web Master and Aryn Lockhart as they are putting together the 2018 Reunion photos for the web site.

Looking forward to seeing everybody in 14 months in Branson, MO - Load Clear.

Mike Welch, President, TC/TAA



Sorrowful Times

The past years have been a sorrowful time for our organization. We have lost an unprecedented number of our members, many to some form of cancer or other disease associated with exposure to herbicides in South Vietnam. Furthermore, many were comparatively young men, still in their sixties and early seventies, and in some cases younger than that. Many, if not all, succumbed to some form of cancer and ALL served in South Vietnam where they were exposed to herbicides such as the infamous Agent Orange. Since our organization was formed in 2006, we have lost a president, two actually since Hector Leyva was our first president after we officially organized, and several board members as well as “rank and file” members. Our most recent losses were Sherman “Gomer” Pyle, a loadmaster who was involved with the organization from the get-go and was an original board member and Andy Sich, who recently joined the organization.

Sherman “Gomer” Pyle



Gomer started out as an aircraft mechanic and was working on a C-123 at Biggs AFB, Texas when the Air Force put out a call for men to cross-train into the aircraft loadmaster career field due to an expansion of airlift capability. Along with hundreds of others, his application was approved, and he transferred to Forbes AFB, Kansas where he joined the newly formed 29th Troop Carrier Squadron. Two years later the 29th transferred to Clark AB, Philippines and Gomer went with it. By this time, he had been designated as an instructor and was assigned to the 463rd TCW Stan/Eval section. He spent two years at Clark flying combat missions in South Vietnam.

From Clark, Gomer went to Charleston AFB, South Carolina where he was assigned to the 437th Aerial Port Squadron aerial delivery section. Like many other lower ranking loadmaster NCOs, he was picked for another overseas assignment and went to Phan Rang AB, SVN. (He did not list his C-123 assignment on his TC/TAA application.) Gomer never received the Distinguished Flying Cross even though he flew in Vietnam during the most intense period of the war in early 1968.

After his Vietnam assignment, Gomer returned to C-130s at Little Rock, where was assigned to the 61st TAS. He retired from the Air Force as a senior master sergeant then went to work for an air freight carrier and was a station manager in Korea. His home was in Niceville, Florida.

August – September 2018 was a very bad time for our organization – we lost three members within a few days.

Kent Goldsmith

Little Rock native Kent Goldsmith had a varied and exciting life. He worked as a cab driver in Paris, France, served in a diplomatic role in Asia as well as flying a variety of Air Force airplanes. The C-130 was his favorite. He was in the 61st TCS at Sewart and the 40th TCS in C-130s and was with the 310th Air Commando Squadron in C-123s. He also served with 315th Air Division in Japan.

Hector Leyva



Hector came to us when we had our organizational meeting in February 2008 in Clear Lake, Texas. (The organization was chartered in June 2006, but it wasn't until the Clear Lake meeting that we adopted bylaws.) Because of his background, we elected him president!

Hector's association with tactical airlift started when he was assigned to the 62nd Tactical Airlift Squadron as a loadmaster cross-trainee. He spent several years at Sewart before he received orders to CCK AB, Taiwan where he was assigned to the 776th TAS. Although he arrived at CCK at a time when it seemed that the Vietnam War was in its final stages, the intensity of the conflict suddenly escalated when the North Vietnamese launched an attack that was intended to end in Saigon. The attack stalled when the attacking force was unable to subdue the South Vietnamese garrison at An Loc. After Vietnamese Air Force C-123s were unable to supply the defenders, Seventh Air Force was directed to mount a supply effort. Hector was one of the loadmasters on the first C-130 in a three-airplane formation that attempted to drop supplies on April 15, 1972. Hector was awarded the first of three DFCs for the mission. After being grounded for medical reasons, Hector went

into the education and training field. At the time of his retirement, he was vice-commander of the Tactical Air Command NCO Academy at Bergstrom AFB, Texas.

Hector retired from the Air Force in 1984 and went to work for the US Treasury Department, where he held a number of important positions before retiring to San Antonio. He was elected president of the TC/TAA in February 2008 but declined to continue in that role after his three-year term due to health issues. He moved to El Paso where he passed away on August 28, 2018.

Gordon Hartley



Retired flight engineer Gordon Hartley passed away on September 14, 2018. During his 22-year Air Force career, he was stationed at Dyess with the 347th TCS, the 773rd TAS at Clark and the 48th TAS at Forbes. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for a mission into Bu Dop on November 29, 1969. He served a tour with the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service and with the 16th ATS at Little Rock, where he retired. After his retirement, he worked for a local golf cart company before going into business for himself then, after fully retiring, worked at the pharmacy on Little Rock Air Force Base. Gordon was heavily involved with the DFC Society. He served as president of the Eaker Little

Rock Chapter 2009-2013.

George Theis

We only recently learned of the death of George Theis, one of our World War II members. George was a glider pilot in World War II and was heavily involved with the Glider Pilots Association long before he became a member of the association. No obituary is available on the Internet but someone notified us that he passed away in 2017.

Lynn D. Olson



Lynn Olson was a flight line mechanic/crew chief with the 374th TAW at CCK. An airplane he crewed was lost during the resupply of An Loc in the spring of 1972. He was also with the 463rd TAW at Dyess. After his Air Force hitch, he went to work for Lockheed International and went to Saudi Arabia. He then took a job with an aircraft maintenance facility at Fargo in his native North Dakota prior to signing on with Continental Airlines at Chicago's O'Hare Airport. He worked for Continental until 2003 when a work-related injury forced him into retirement. He remained in the Chicago area until 2015, when he moved back to North Dakota where he lived until his death on July 18, 2019. Lynn was very proud of his

military service. He loved the C-130.

Jack D. Brankamp



Jack D. Brankamp of Hubert Heights, Ohio served with Det. 5, 8th Aerial Port Squadron at Bien Hoa, RVN as a passenger service specialist. He was involved with 8th MAP reunions. After leaving the Air Force, he worked in restaurant and retail management until his retirement in 2009. Jack was heavily involved with the Veterans of Foreign Wars, initially as a member then in a leadership role. He received numerous awards for his work helping veterans. In one instance, he led his local VFW chapter in an effort to pay the funeral expenses of an Air Force Reservist from Dayton who was murdered, and her body dumped into a river. After his death on May 28, 2018, he was honored by the Huber Heights City Council, and city flags were flown at half-staff in his honor.

Garry Arndt

Also a resident of Huber Heights, Ohio, Garry Arndt was a retired Air Force NCO who spent part of his career as an aircraft loadmaster. He started out on C-124s with the 8th Troop Carrier Squadron at McChord AFB, Washington. He served overseas with an ARRS unit prior to his assignment to the 7th Aerial Port Squadron at Naha AB, Okinawa. He also served a year in South Vietnam. While at Charleston AFB, SC he quit flying due to his wife's medical condition and was retrained. After retiring, he volunteered at the USAF Museum in Dayton. Garry played a role in the selection of the site for the monument the Association placed at the Museum in October 2018. Although Garry was at the museum for the placement of the memorial, he did not live to see the dedication. He passed away on August 24, 2018.

Andy Sich



Andrew G. Sich, or Andy, as he was known, passed away in early September after having recently been diagnosed with lung cancer. A New Yorker, Andy was a loadmaster with the 7th Aerial Port Squadron at Tachikawa AB, Japan. In the spring of 1966, he was TDY to Ubon, Thailand on a "Blind Bat" C-130 fleaship crew. During that tour, Andy became a REAL hero. An experimental flare launcher was sent down to Ubon from Naha. The launcher was a plug that mounted in

the left paratroop door. The door was raised to the fully open position and the launcher was locked in its place. The lower portion of the plug was the flare launcher.

According to accounts, one of the loadmasters on the crew assigned to test it got sick on the flightline and had to be replaced. Someone went to the hooches to find another loadmaster and came back with Andy, who was on another crew that wasn't flying that night. Although he was assigned to the 7th Aerial Port Squadron at Tachi, he was flying with a Naha crew. Later that night, a flare hung in the launcher. The crew tried to jettison the launcher, but it wouldn't release. Here is what the citation for Andy's DFC says about it - "The President of the United States takes great pleasure in presenting the Distinguished Flying

Cross to Airman Second Class Andrew G. Sich for heroism while participating in aerial flight as an aircrew member on 30 August 1966.¹ On that date, while flying on a flare drop mission over hostile territory in Southeast Asia, a 24-million candlepower flare ignited in the flare-dispensing apparatus. In his efforts to jettison the ignited flare, a second flare exploded and inflicted severe burns and wounds to his left hand. Despite the hazardous conditions involved, Airman Sich successfully jettisoned the two flares and prevented the loss of crew and aircraft. The outstanding heroism and selfless devotion to duty displayed by Airman Sich reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.” It was rumored that he was put in for the Silver Star – and that it was downgraded to an Air Medal, although he was one of the first C-130 crewmembers to be awarded the DFC.

After leaving Tachi, Andy went to Lockbourne where he was assigned to the 40th TCS. He left the service at the end of his four-year hitch and returned to New York. Andy was an avid outdoorsman – even though he grew up in and spent most of his life in New York City, He loved to fish. Andy was involved with Blind Bat and 40th TCS reunions. He recently joined the TC/TAA and was at the Dayton reunion last year.

The following is from Ken Schamens:

The Villages Honor Flight # 42 was the most memorable of my life. The cards and letters of love brought tears to my eyes and I was humbled by the outpouring of care especially from my guardian Kitty McIntyre and the Village Honor Flight Staff and assistants who planned and carried out this flight. Thank you, thank you for serving us with a love beyond description.

Reflections from Villages Honor Flight 42 to Washington DC Oct 31, 2018

From 1965-1968, I was involved in the rapid buildup of combat C-130 airlift including flying as a pilot and establishing operational detachments in Vietnam as Chief of Airlift Programs, 315th Air Division, Tachikawa AB, Japan. I witnessed many Army/Air Force personnel making good use of empty Agent Orange Barrels (they had an orange stripe around the barrel) for showers and barbecue grills. What started as a small operation with a few C-123s in 1962 (called Ranch Hand) became a major operation by 1968 with 36 aircraft, each equipped with 1,000 gallon spray mechanism dispensing about 35,000 gallons/day. The purpose was to deny the enemy vegetation/jungle canopy and food supply. Then came the surprise attack on Tan Son Nhut AB (Saigon) in May of 1968 carried out, not by just North Vietnamese, but Viet Cong comprised of farmers and some who worked at the base and put on black pajamas becoming Viet Cong by night. By August of 1968, there was a major change of command. Army General Creighton Abrams became Military Commander of Vietnam and Air Force General George

¹ The date may be in error. The actual action occurred in the spring. (The editor was there.) Perhaps the date was incorrect in the citation or it may be a typo since the citation was copied onto a personal Facebook page after Andy's passing.

S Brown became the air component commander (7th Air Force). They were both close friends & polar opposites of their predecessors. General Abrams' quote: "You people are telling me what you think I want to know. I want to know what is actually happening."

In August 1968 I was assigned as special projects officer to General Brown, one of which was "Ranch Hand/Agent Orange." In late 1968 the Army wanted to increase the Ranch Hand/Agent Orange program from 36 aircraft to 54 aircraft. Gen Brown asked me to do a background review of the Ranch Hand operation and a deep dive into operating costs and human costs. He was convinced, from his experience in Kansas and Missouri, that you can't spray systemic dioxin on plants without having an adverse impact on humans and the food chain. We knew nothing about DNA in those days. I found when the old two-engine C-123s lost an engine they had to dump the toxic Agent Orange, one such incident took place over the Saigon river killing fish. To overcome the engine problem, auxiliary JATO assist rockets were installed to provide more lift. Additionally spray was being carried by winds over areas not intended to be sprayed. Also, 12-16 fighter aircraft/day were needed to suppress ground fire on the slow operating C-123s who were flying in 6-8 groups of formations containing 5 aircraft (30-39 aircraft) spraying about 35,000 gallons of herbicide a day. While cost of a barrel of Agent Orange was only around \$8, it did NOT include the costs of shipment to Vietnam from US producers Dow/Monsanto. By late 1968 we had sprayed nearly 19 million gallons of herbicide, of which 11 million gallons were Agent Orange. The study concluded that we were expending around \$1 million/day. Also, there was evidence that upset farmers were joining the Viet Cong and NVA. The final conclusion was that there may be a significant unidentifiable human cost based on dioxin levels found in food and fish that had been exposed.

In 1969, General Brown took the study to Gen Abrams and on the day of the Army's briefing to Gen Abrams on the results of the herbicide operation and request for more aircraft, Gen Abrams, in his crusty way, thanked those involved, then said: "Gen Brown and I have decided to significantly reduce and terminate the Ranch Hand/Agent Orange program as soon as possible." Both got up and left the room. Gen Brown had the Ranch Hand aircraft de-configured and the last mission was flown around March 1970.

In August 1974 Gen George S Brown became Chairman of the JCS, retiring in June of 1978 and he died of prostate cancer Dec 5, 1978. Gen Creighton Abrams became Chief of Staff of the Army in 1972 and died of cancer Sept 4, 1974. Both General Creighton Abrams and General George S Brown were 60 years of age and are buried near each other in Arlington Cemetery. On the Vietnam wall are names of 58,000 killed. Excluded are the 300,000 servicemen who died of Agent Orange and the 4 million Vietnamese who have died of related causes.

Currently, I'm living with Agent Orange/cancer which has resulted in the loss of one kidney, 2 feet of small intestine removed and prostate cancer which is now in remission from radiation treatments. While I suffer other related issues, **I'm comforted by the Grace of our God and the faith and forgiveness granted me through the cross of God's Son Jesus Christ—who is symbolically imbedded/mirrored in the Korean Memorial Black wall. That faith motivates me to continue to bring healing to others who have been wounded by Agent Orange.** Kenneth W. Schamens, Col (USAF, Ret). 9911 SW 63rd Loop, Ocala FL 34481-2647

Franklin Field, Nevada

Not many veterans have an airfield named after them, but Irl Franklin, who also goes by Leon, does. Leon is an old-time troop carrier pilot whose career goes back to C-123s with the 331st Troop Carrier Squadron at Sewart AFB, Tennessee. He moved to Pope and was with the 464th Troop Carrier Wing when Tactical Air Command decided to equip the 779th Troop Carrier Squadron with modified C-130s designed for low-altitude operations, at night, for the mission of supporting forces operating deep inside hostile territory. He is best known for participating in the attempted rescue raid on the Son Tay POW camp in North Vietnam when he flew one of two modified C-130Es that were involved in the raid. Leon retired in Winemucca, Nevada where he ran the local airport and was heavily involved with the Civil Air Patrol.



The following is a recent news release:

On Saturday, April 20, (2019) at 10:00 am, local dignitaries, Civil Air Patrol Nevada Wing and Pacific Region command staff and members will gather at the Winemucca Municipal Airport to honor Lt. Col. Irl “Leon” Franklin, USAF (Ret.) with the dedication of an airport entranceway marker engraved “Franklin Field.”

Begun as a proposal by local citizens and veterans' groups in late 2018, the Franklin Field marker honors Lt. Col. Franklin's forty years of public service to the citizens of Winnemucca and Humboldt County. The aviator is a FAA Wright Brothers Master Pilot awardee. Franklin operated a charter flying and flight instruction service at the airport for many years. He also served thirty years (1988-2018) on the Winnemucca Airport Advisory Board, over 20 years as its chairman. During his tenure he helped to secure multiple FAA grants to make, in the words of former City of Winnemucca Airport manager, Stephen D. West's words, "One of the nicest rural airports in Nevada."



In 1999, Lt. Col. Franklin was a founding member and the first commander of the Humboldt County Composite Squadron of the Civil Air Patrol and has been an active member ever since. His other volunteer community service includes lifetime membership in the Winnemucca Host Lions Club and serving on the Nevada Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Board.

The public is invited to this dedication ceremony. Light refreshments will be served at the Humboldt County Composite Squadron building, on the airport, immediately following.

Civil Air Patrol, the official auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force, is a nonprofit organization with 61,066 members nationwide. CAP performs 90 percent of continental U.S. inland search and rescue missions as tasked by the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center and was credited by the AFRCC with saving 158 lives

in fiscal year 2018 its volunteers also perform homeland security, disaster relief and counterdrug missions at the request of federal, state and local agencies. The members play a leading role in aerospace education and serve as mentors to more than 22,000 young people currently participating in CAP cadet programs. CAP has been performing missions for America since 1941.

Carolina Moon



A SEWART-BASED C-130E AT DONG HA IN 1965

During World War II, the British Royal Air Force trained a heavy bomber squadron to fly extremely low-level missions at night to deliver specially-developed cylindrical weapons to blow up crucial dams in Germany's Ruhr Valley. In 1965, the United States Air Force began development of a similar project, although the target wasn't a dam. It was an elusive bridge across the Song Ma River in North Vietnam at a place called The Dragon's Jaw. The massive bridge, which had only recently been erected to

replace a French-built bridge that had been destroyed by the Viet Minh during the French

Indochina War by running two explosive-laden locomotives together on top of it, had become one of the two most difficult targets in North Vietnam. Numerous attacks by Air Force and Navy fighter-bombers with missiles and bombs failed to do more than put holes in the pavement. (The Air Force had restricted B-52 attacks to targets south of the DMZ.)

Working with the Oak Ridge Laboratory, Air Force munitions experts at Eglin AFB, Florida came up with a means of "mass-focusing" an explosive so that the force would be directional. Fuses that had originally been developed for Bomarc anti-aircraft missiles would focus on the bridge structure and set the weapon off as it passed under it. Tests demonstrated the concept was workable. Each weapon weighed some 4,000 pounds, was eight feet wide and three feet tall and was, according to one source, shaped "like a hot tub." (They have also been described as shaped "like pancakes.") The problem was that the new weapons, which were designed to be dropped into a river and float under the target, could only be delivered by cargo airplanes, C-123s and C-130s. A detachment of 2nd Aerial Port aerial delivery personnel went to Eglin from Sewart AFB, Tennessee to develop a means of delivering the weapons. According to Norman Clanton, the navigator on the primary crew, the weapons were rigged so they could be delivered using standard 463L heavy drop procedures. Each weapon was equipped with two G-12 parachutes rigged so that the parachutes would automatically release when the weapon hit the water. The

intent was to drop the weapons into the river and allow them to float under the bridge, where the fuses would detect the metal and they would detonate. Seventy-five shapes were dropped during testing at Eglin, some from C-123s and some from C-130s. Although C-123s were capable of delivering the weapons, officers in 2nd Air Division, the command element in South Vietnam, insisted on C-130s due to their higher speed and larger payload. A single C-130 could deliver five weapons while a C-123 could only carry three.

Two crews were selected for the mission, one from the 61st and one from the 62nd Troop Carrier Squadron at Sewart.² The aircraft commanders were Majors Richard Remers of the 62nd and Thomas Case of the 61st. A second navigator was part of each crew due to the precise navigation required. One of Remers' navigators was Lt. William R. "Rocky" Edmondson, who had extensive experience operating over North Vietnam in his previous assignment at Naha AB, Okinawa where he had been heavily involved with the flare mission. Remer's other crewmembers were Lt. Thomas M Turner, copilot; Capt. Norman G. Clanton, navigator; MSgt John Shields, flight mechanic; and SSgt Aubrey Turner and A3c Johnny Benoit, loadmasters. Case's crew consisted of Lt. Harold J Zook, copilot; Capt. Emmett R. MacDonald and Capt. Armon D. Shinkledecker, navigators; SSgt Bobby Joe Alberton, flight mechanic and Airmen First Class Philip J. Stickney and Elroy E. Harworth, loadmasters. Remers' crew was primary and Case was alternate. Two brand new C-130Es, 64-0511 and 64-0513 were assigned to the mission. The two airplanes were identical, with one exception – 64-0513 was equipped with an APN-161 Ka-Band radar, an experimental improved version of the APN-59s installed on C-130s that was under development for the planned all-weather airdrop system (AWADS). The new radar offered a high-resolution ground display. Captain Clanton had been assigned to test the new radar prior to being picked for CAROLINA MOON after the navigator originally assigned to the test program departed for overseas. Remers' crew was apparently primary for the mission because they had been testing the new radar. The aircraft radar was important for the mission because the pilots would be flying at **one hundred feet, at night**, over unfamiliar terrain.³ Since the delivery method called for the crews to drop the weapons in the river upstream from the bridge, they had to fly a route that took them overland for just under ten minutes to reach their drop point in the river, which flowed northwest to southeast before making a sharp turn to the east just upstream from the bridge. Between 11 April and 15 May 1966, the two crews trained at Eglin for the operation. The training included 3 hours of mission orientation, 40 hours of weapon system training, 20 hours of target study, 20 hours of mission planning, 25 hours of day mission training, and 50 hours of night mission training. The last 2 segments involved 2 and 7 weapon drops; the 2 crews completed a total of 14 drops.

By mid-May, the two crews had completed their training. They departed Eglin on 15 May for Da Nang, Republic of South Vietnam, where they arrived on 19 May with five weapons aboard each airplane.⁴ They were on TDY with the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing. The order to execute the mission went

² The two crews are often erroneously shown as being from the 314th Troop Carrier Wing. Actually, the wing had transferred to CCK and a provisional wing had activated at Sewart and the 61st and 62nd transferred into it.

³ A recently published book about the Than Hoa bridge attacks claims C-130 navigators weren't trained in radar navigation!

⁴ Their families were not aware that they had been sent to Vietnam on a Top Secret mission. They thought they were at Eglin.

out from Headquarters, PACAF on 20 May. After they got to Da Nang, the two crews engaged in planning for the mission, including selecting a route to the drop zone, which was a mile northwest of the bridge. They were well aware of heavy concentrations of anti-aircraft around the bridge and were depending on the element of surprise to catch the gunners off-guard. In the event the atmosphere was too hostile for the primary drop point, a secondary point two miles upstream had been designated. An Air Force historical account relates that the two crews debated whether to wear armor or parachutes; they couldn't wear both. Remers believed the C-130 could survive multiple hits and gain enough altitude to bail out; Case felt that their low-altitude would make a bailout difficult, if not impossible. Finally, Remers decided that his crew would wear parachutes and Case decided to wear the armor. The strike was planned for the night of 29 May. Two days prior to the mission, intelligence reported five additional anti-aircraft positions in the vicinity of the bridge. The plan was re-evaluated and determined to be sound.



THANH HOA BRIDGE AT THE DRAGON'S JAW

Major Remers went out right after midnight on May 30 for the strike. Case's crew also launched to be ready in case the other crew had to abort and flew with them to near the ingress point before they turned back. Two F-4s were scheduled to make a diversionary strike south of the bridge. An hour after takeoff, they reached their coast-in point.⁵ The plan called for just under ten minutes at low-level to reach the secondary release point two miles northwest of the bridge. Depending on ground fire, the crew would either drop there or continue to the primary point a mile downriver. As they approached the first release

⁵ Whether the coast-in point was north or south of the target is uncertain. The river flows generally from northwest to southeast but a couple of miles upstream from the bridge, it makes a northward turn and flows generally eastward from there to the sea.

point, Remers popped-up to 400 feet, the planned altitude for the drop. They hadn't received any ground fire so he decided to press on to the point closer to the bridge. By this time, their presence had been detected and they were greeted by light ground fire, but it was too late to turn back; they pressed on. None of the antiaircraft came closer than a few hundred feet. They made the drop then Remers banked to the right and dove back to a hundred feet and headed for the Gulf of Tonkin, which was only a few miles to the east. The crew went back to Da Nang, where they celebrated their survival with a bottle of Jim Beam whiskey for the officers and beer for the enlisted men.⁶ The men were told they were being put in for Silver Stars but if they were, they never materialized. Four of their mines were found to have detonated but caused minimal damage to the bridge. The fifth was recovered by the North Vietnamese after its self-destruct mechanism failed.

Unfortunately, reconnaissance flights made shortly after daybreak revealed that the bridge was still standing so the other crew was scheduled to make a second attack that night. Case and his navigators made a change to the route and their departure time was slipped back an hour. Rocky Edmondson volunteered to go along on the second mission and Case accepted his offer. They took off at ten minutes after their planned departure of 0100 and were never heard from again. Other aircraft operating over North Vietnam later that night – including a C-130 flareship on station some 70 miles to the south – reported a large flash on the ground about the time of the planned attack. Intelligence claimed that interrogated North Vietnamese sailors said that the weapons had been dropped into the river but failed to explode. Several Vietnamese accounts make various claims.

What actually happened to the ill-fated crew will never be known. Their route seems to have passed in close proximity to a North Vietnamese airfield some 25 miles from Son Tay. Antiaircraft gunners at the airfield claim they heard the low-flying C-130 and put up a barrage of fire and it crashed. The crash site has been located well to the west of the bridge. Authors Steve Coontz and Barrett Tillman believe the airplane was hit but that Major Case turned toward Laos in an attempt to bail out and crashed. There are a couple of things wrong with this theory. For one thing, Case had decided not to wear parachutes. Second, they would have been only a few miles from the Gulf of Tonkin where their chances of rescue in the event of a successful ditching or bailout would have been good (with an emphasis on “successful”). Third, no MAYDAY message was picked up by other aircraft in the vicinity, of which there were several, or the Navy destroyer that had been positioned just offshore to pick up survivors. Another reason is that film footage of the wreckage of the airplane published by Communist sources were analyzed and was determined to indicate that the airplane hit the ground in level flight. It is likely that they never reached the release point but were either hit by the antiaircraft and crashed or they simply flew into the ground. Regardless, the actions of the two crews are beyond heroic just for attempting a nearly impossible mission. Although members of the two crews were put in for the Silver Star, the awards were downgraded to an Air Medal for everyone but Remers, who got a DFC. The members of Case's crew were awarded posthumous DFCs.

⁶ I AM NOT making this up! This is right out of the history.