



The Airlifter

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Promoting and preserving the troop carrier/tactical airlift heritage
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Kham Duc Special



KHAM DUC (RAY MERRITT)

At our Tucson convention, Ernie Gassiott gave me a thick volume of papers with a circular binding with the title Kham Duc/Ngok Tavak that he had purchased at a reunion of survivors of the historic, but frequently overlooked, battle and subsequent evacuation. He told me to put it on the table where anyone who was interested could look at it, then take it home and use it for research. I was happy to do so. Even

though I already have quite a bit of information about the events of those three May 1968 days, it would add to what I already have.

My first recollection of the battle was an account I saw in Air Force Times a few days after the evacuation. Ironically, I had an appointment the next morning with an Army recruiter in Macon, Georgia the next day to discuss switching services as I was well on my way to becoming a private pilot and the Army was crying for men with aviation experience to sign up for their warrant officer flight training program. I got up and got dressed and was just about to head out the door when I saw the article about the two C-130s that had been lost a few days before. I thought to myself, *Screw this! If I switch to the Army, as soon as I get out of flight training they'll be send me to Vietnam and I've already done my time.* Ten months before I had left Naha AB, Okinawa after an 18-month tour that

included several weeks flying FAC/flare missions over Laos and North Vietnam as well as tactical airlift missions all over South Vietnam and Thailand. The war had heated up since then and several C-130s and C-123s had been lost to enemy action. I decided to stay where I was at Robins AFB, Georgia enjoying the good life as a MAC loadmaster on C-141s, drawing per diem and flying in and out of the combat zone at least once a month and getting combat pay and a tax exemption.

As it turned out, a few months later I found out that I was going back to war but not as an Army pilot. Somebody in personnel had decided that my services were needed back in PACAF in the back end of a C-130, only this time I was going to Clark to C-130Bs. After I got there, I met a lot of guys who had been there the previous spring, including my trailer-mate, Tom Stalvey. Kham Duc was a name that was uttered with utmost reverence but with few details. It wasn't until a decade and a half later that I found out about and purchased a copy of the new history of the tactical airlift mission in Southeast Asia that I learned some details of what had happened. It turned out that I knew some of the participants personally, some before the battle and some I met later. My knowledge was expanded when I was on one of several visits I made to the USAF Museum and purchased a monograph by Dr. Alan Gropman about the battle. Since then I've been given documents, including the combat action reports by the senior Army Special Forces officer and the commander of the 196th Infantry Brigade battalion (2nd) that participated in Operation GOLDEN VALLEY. The book Ernie gave me includes a lot more information, including the mission reports of some of the C-130 pilots who participated in the evacuation and the debriefing of TC/TAA member Maj. Billie B. Mills (later colonel.) Most Air Force accounts (with the exception of Dr. Gropman's) focus primarily on the Medal of Honor flight made by the crew commanded by Lt. Col. Joe M. Jackson, but in reality his heroic flight was a postscript to a dramatic series of events that had already concluded; events that took the lives of one C-130 crew and almost claimed at least one other. One C-130 pilot was awarded the prestigious MacKay Trophy for his flight that day while two C-130 pilots and two C-123 pilots were awarded the Air Force Cross (one posthumously) and at least three others were nominated for it for their actions on what was possibly the most heroic day in US Air Force history with the possible exception of the low-level attack on the Ploesti, Romania oil fields in 1943. (Five Medals of Honor were presented for actions over Ploesti, three posthumously.) Without a doubt, it was the most heroic day in airlift history, bar none.

The Two Air Divisions



In May 1968 the airlift organization responsible for operations in South Vietnam was 834th Air Division, which had activated at Tan Son Nhut some eighteen months before after Seventh Air Force

replaced 2nd Air Division as the USAF command organization in South Vietnam. Commanded by Maj. Gen. William G. Moore, a veteran troop carrier commander, the new division was initially staffed with officers with long troop carrier experience, although that started changing as the war continued and replacements came in from other commands. General Moore was replaced by Maj. Gen. Burl McLaughlin, another veteran tactical airlift officer, who was in command in the spring of 1968.

The division commanded two airlift wings, the 315th Air Commando Wing, which was actually a conventional airlift unit equipped with C-123s, and the 483rd Tactical Airlift Wing, which operated C-7 Caribous that had recently transferred to the Air Force from the Army.¹ The division had operational control of C-130s assigned to three wings and an independent squadron under the command of 315th Air Division in Japan under the command of Col. Charles W. Howe, who was arguably the most experienced airlifter in the Air Force.² The division also had operational control over the 22nd Military Airlift Squadron, a former 315th C-124 unit that had transferred to MATS in 1958. The 22nd kept C-124s in South Vietnam for outsize cargo operations. Although plans to base a wing of C-130s in South Vietnam had been floated, an alternate plan had been adopted under which all airlift C-130s were based out-of-country and rotated to bases in Southeast Asia, with crews rotating for sixteen days at a time and the airplanes and their ground crew for nine. Other personnel went TDY to the in-country bases for periods ranging from two weeks to 179 days.

Prior to the activation of 834th, 315th commanded airlift operations in Southeast Asia through detachments in South Vietnam and Thailand. 834th's area of responsibility was confined to South Vietnam; tactical airlift operations in Thailand were under 315th Air Division control. The 374th TAW commanded four squadrons of C-130As based at Naha AB, Okinawa while a fifth squadron based in Japan reported directly to 315th Air Division. The 463rd TAW was based at Mactan AB, Philippines with two squadrons of C-130Bs at Mactan and two at Clark. The 314th TAW was based at Ching Chuan Kang AB, Taiwan with three squadrons of C-130Es.³ In the spring of 1968, each wing provided airplanes and personnel for three 834th detachments at Tan Son Nhut (C-130Bs), Cam Ranh (C-130As and Es) and Tuy Hoa (C-130Es). In addition to the three wings, 315th Air Division also commanded several Tactical Air Command rotational squadrons that had deployed the Pacific in the wake of the Pueblo Crisis and Tet Offensives which had occurred earlier in the year. 834th also commanded the 2nd Aerial Port Group, which included three aerial port squadrons, the 8th APS at Tan Son Nhut, the 14th

¹ The previous August all USAF troop carrier units were redesignated "tactical airlift."

² After flying light and medium attack bombers in the Pacific from 1942-1945, Colonel Howe moved into airlift during the Korean War when he transferred into 315th Air Division as the IG. He commanded the 374th TCG then went to Sewart AFB, Tennessee where he commanded the 314th TCW and 839th Air Division. In the early sixties, he commanded 322nd Air Division in Europe. After a short stint as Director of Air Police, he took command of 315th AD in 1965. Although he held commands that called for a 2-star general, he was never promoted to star rank. When he commanded 315th AD, he was the senior colonel in the Air Force.

³ Operationally, there was no difference between the three models of airplanes although the A-model electrical system was DC while the B and E were AC. The maximum gross weight differed with the A-model being lightest and the E-model heaviest but the differences were due to increased fuel and each model could carry roughly the same payload (30,000 pounds) due to wing limiting fuel considerations. All three models were equipped with Brooks & Perkins dual rails cargo handling systems which allowed rapid on and offload of palletized cargo.

at Cam Ranh and 15th at Da Nang. There was a combat control section assigned to 8th APS.

834th maintained command and control from the Airlift Command Center at Tan Son Nhut and through Airlift Command Elements at various bases around South Vietnam. Communications between the ALCC, the detachments and the ALCEs was maintained by radio, telephone and teletype. Mission requests were passed to the ALCC which then passed them to the detachments and the two wings for scheduling. Once a crew departed its home or TDY base, they maintained contact either directly with the ALCC or with the ALCE at the airfields through which they passed during the course of the day. Depending on the volume of traffic at a forward airfield, communications were maintained through the aerial port detachment or through an airlift mission team. At some airfields, particularly those associated with Army Special Forces A and B teams, there might not be an aerial port detachment, in which case communications were directly with the ALCC in Saigon through radio or telephone. Command and control at such airfields was carried out by the airlift mission commander, a field grade officer serving on temporary duty from one of the offshore C-130 wings specifically to serve as 834th's representative in the field. The mission commander was often accompanied by a combat control team from the 8th Aerial Port combat control section at Tan Son Nhut to operate the radio equipment necessary to maintain communications with the 834th Air Division ALCC.

The Airlift Mission Team



The airlift mission team was a development of airlift operations in South Vietnam in 1966. Airlift specialists at 834th Air Division saw the need for a team consisting of airfreight and combat control personnel and sometimes aircraft maintenance personnel to deploy to airfields where there was no airlift control element (ALCE) to support airlift operations. The three 315th AD C-130 wings provided field-grade officers to 834th Air Division on TDY to serve as airlift mission commanders. Whenever a mission required a mission commander, an officer was sent to the airfield along with whatever support personnel were needed. The mission commander was just that; he was in command of all airlift operations at the airfield to which he was assigned. They were different from the drop zone safety officers who observed training operations in the States and at the C-130 home bases. He was 834th Air Division's representative at the airfield where the operation was taking place. If the mission was at a forward airfield, a combat control team went with him to provide a communications link with 834th Air Division and with the ALCE responsible for the area. Although airdrops were infrequent, if they were necessary the CCT members would set up the drop zone and provide weather and other information to the drop planes. Since most operations involved landings, they provided airfield information to the arriving aircrews and coordinated takeoffs and landings. Although they were

qualified air traffic controllers, their role in Vietnam was more of an advisory nature. Aerial port personnel operated forklifts and other cargo handling equipment to offload the airplanes and move the cargo away from the parking area while passenger service personnel processed passengers.

May 10-12, 1968

The battle of Kham Duc took place over a three-day period in May 1968. Although it is beyond the scope of our story, it began with the attack that overran the outpost at Ngoc Tavak, an old French fort a few miles from the main Civilian Irregular Defense Corps camp at Kham Duc. Kham Duc was not an unfamiliar place to tactical airlifters in South Vietnam. Located in a mountainous area near the Laotian border, Kham Duc was the location of a hunting camp used by high Vietnamese officials. The airfield was blessed with a 6,000-foot asphalt runway but it was not a US military forward base. Instead, the camp was used to train South Vietnamese, who were essentially militia, and for patrols along the border some ten miles to the west. The village of Kham Duc and the camp were in northwestern South Vietnam in Quang Nam Province a little over 100 miles south of Khe Sanh and some 40 miles south of the A Shau Valley, both of which had seen major airlift operations under fire in the preceding weeks. Intelligence sources determined that the communists were building up strength in the vicinity of Kham Duc and advised the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam that the camp was threatened.



22ND MAS C-124 AT KHAM DUC (70TH ENGINEERS)

provide communications for Gallagher, provide airfield information to arriving transports and to control airdrops if any were scheduled.⁴ Although there is no mention of them in any of the accounts, the airlift mission also included aerial port personnel.

On May 10, MACV commenced a reinforcement of the camp with personnel from the 196th Infantry and the 70th Engineering Battalion in Operation GOLDEN VALLEY. The reinforcement was ordered that morning and, within hours, personnel and equipment were on the way to the camp. To support the airlift, 834th Air Division sent an airlift mission commander, Major John (Jack) Gallagher from the 773rd TAS at Clark, to the camp along with two combat controllers, TSgt. Morton Freedman and Sgt. James Lundie, to

⁴ Gallagher was a former bomber pilot on his third war. He had flown B-17s in Europe and B-29s in Korea then had gone into C-130s after flying B-47s in SAC. Freedman's previous assignment was as parachute instructor at the Air Force Academy. Lundie was a first-term airman. He had previously spent time at Khe Sanh during the siege.

On May 10, 834th transports flew some 600 men along with artillery and other equipment into Kham Duc. C-124s brought in bulldozers and other equipment for the 70th Engineers. Although the 22nd MAS was a MAC unit based at Tachikawa AB, Japan, the squadron was under the operational control of 315th Air Division, which also commanded the C-130 wings.⁵ In 1968, the 22nd was the only MAC airlift unit with a combat mission. Additional troops and supplies were brought in the following day. According to a account by an soldier who was flown in on a C-130 from Hue-Phu Bia, immediately after their airplane came to a stop, the “crew chief”, most likely the loadmaster, went out behind the airplane and was immediately wounded in the arm by shrapnel from an exploding round.

None of the accounts mention aerial port or maintenance personnel at Kham Duc. However, the Army combat action report states that there were 10 USAF personnel at the camp on May 10. The mission commander and the CCT account for three and the Air Force liaison officer with the 196th makes four. The identity of the other six is uncertain. However, I received an Email a few months ago from an aerial port veteran who says that there were aerial port personnel at the camp. He also says that one was wounded. As for maintenance personnel, no mention of them is made in any account but Lt. Col. Darrel Cole’s crew flew a jack and six C-130 tires into Kham Duc on the morning of May 12. There may have also been some Air Force tactical air support personnel present. The combat action report of the battle refers to the tactical air control bunker next to the command bunker. One list of personnel at the camp shows two Air Force enlisted men and an apparent civilian who were members of a “Beacon crew.” One member, MSgt Teddy Reiser, remained at the camp on May 12.

Ngoc Tavak was overrun on May 10 and the following day the main camp at Kham Duc came under mortar attack. Intelligence had determined that a large force of communist troops had gathered around Kham Duc in preparation for an attack on the camp. That evening, MACV commander General William C. Westmoreland agonized over the fate of the camp. He was fearful of repercussions if the camp was overrun and a large number of Americans were killed or captured. The size of the American contingent at the camp had been increased from some 25 men to over 600 the previous day and additional reinforcement (32 men) had arrived that day. Along with the CIDG troops and their families, there were roughly 1,800 people at the camp. Westmoreland felt that Kham Duc was of little military importance and there was no reason to risk the lives of its defenders in an attempt to hold it. Sometime around midnight he decided to order an evacuation commencing at first light. A message was sent to the commanding general of the Americal Division (27th Infantry Division), Maj. Gen. Samuel W. Koster, to prepare for a tactical withdrawal of all

⁵ One of the first troop carrier squadrons to see combat, the 22nd TCS was formed in Australia in early 1942. The squadron remained in the Far East after World War II with its parent 374th Troop Carrier Group, later elevated to wing level, and served in Korea. The 6th and 22nd TCS equipped with C-124s during the Korean War. All C-124s transferred to MATS in 1958. However, although they became part of MATS, the 6th and 22nd remained under the operational control of 315th Air Division. The 6th transferred to Hawaii in the early 1960s but the 22nd remained at Tachikawa until 1969 when 315th Air Division inactivated. The 22nd also inactivated but four C-124s were assigned to the 463rd TAW at Clark for outsize cargo duty.

forces from Kham Duc over a three-day period. The message included a recommended sequence of withdrawal:

1. A Co, 1st Bn, 46th Infantry
2. A Co, 70th Engineers
3. Vietnamese dependents (200-250)
4. CA/PSYOP USA (non-existent)
5. Americal Battalion
6. USAF personnel
7. Command & Control Detachment
8. MF Company (probably stands for "Mike Force")
9. CIDG

Westmoreland's original intention was for the defendants to be withdrawn by helicopter and for 834th Air Division to keep them supplied. However, that plan was blown to smithereens during the wee hours of the morning when the communists launched attacks against the outposts in the hills around the camp and overran them one-by-one. The defenders who were able used escape and evasion techniques to make their way back to the camp but not all made it. One group of three never made it into the camp. They were picked up by helicopter several days later. Some were



BURNING HELICOPTER WRECKAGE (70TH ENGINEERS) the bulldozers (or a frontend loader) to get it running. Finally, the driver, Specialist 4th Class John Powell, used his "front loader" to move the wreckage from the runway. Some accounts have stated that he was KIA, but these are in error.⁶ Powell was awarded the Bronze Star with V Device for his actions. By this time, the fog was starting to burn off and the runway was open for fixed-wing landings.

killed and one, Private Julius Long, was captured. The evacuation plan wasn't helped by the weather. Kham Duc is in the mountains and, as is typical of mountain weather, at daybreak the next morning the weather was WOXOF. Once it started to clear, Army and Marine CH-47 and CH-46 helicopters started into the camp to initiate the evacuation. The first CH-47 was hit by ground fire and crashed right in the middle of the runway. The engineers had been ordered to disable their equipment since it was going to be left behind. They began working on one of

⁶ The erroneous report that Powell was killed came from combat controller TSgt Mort Freedman. Freedman, who passed away recently, reported in his debriefing that the driver had been killed. Powell was wounded.

There seems to have been a lot of indecision in Saigon and at the Americal Division Hq. at Chu Lai. The initial plan to bring everyone out by helicopter fell by the wayside due to the heavy attacks so the plan was changed to include fixed-wing transports due to their higher payload capacities. However, that plan was also squashed due to the heavy concentrations of communist troops in proximity to the airfield and the severe damage suffered by the first C-130 to land. Early that morning, Seventh Air Force commander Lt. Gen. William W. Momyer ordered a "Grand Slam," a code-word for an all-out tactical fighter effort in support of the camp. Normally, Grand Slams were only ordered in North Vietnam. All tactical fighter missions scheduled for both North and South Vietnam were made available for airstrikes in support of the camp. A modified C-130E with a capsule in the back filled with command and control personnel was ordered to the vicinity to coordinate air traffic. Its call sign was HILLSBORO.

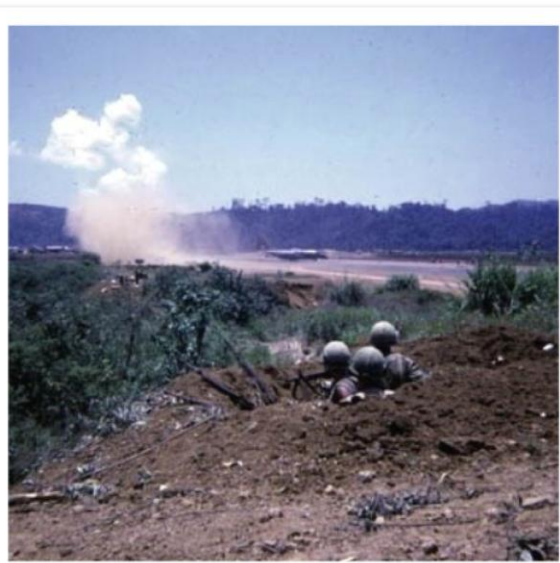
The confusion is illustrated by the coded message Captain Willard Johnson, the FAC serving as an ALO with the Americal Division received. Johnson was working with the senior Americal and Special Forces officers. He recorded his thoughts on a small tape recorder. He was informed that several C-130s were being dispatched to the camp but he didn't know why. When asked "didn't you get the message," Johnson said no. He finally found the coded message and, after half an hour of unshackling it, finally learned that the Americal Division commander had decided to extract the camp's defenders using C-130s. Shortly afterwards, the first C-130 arrived. The crew had no idea that they were part of an evacuation; they thought they had been sent to Kham Duc to deliver a lot of maintenance supplies then to shuttle between there and Pleiku. The ALCC had decided to use them and another C-130 to shuttle troops out of the camp. That plan also went to pieces. Communist troops were swarming all around the camp and they were equipped with automatic weapons, including heavy machine guns and even 37 MM cannon. A USAF A-1 went down but the pilot bailed out and was rescued by helicopters. Ground fire damaged a UH-1 gunship and the pilot landed beside the runway then, believing the helicopter was unserviceable, left on another helicopter. The pilot of the ill-fated CH-47 looked it over and decided it was fit to fly, then flew it out.

Meanwhile, the Americal Division, MACV, Seventh Air Force and 834th Air Division were all looking at the situation and considering various plans to evacuate the camp. Their plans kept coming back to 834th Air Divisions transports although for awhile it appeared that an airlift evacuation would be suicidal. That conclusion wasn't too far from the truth.

Lt. Col. Darrell D. Cole



LT. COL. COLE'S C-130A LANDING (70TH ENGINEERS)



COLE AFTER LANDING (70TH ENGINEERS)

By 1000 hours, no fixed-wing aircraft had landed at the camp and no helicopters were getting in. Earlier that morning, Lt. Col. Darrell D. Cole of the 21st Tactical Airlift Squadron at Naha AB, Okinawa reported to Det. 2, 834th Air Division at Cam Ranh Airbase with his crew for their mission. One of a number of mostly field grade officers who had been called out of desk jobs for cockpit duty in transports, Cole had become a veteran C-130A pilot after over a year and a half at Naha. He had originally been assigned to the 35th TCS, but at some point after the author left Naha, he transferred to the 21st. His crew included Maj. Walter B. Farrar, pilot; 1st Lt. Edward Forsy,

navigator; SSgt Kenneth C. Wheeler, flight engineer and A1C (E-3) Robert L. Pollock, loadmaster.⁷ Their mission frag called for them to proceed to Kham Duc then make three shuttles from there to Pleiku His load out of Cam Ranh consisted of two pallets containing six C-130 tires and a jack.⁸ Their scheduled departure time was 0800 but they were delayed for an hour, probably due to the helicopter wreckage on the runway since the fog had dissipated by this time. They finally departed at 0900. No one had advised them of the desperate situation that had developed at the camp.

Cole stated in his mission report that as they approached the camp they observed F-4s attacking targets on the hilltop immediately to the north. The wreckage of the downed helicopter was burning by the runway, as was the bulldozer (frontend loader). One of the combat controllers –

all CCTs used the call sign TAILPIPE – advised that there was 2,200

⁷ The Air Force had changed its lower enlisted grades earlier in the year. The airman third class rank was done away with and the former airman first class rank (E-4) became sergeant. The former airman third class rank (E-2) became airman.

⁸ The tires and jack were for a maintenance team that was to be placed at the camp.

feet of useable runway and recommended that they land to the northeast on runway 04. The controller also advised that they would be taking passengers out. They asked what to do with their cargo and the response was to dump it anywhere as long as it wasn't on the runway. The crew realized that the situation had deteriorated. As they approached the runway, they saw two columns of US troops walking alongside of the runway toward the compound area. Cole instructed the loadmaster to "speed offload" their cargo as soon as he had completed a 90-degree turn.⁹ However, before the crew could dump the two pallets, the airplane was mobbed by soldiers and civilians, Americans and Vietnamese who's only thought was to get out of Kham Duc.



MORTAR ROUND IMPACTING NEAR COMPOUND (70TH ENGINEERS) NOTE CLOUDS FORMING OVER MOUNTAINS

The loadmaster was unable to do anything with the passengers so Cole decided to take off with them and the cargo onboard. However, just as they started their takeoff roll, a mortar round exploded right beside the airplane. Apparently, shrapnel struck the rear tire and flattened it. Shrapnel also did a considerable amount of damage to the right side of the airplane. Cole continued the takeoff up to about 40 knots but then decided to abort because it wasn't accelerating. He turned around and taxied back to the small ramp area to be clear of the runway. The loadmaster opened the ramp and door and the terror-filled

passengers abandoned their weapons and equipment and jumped out of the airplane and ran into a nearby ditch. The crew shut down the engines and turned off the battery then grabbed their survival vests and weapons and got out. A jeep pulled up just as they got off of the airplane to take the five men across the runway to the Special Forces compound where the command center was located. Mortar shells were impacting all over the camp.

Once they got into the compound, someone contacted Major Gallagher and he relayed the crew's status to the airlift command center in Saigon. The crew watched the scene before them – mortar rounds exploding all over the place, F-4s hitting targets a few hundred yards away. Using binoculars, they noticed that fuel was streaming out of holes in the left wingtip of their airplane, 55-0013.¹⁰ Cole noticed an air of "tense calm" in the compound. The SF officers were discussing abandoning the camp.

⁹ "Speed offloading" was a technique loadmasters initially developed on our own but was later officially sanctioned by 315th Air Division. The method consisted of simply dropping the cargo ramp to just above the ground and letting the pallets roll out onto the ground while the pilot taxied forward. Loadmasters were supposed to install the truck loading ramps to protect the lip of the ramp when the pallets slid off but I personally didn't do it at a "hot" airfield.

¹⁰ This airplane was later transferred to the South Vietnamese. It is one of the C-130As that sat derelict at Tan Son Nhut.

While Cole was talking to one of the combat controllers, an SF man handed the man a thermite grenade and told him to destroy his jeep and radio gear prior to evacuation. Major Farrar wrote in 1994 that right after they were joined by Maj. Gallagher, some GIs approached them and said that the camp was being overrun and they were forming an "E&E party" to go out through the jungle. They handed the startled airmen weapons and ammunition that they had just appropriated from a nearby magazine and asked if they wanted to join them. One hung a bandoleer of ammunition on Farrar's shoulder. It was at that point that Farrar decided there might be a better way.

Cole had been on the CCT radio talking to HILDA, the ALCC in Saigon and discussing their situation. The ALCC controller told him to advise Gallagher that no further fixed-wing landings would be allowed at the camp and they should prepare to E&E.¹¹ At some point while they were on the ground (1110 hours), Maj. Ray D. Shelton's C-123 came in and picked up a load of passengers, mostly engineers, then took off again. Shelton was awarded the Silver Star for the flight.¹²

Although mortar rounds had been exploding all around the airplane, none were close enough to do more than spray shrapnel on it. Farrar suggested that they cut the blown tire off the rim and try to save the airplane – and themselves. Although they had six tires and a jack on the airplane, the engineer didn't have the necessary tools to remove the wheel. They discussed Farrar's plan with the senior officer at the camp and he agreed it was feasible. They obtained some bayonets and enlisted the aid of a couple of engineers, who found a blowtorch. They were wearing flak jackets and the work was fatiguing so everyone took turns. They managed to cut through the rubber but the steel beading refused to give way, not even to the blowtorch. The mortar rounds were getting closer and closer and finally hit a howitzer that been firing from only 30 feet from their wingtip. They decided it was time to go. The crew thought they could get the airplane up to about 80 knots on the rim, which was enough speed to get off the ground.

There doesn't seem to be any accounting of whose idea it was, but someone decided to load all of the Air Force personnel at the camp onto Cole's airplane. Neither Cole or Farrar mention anyone making a decision. Farrar said that at some point Gallagher told him that their radio equipment had become useless and they no longer had a mission. There is some question as to just who got on the airplane other than Gallagher, Freedman, Lundie and Captain Johnson, the Americal Division ALO. Cole stated that there were ten passengers but Farrar said twenty years later that he didn't think there were that many. The two engineers who had been helping them with the tire apparently flew out with them. There may have been other USAF personnel on the airplane as well.

¹¹ Cole states that this conversation took place at 1145 so it was evidently right after the crew had decided to fly their airplane out.

¹² Maj. Shelton was a former C-133 pilot from Dover. He returned to Dover and later made full colonel. He transferred to Charleston to take command of the 3rd Military Airlift Squadron, the author's squadron at the time, which was flying C-5s. I knew him fairly well. He was still in command of the squadron when I left the service in 1975.



USAF CHIEF GEN. JOHN MCCONNELL PRESENTING 1968 MACKAY TROPHY TO LT. COL. DARRELL COLE

The damaged tire had been cut away but they had other problems. Some 4,000 pounds of fuel had leaked out of the left wing, creating a terrific fuel imbalance. The crew was concerned that the leaking fuel would be sucked into the #1 engine so they decided to taxi on three engines then start the fourth one once the airplane had picked up enough speed that the fuel would be streaming behind the wing. Cole instructed Pollock to

kick the two pallets off the airplane to reduce weight. During their taxi, they had to pass right over a large

box that had been dumped by a helicopter and a damaged ¾ ton truck. Farrar guided Cole so that the box passed between the #3 and #4 engines. Mortar rounds continued to impact all around them and shrapnel from one shattered two of the pilot's side windows. They pulled onto the runway and flew onto the pages of history.

Cole reported that the takeoff wasn't particularly difficult. Farrar applied full left aileron to hold the right wing up while Cole stayed on the nosewheel steering until they reached about 60 knots. He took control of the yoke with his right hand and continued steering with his left until they reached 80 knots. The airplane came right off the ground and went into a steep maximum performance takeoff. Cole continued climbing at a steep angle to gain altitude. Farrar reported that once they had reached a safe altitude, he contacted HILDA to advise them that they were in the air and that Gallagher and the two combat controllers were with them. The response came back that they had left without authorization and that they should standby for reinsertion when they landed. Farrar says that he and Cole argued with the controller in the office in Saigon (some 300 miles from the battle) that sending them back in was not a good idea – to no avail. They requested that the runway at Cam Ranh be foamed to protect against fire when they landed. The landing was uneventful.

The 374th Tactical Airlift Wing history records that Cole was nominated for the Air Force Cross. However, the recommendation was downgraded to a Silver Star. He was, however, recommended for and received the prestigious MacKay Trophy for "the most meritorious flight of the year by an Air Force aircraft." It was the second time that the trophy was awarded for a C-130 flight.¹³

¹³ The first was four years before when the trophy went to the 464th Troop Carrier Wing for the historic rescue mission at Stanleyville in the Congo.

Captain Wayne Warner – F-105 Pilot



The most successful air strike of the day was flown by a two-plane flight of F-105s from the 388th Tac Fighter Wing at Takhli, Thailand. The flight leader, Captain Wayne Warner, was a former C-130 pilot from the 21st TCS at Naha. Warner, who graduated from the USAF Academy in 1963, volunteered for C-130s and overseas duty after completion of pilot training. As his tour at Naha was drawing to

an end, he volunteered for fighters and received an F-105 assignment. By May 1968, he was an experienced fighter pilot with 86 missions over North Vietnam to his credit. Tactics used in North Vietnam were different from those the FAC was used to. Instead of operating at lower altitudes and making their attacks on a shallow angle, F-105s came over their target at 15,000 feet and initiated a dive at a 45-degree angle to drop at 6,500 feet. The FAC wanted the F-105s to come in at a lower altitude but Warner said that changing tactics wouldn't be a good idea. The FAC told Warner and his wingman to drop their load of eight 750-pound bombs each on a concentration of communist troops that he had seen massing just south of the airfield. The combined force of sixteen high-explosive bombs destroyed the enemy concentration. Warner wanted to come back in and strafe but the FAC nixed the idea because he was working too many fighters. He realized later that coming in low would have been a mistake due to the heavy volume of fire around the camp. Several crews reported 37-MM airbursts. A few days later, a message arrived at Taklhi from the Americal commander at Kham Duc addressing Warner's flight by flight number. The Army officer informed the 388th commander that Warner's attack had broken the back of the enemy attack and allowed evacuation.¹⁴ Warner was awarded the Silver Star for the mission.

The Evacuation

After Cole took off, it was some three hours before any flights got into the camp. The only troops evacuated had been the handful on his airplane, the passengers who went out with Shelton and some who had managed to get out on the few helicopters that had managed to get in and out before ground fire became too intense for them to penetrate. Earlier in the day, after Shelton got in and out, further fixed-wing landings were halted. HILDA advised Cole of this and instructed him to advise Gallagher. Little progress had been made in the air evacuation and although orders to prepare to abandon the camp and exfiltrate through the communist forces had been sent to the

¹⁴ Although Warner completed two Southeast Asia tours, one in C-130s and one in F-105s, he was not through. He volunteered for a third tour, this time in A-1s. After completing A-1 training, he went to Nakonphanom, Thailand. After flying a few missions, he lost an engine on takeoff and was badly burned in the subsequent crash. He endured months of painful skin grafts then was medically retired from the Air Force. He went to law school and went to work for the Air Force as a civilian. He published his memoir of his military career as One Trip Too Many, A Pilot's Memoirs of 38 Months in Combat Over Laos and Vietnam.

camp, the order had yet to go out for such an action. Seventh Air Force directed 834th to prepare for CDS drops and there are reports that one drop was made but most of the crews went to Da Nang where they were loaded with CDS bundles and told to stand-by. TAC air was laying tons of bombs and napalm on the enemy positions just outside the perimeter and there were even some B-52 strikes in the vicinity of the camp.

At 1515, MACV ordered Seventh Air Force to evacuate the camp and the order was given to the ALCC. By this time, several C-123s and C-130s were in the air near the camp. Other C-130s had been rigged for airdrop and were standing by at Da Nang to fly to the camp. They remained on stand-by until the camp had been evacuated. Because of their larger payload, the ABCCC controllers decided to use C-130s for the evacuation. The C-123 crews were shuttled aside and told to stand-by. Over the next hour and a half, seven C-130 crews landed at Kham Duc. Only five came out. One crew would die and another would be shot down but survive without serious injury. Then, after the camp had been evacuated, one of the most colossal of all military screw-ups resulted in the award of the only Medal of Honor to ever go to an airlifter.¹⁵

Major Bernard C. Bucher



PROBABLY BUCHER'S C-130B (70TH ENGINEERS)

The first airplane in the queue was C-130B 60-0297 flown by Maj. Bernard C. Bucher of the 774th TAS at Mactan. They were TDY to 834th Air Division Det. 1 at Tan Son Nhut. Bucher's crew included 1st Lt. Stephen C. Moreland, copilot; Maj. James L. McElroy, navigator; SSgt Frank M. Helper, engineer and A1C George W. Long, loadmaster. No details are available about their crew day prior to their arrival in the skies over the besieged camp.

They made their approach through a hail of fire – witnesses saw their airplane taking hits – and landed at 1530. Approximately 150-200 passengers were loaded onto the airplane, most of them Vietnamese civilians. One Army Special Forces officer also got on the airplane. After the airplane was loaded to capacity, Bucher took off on runway 04 on a flight path that took them over a hill. Witnesses saw the airplane take ground fire, then go into the ground. No one survived the crash. Major Bucher was awarded the Air Force Cross (posthumously.)

¹⁵ Loadmaster A1C John Levitow was awarded the Medal of Honor but was out of airlift at the time of the event that resulted in his award. He was assigned to the 4th Air Commando Squadron at Bien Hoa as a crewmember on AC-47 gunships.

The Lucky Duc



MAJ. JOHN REED POSING BY LUCKY DUC (SAM KERRO)

While Bucher was on the ground, a C-130E crew commanded by Lt. Col. William Boyd Jr, a veteran pilot whose military career dated back to 1943 when he enlisted as an aviation cadet, was waiting to land. Commissioned too late to participate in World War II, Boyd flew in the Berlin Airlift then after a tour as a flight instructor went into the KC-97 tanker program. In February 1967, he was reassigned to the 346th TCS at Dyess. A year later, he arrived at CCK and was assigned to the 50th TAS at the height of the Tet offensive. Right after he

arrived, he received his baptism of fire on an airdrop mission over Camp Evans when his airplane took several hits. With fuel streaming from a wing, he landed for temporary repairs and reloaded for a second drop. He was awarded a DFC for the mission.



LT. COL. BOYD, UNIDENTIFIED ARMY, MAJ. REED

On the morning of May 12, Boyd and his crew reported for duty at C-130 Ops at Cam Ranh just like everyone else. No one gave them any indication that the day would be any different from any other. In fact, although there had been some hectic moments earlier in the year, things seemed to have settled down somewhat. Boyd's crew included Maj. John W. Reed, copilot; Capt. Felix D. Powers, TCTAA member SSgt Harlan (Gene) Johnson, FE and A1C Sam Kerro as loadmaster. An extra crewmember was on board. TSgt Earl Fonderwhite, a Stan/Eval engineer, was giving Johnson an evaluation. They were flying C-1130E 62-1838, a TAC airplane on rotation from Langley, as SPARE 807. Their day started out as a routine day of flying in South Vietnam. Their first stop was at Qui Nhon, where they offloaded their cargo and picked up another load for Hue-Phu Bai. They were scheduled to go to Chu Lai but an engine problem forced them to land at Tuy Hoa, where the 314th TAW supported another detachment, for maintenance.

At approximately 1430, they finally arrived at Chu Lai. Their crew day was almost over by that time, with less than an hour remaining. Boyd walked to ALCE to talk to the commander, Lt. Col. Joe Brennan, and advise him of his

situation. They had just enough time to make it back to Cam Ranh. Brennan informed him that his crew day was being extended for a "tactical emergency" mission to Kham Duc. His instructions were to land, load as many troops as possible, then bring them back to Chu Lai. He joined the other officers who had been waiting for him outside and they started back to their airplane. On the way, they encountered a USAF lieutenant colonel, an A-1E pilot, who had just been brought to Chu Lai in an Army helicopter after having been shot down just west of Kham Duc a few hours earlier. "For God's sake, stay the hell out of Kham Duc, it belongs to Charlie" he told them. With those words ringing in their ears, they departed Chu Lai a few minutes before three.

During the flight, Boyd made preparations for the landing on an airfield that they now knew was under attack. He told Johnson to let Fonderwhite, who was an instructor FE, have his seat and go in back to help the loadmaster with the loading. He advised his crew to try to remain calm and do their jobs as professionally as possible. They had all become aware that they were flying the most important and dangerous mission of their lives. He advised them that "this is going to be the proof of the pudding and the ultimate test of our training." When they came over Kham Duc, Boyd put the airplane into a sideslip to lose altitude. Kerro called that they were taking hits in the tail section but the damage was minor. Bucher's airplane was just beginning its takeoff roll. The crew could see enemy troops outside



TROOPS AWAITING EVACUATION (70TH ENGINEERS)

the perimeter fence looking up and firing their AK-47s at them. As they approached the runway, they could see puffs of dirt from automatic weapons hitting the runway in front of them. A 40 MM shell exploded on the runway right where he was planning to touch down. Someone called to him on the radio, "don't land! The C-130 that just took off was shot down." Those words convinced him to go around.

As they flew down the runway, they could see the American and Vietnamese troops who had taken shelter in a ditch beside the runway looking up at them. Boyd

climbed to an altitude of several thousand feet and circled back around for another attempt. He advised his crew that there was a "damn good chance we're not going to make it but we're going to try anyway." They touched down in a max performance landing so they could turn around before they got in range of the communist troops firing from the other end of the runway. Boyd turned around and taxied to the spot where the troops were waiting. While they taxied, Kerro opened the door. He directed the troops onto the airplane and Johnson got them seated. Once they were loaded with 85 Americans and 15 Vietnamese, Kerro closed the door and Boyd started taxiing for takeoff. He decided to take off to the south rather than to the north since Bucher had taken off on Runway 04. There was less enemy activity to the south, no doubt thanks to the sixteen 750-pound bombs dropped previously by Capt. Warner and his wingman.



A1C SAM KERRO W/UNIDENTIFIED ARMY
(KERRO)

While they were rolling down the runway, they heard the whacking sounds of bullets hitting the airplane. Some of the fire was from .30 and .50-caliber machineguns. The crew later said it was a miracle that they got off the ground. An F-4 pilot observed the takeoff and notice that there were puffs of blue smoke coming from the C-130 from hits from ground fire. He watched Boyd bank first to the right then to the left to mask his airplane with the terrain. The airplane took numerous hits, well over 200, but they arrived at Chu Lai safely although a bullet-damaged bleed air duct came loose right after they got on the ground and filled the airplane with smoke. They brought the airplane to a stop and killed the power and the smoke ceased. One of the troops they had brought out of Kham Duc found a can of spray paint and wrote "The Lucky Duc" on the side of the airplane. After they were parked, SSgt Johnson repaired the bleed air duct. Once the airplane had again been made air-worthy, they took off for their TDY base at Cam Ranh Bay where they arrived at 1930. They had been on duty for 16 hours and 20 minutes.

Boyd's commander, Col. C.L. Balch, commended the entire crew. It appears that he recommended them all for the Air Force Cross. Lt. Col. Boyd was awarded the AFC and the rest of the

crew received the Silver Star for heroism.

Sadly, the airplane they were flying that day, 62-1838, was lost in an accident in 1996 in Idaho.



SMOKE RISING FROM WRECKAGE OF BUCHER'S AIRPLANE (KERRO)

Boyd landed at Kham Duc on a day plagued by confusion and indecision. Three C-130s, one C-123 and 13 helicopters had landed at the camp so far but less than 200 defenders had been brought out safely. Some two hundred died in the crash of the first C-130 that went into the camp after 834th Air Division was ordered to bring out the defenders. There was no doubt that Boyd had been lucky, as the men who came out with them were well aware as evidenced by the words they wrote on the side of the fuselage. The original plan to

bring everyone out by helicopter evaporated as soon as the fog dissipated that morning and the first helicopter to go in was shot down. The ALCC had dispatched several C-130s to Da Nang to load

CDS containers while others were told to proceed to the vicinity of Kham Duc and check in with HILLSBORO and await further instructions. A C-130B flown by Maj. Norman K. Jensen had been dispatched to Kham Duc with a combat control team to replace the one that had left on Lt. Col. Cole's airplane. Although Jensen was later listed as one of the pilots who landed at the camp, in reality he never landed.¹⁶ At the time, the ALCC was still planning to drop supplies into the camp even though the defenders had been told to prepare to abandon the camp and to disable their vehicles and destroy their supplies. Boyd's successful landing and departure encouraged the next crew in line to land, the crew flown by Lt. Col. John R. Delmore from the 21st TAS at Naha.

Lt Col. John R. Delmore's Not So Lucky Crew

The next crew to go into the cauldron was Lt. Col. John R. Delmore's crew, who, like Cole's crew who went in and out that morning, were from the 21st TAS at Naha. Like Cole, Delmore had become a veteran C-130A pilot after arriving at Naha in 1966 in the batch of field grade officers who had been brought back into cockpit jobs. In the fall of 1966, Delmore was TDY to Cam Ranh as commander of the 315th Air Division detachment that had been set up there the previous May. On May 12 they were flying as IGLOO 873 in C-130A 56-0548. His crew consisted of Joe P. Donahue III, copilot; Capt. Bob Lake, navigator; TSgt John K. McCall, engineer and Sgt James Chesser, loadmaster.¹⁷ Delmore was preparing to land when he saw Boyd's airplane on the runway and had to go around. During their second approach, they took heavy ground fire, which shot out the power lever controls, and lost power on all four engines. McCall later said that they were taking so many hits that they were cutting the airplane apart "like a can opener." The crew quickly feathered the propellers and landed without power. Delmore somehow managed to steer the airplane off the runway where they "went through" the wreckage of the CH-47 that had been shot down that morning. Miraculously, none of the crew was seriously injured but they were on the opposite side of the runway from the camp. Armed only with their .38s, the crew felt naked due to the heavy ground fire that was flying around.¹⁸ Fortunately, friendly personnel got to them and took them to the evacuation area where they were loaded onto a Marine CH-46 which flew them to their advance base at Landing Zone BALDY. They were taken on to Chu Lai in a Huey.

According to the 374th TAW history, Col. Delmore was put in for the Air Force Cross. However, the award was downgraded to a Silver Star. The rest of the crew received DFCs.

In order to fire on the arriving transports, the communists revealed themselves to the FACs working over the airfield. Fighters dropped bombs and napalm on their positions, sometimes dropping so close to the perimeter that the troops awaiting evacuation could feel heat from the burning napalm. The source of the fire that brought down Bucher's airplane came from two heavy

¹⁶ In Col. Ray Bower's history of tactical airlift operations in SEA, he states that the second CCT team was preparing to land at the camp after the rescue of the original team to "search for survivors" but the order was rescinded.

¹⁷ Chesser goes by David. He had come to Naha from Sewart where he had cross-trained out of maintenance. He later was selected to go into the super-secret E Flight at Naha. He later became a member of Project HEAVY CHAIN and spent the rest of his career in special operations. He retired as a chief master sergeant.

¹⁸ They may have had two M-16s. During the author's tour at Naha in 66-67 the engineer and loadmaster were required to check out MK-16s prior to leaving Naha.

machinegun positions.¹⁹ The FAC directed airstrikes against them and they were put out of action. Not only did the intense attacks clear the way for other transports to land, they also allowed Army and Marine helicopter crews to take advantage of the diversion provided by the fixed-wing landings to get in to the camp and make their own pickups. The helicopter crews were operating without any form of control until two pilots, one flying a UH-1 and the other a CH-47, took the initiative to start providing information and directions to other helicopter crews. Still, there was lack of communication and coordination between the helicopters and the ABCCC due to radio incompatibility. One helicopter, an Army CH-47, was hit by ground fire after taking off with a load of troops. One soldier was hit and killed. The helicopter went out of control and crashed. However, except for the one soldier killed by ground fire, everyone escaped.



KHAM DUC DURING BATTLE (KERRO)

A second C-130A flown by Lt. Col. Franklin Montgomery and his crew from the 41st TAS at Naha landed a few minutes after Delmore was shot down. They had no idea who they were supposed to be picking up or what the condition of the runway was. By this time, the ground fire was lessening due to the airstrikes and Montgomery was able to land without incident although the crew could see tracers flying all around them during their approach. While they were on the ground, the crew counted more than fifty mortar rounds and rockets impacting around

the camp and airfield. When the airplane came to a stop, it was rushed by a mob of civilians who were so terrified that some of them ran under the spinning propellers in their rush to board the airplane. They knocked the loadmaster down and trampled him as they scrambled up the ramp. He was knocked down a second time by the concussion of an exploding mortar round that impacted near the airplane. Montgomery came out of Kham Duc with 150 passengers. Miraculously, his airplane didn't take a single hit. Montgomery was recommended for the Air Cross Cross, but as with the other recommendations made for Naha crews, it was downgraded to the Silver Star.

Montgomery was the fifth C-130 pilot to land at Kham Duc that day. One C-130 had been shot down and a second was so shot up that the pilot had to land with all four engines feathered. At this point, there are conflicting accounts as to who was next. Col. Ray Bowers reported that Maj. Norman K. Jensen landed in a C-130B and took out a load of troops. However, it appears that Jensen never landed. He had a second combat control team onboard that he had brought up from Saigon

¹⁹ Some accounts relate that the fire was from American guns that had been captured early in the day, however, the attacking force had heavy weapons. Some crews, including Boyd's, reported seeing 37 MM anti-aircraft fire.

but was never ordered to land them. He returned to Saigon with the team onboard. There seems to be no doubt that the next pilot to land was TCTAA Life member #29, then-Major Billie B. Mills.

Major Billie Mills

While the PACAF airlift force had become to a large extent made up of pilots without previous tactical airlift experience, Billie Mills was a professional tactical airlifter if there ever was one. A former enlisted man who flew as a radio operator in the Berlin Airlift, Billie went to cadets and was assigned to the 463rd Troop Carrier Wing as a C-119 pilot. When the first C-130s were delivered to the 463rd at Ardmore, Billie, who was still a lieutenant, was one of the first pilots to check out in them. In 1958 Billie's crew was sent from Sewart, where the 463rd had transferred, to Colorado Springs for what he thought was a routine mission to take Air Force Academy cadets on orientation flights. When he got there, he was greeted by men in suits who said he and his crew and the airplane were theirs. He spent several days dropping strange Asians into drop zones in the Colorado Rockies near Camp Hale. The CIA men were so impressed with him and his crew that they asked for them for a special mission in Asia training civilian pilots to fly C-130s. Although he wasn't one of the "Four Horsemen," he often flew with them as a second pilot and sometimes flew a fifth airplane during their performances. Over the next decade, Billie was a troop carrier. By the spring of 1968, he was a Stan/Eval pilot based at Clark AB, PI with the 463rd Tactical Airlift Wing, assigned to Thirteenth Air Force Stan/Eval. On May 12, Pat McNamara was his copilot and Byron Peach was his navigator. His flight mechanic and one loadmaster are unknown.

TCTAA member #109 Tom Stalvey was at Tan Son Nhut TDY as a duty loadmaster. He was assigned to Mills' crew as the second loadmaster and they proceeded to Kham Duc where they arrived at approximately 1450. They remained clear of the area while Bucher, Boyd and Delmore each landed then followed Montgomery in. Mills approached from the south and landed in about 1,000 feet. He turned around and taxied to the south end of the runway where he sent one loadmaster out to the front of the airplane to make sure none of their passengers ran into the props and the other to the back. Once the passengers were on board, he backed the airplane about 1,000 feet down the runway and took off bound for Chu Lai. His passengers were mostly Americans from the 196th Infantry. Except for members of the command and control unit, they were most likely the last Americans to be evacuated by C-130.

When he returned to Tan Son Nhut, he was told to report to 834th Air Division headquarters. When he got there, he was ushered into the office of Maj. Gen. Burl McLaughlin, the commander, who had just returned from Kham Duc. McLaughlin congratulated him and told him he was putting him in for a Silver Star. Mills asked the general what about the rest of his crew and got a noncommittal answer. A few weeks later, the 315th Air Division newspaper, The Airlifter, included an article about Mills at Kham Duc.



CH-47 CHINOOK

While the communist's attention was directed toward the five C-130s, the Army Chinooks were taking advantage of the diversion and sneaking into the camp and departing loaded with troops. Some crews flew more than one sortie into the camp. All told, Army CH-47s flew 41 sorties, UH-1s flew 12 and Marine CH-46s flew 26. However, not all of the helicopter sorties actually made pickups. Still, most of those brought out of the camp came out by helicopter.

Mills apparently brought out the last of the Americans except for the command and control personnel, some of whom were onboard helicopters waiting to go. There were still a few Vietnamese waiting to be picked up. The next – and sixth – C-130 to land was flown by Major James L. Wallace of the 50th TAS at CCK.

Major James Wallace

Like his squadron mate, Lt. Col. Bill Boyd, Major James L. Wallace was new to the war. Although he had spent eight months at Forbes AFB, Kansas, he had only been at CCK since March and was on his third in-country shuttle in May 1968. Wallace's crew was 1/Lt. Lee (Britt) Blaser, copilot; 1/Lt. Gerald Iverson, navigator; SSgt Robert Kitchens, flight engineer and SSgt Darrell Vaughan (TCTAA member #120) loadmaster. Their departure from Cam Ranh was delayed for four hours due to maintenance. They finally arrived at Da Nang just before noon. They took a load of cargo to Dong Ha then returned to Da Nang where they learned they were being diverted to Kham Duc. Wallace told Kitchen not to add any fuel as they had some 12,000 pounds on board and went into ALCE where he received a briefing that was not exactly encouraging. There were other crews sitting around whose airplanes had been loaded with CDS bundles. According to Wallace, those crews remained on the ground at Da Nang until after the evacuation was complete, when they were told to unload their bundles and return to their TDY bases. He noted that there was an air of confusion in the ALCE; all normal missions had been halted and the airplanes either loaded for airdrop or were standing by to land at Kham Duc.

Wallace was expecting to proceed directly to Kham Duc and land, but when he contacted the ABCCC, he was told to take up an orbit about 15 miles north of the camp and await further instructions. Other C-130s and C-123s were already in the orbit. The ABCCC controller was taking the C-130s out of the orbit one at a time and sending them into the camp, with each airplane taking about ten minutes to leave the orbit, land, load and takeoff again (if they were able.)²⁰ Wallace held for about 40 minutes before he was sent in after he advised the ABCCC controller that he was running low on fuel. The controller pulled him out of the orbit ahead of some of the other airplanes and sent him

²⁰ The C-123s were not being used due to the larger payload of the C-130s.

into the camp. When he was about 5-6 miles from the field, he saw another C-130 on the ground (Mills) and decided to make a 180 degree maneuver to give him time to get off. He came over the field at 3,500 feet at a right angle then made a 270-degree turn to line up with the runway while descending at 2-3,000 feet a minute "with everything out." While they were on the ground, the ammunition dump exploded but he didn't know if it had been set off by mortar fire or what caused it.²¹ They picked up Vietnamese troops with a few civilians mixed in. His loadmaster said they were in a state of panic. One woman with a baby was knocked over and trampled. Some of the Vietnamese ran under the props. While the Vietnamese were boarding, they noticed a group of about 25-30 Americans approaching. Wallace wasn't aware of it, but they were part of the command post contingent. They were more orderly than the Vietnamese and avoided the props. They had about 120-125 people on board but had room for more, but no one else appeared. Wallace started taxiing with two Americans with BARs positioned on the ramp until the loadmaster closed it. He took off and headed for Chu Lai. After he took off, he heard over the radio that there were still 35 people on the ground.

Although no one knew it at the time, Wallace and a CH-47 had brought out the last of the defenders. (Some may have abandoned the camp in an effort to E&E.) One of the C-130s in the orbit was flown by a TAC crew commanded by Major Jay Van Cleef from the 37th TAS at Langley. His crew included copilot 1/Lt. Rollin Broughton, 1/Lt. Tom Newton, navigator and TSgt Green as loadmaster. The name of his engineer is not recorded. An instructor navigator, Major Edward Carr, was also aboard. Van Cleef's crew was one of a number of TAC crews who had been sent TDY to PACAF in response to the recent Pueblo crisis and the enhanced combat activity as a result of the Tet Offensive. His crew was preparing to depart from Cam Ranh for a day of flying when Cole's crew came in from Kham Duc with the Air Force personnel onboard. They were told that their mission was changed; instead of a regular cargo mission as planned, they were to go to Da Nang to load with CDS in preparation for a drop at Kham Duc. Van Cleef was told that the three members of the airlift



TROOPS AT KHAM DUC (70TH ENGINEERS)

mission control team that had just come in on Cole's airplane were going with them.

There are conflicting accounts of who ordered the three men back to the camp. General McLaughlin later claimed that he ordered them sent back that afternoon when he learned that they had left "before completing their mission." However, Cole's copilot, Major Farrar, said that they were notified by HILDA that the men had left "without authorization" immediately after he advised the ALCC that they had brought

²¹ The explosion was mostly likely caused by charges left by the departing troops.

the Air Force personnel out with them shortly after noon. Since McLaughlin was on his way to the vicinity of the camp himself, it's doubtful that he was even aware that the men had been evacuated then ordered back in until after the fact. TSgt Morton Freedman, the senior combat controller, later claimed that he and Sgt. James Lundie, the other controller, protested the decision for them to come out on Cole's airplane because they thought they could be useful. However, Farrar related that they only decided to cut the tire away and try to fly the airplane out after they were told that no other airplanes would be coming in and they would have to make their way out on the ground. In his report, Freedman reported that their Jeep had been put out of commission by a mortar round, which meant the only power they had for their radios were batteries. They had lost some of their equipment right after they arrived at the camp when their trailer was hit by artillery and destroyed. Lundie had broken his hand while trying to retrieve some of their equipment from the trailer. A medic advised that he be evacuated but Lundie refused even though a replacement could have been

flown up from Tan Son Nhut within hours.

Someone at the ALCC evidently decided that the combat control team was needed to control airdrops.²² At some point while Cole was on the ground or about the time he departed, the command apparatus for I Corps decided that since evacuation was impossible, the troops should be resupplied by airdrop. However, Gallagher evidently had not been made aware of this. When the ALCC realized that there was no CCT on the ground to control the airdrops, someone ordered them back. However, at some point ALCC ordered another



CCT IN VIETNAM (NOT THE TEAM AT KHAM DUC)

CCT to Kham Duc aboard the C-130B commanded by Major Norman K. Jensen. Bob Pollock, the loadmaster on Cole's airplane, commented on a web forum that he thought they were ordered back in because of the combat controller motto "first in, last out." The men were sent back without equipment other than their weapons and whatever they brought out with them. Freedman said in his report that he tried to find a FM radio but was unable to find one so the only radio they had was his survival radio and the battery turned out to be dead. Yet even though they had been ordered

²² The 196th after action report relates that a CDS drop was made sometime during the morning, but there is some question as to whether a drop was actually made. The original order to 834th Air Division to evacuate the camp came early in the morning before Cole landed. It was rescinded after his airplane was badly damaged while on the ground, then reinstated in the afternoon.

back to the camp, it was several hours before they were actually sent in.²³ Van Cleef's crew waited at Da Nang for sometime before they were told to takeoff and proceed to the camp.

Although all of the camps defenders and civilians had been evacuated, no one seemed to be aware of it, possibly because the Army helicopters and the ABCCC were not in contact. HILLSBORO ordered Van Cleef to land. By this time, McLaughlin was in the vicinity and was in radio contact with the ABCCC and the ALCC. He was evidently aware that the three men were on board Van Cleef's airplane. Although Van Cleef protested the wisdom of reinserting the team, he was ordered to drop them off. He landed as ordered and the three men ran off the end of the ramp and toward the camp. Although Freedman claimed that personnel boarded the airplane, they must have been a figment of his imagination because Van Cleef reported that he waited on the ground for several minutes and when no one appeared, he took off empty leaving the three men he had just dropped off stranded. As he was climbing out, he heard the ABCCC controller report that the evacuation was complete. According to Bowers, he responded with an expletive that the camp had not been evacuated, that he had just dropped off the mission commander and two combat controllers. It is reported that all of the radio chatter suddenly went silent as the knowledge that three airmen had just been reinserted into an empty camp sank in.



C-123

day. After leaving Van Cleef's airplane, they ran into the camp but found no one so they had ran across the runway to the 196th command post and found it deserted. Realizing they were on the ground alone, they ran to the ditch and prepared to die. Gallagher, who had returned to the camp under protest, spotted a C-123 on approach. When the transport touched down, they climbed out of

When 834th was ordered (for the second or third time) to evacuate the camp, the C-123s in the vicinity of Kham Duc were shuffled to the side due to their smaller payloads even though they had better short-field performance than the C-130s. The C-130s could carry about twice their payload so they were ordered to evacuate the camp. Since there were only three men on the ground, the smaller transport's performance became paramount.²⁴

The first C-123 in the queue was commanded by Lt. Col. Alfred Jeanotte. He landed but his crew was unable to spot the three men, who were hiding in a culvert where they had been previously in the

²³ This may be the basis for McLaughlin's claim that he ordered them in.

²⁴ There were actually other troops still on the ground but no one knew it. Several Americans and Vietnamese had been manning outposts earlier in the day and had been hiding from the communists. One group managed to reach the airfield just as the last airplane took off but were unable to attract their attention. One of the men began firing his rifle wildly and ran away, never to be seen again. One was captured, although no one knew it until he was released with other POWs in early 1973. The others eventually managed to signal helicopters and were picked up from one of the ridges overlooking the camp.

the ditch and ran toward it but the crew didn't see them and took off again. Freedman reported that he saw two .50-caliber machineguns on either side of the runway and saw them open up. He lay down on the runway and started firing at them with his M-16 and saw one of the gun crew members fall over and the firing ceased. He got up and ran back to the culvert. After they were airborne, Jeanotte's engineer spotted the three men. They had been in orbit near the camp for some time and were running low on fuel. Jeanotte didn't think he had enough to make another attempt then get to another airfield. He radioed the position to the ABCCC. The controller ordered the next C-123 to go in.

Joe Jackson



Much has been written about Lt. Col. Joe M. Jackson and much of it gives credit for his pilot skill to his having been a fighter pilot. In truth, although he had flown F-84s in Korea, his career had been spent mostly in bombers and reconnaissance aircraft. After enlisting at age 18 in 1941, he became a B-25 crew chief. After completing the aviation cadet program, he became a gunnery instructor at Eglin AFB, Florida and never saw combat during World War II. When the war ended, he was with a B-24 crew. He flew F-84s in Korea and in SAC after the war, then became a reconnaissance pilot and went into the U-2 program. He then served in several staff positions before he was reassigned to cockpit duty and sent to C-123s in Vietnam. As one of a number of lieutenant colonels in the 315th Air Commando Wing, he was picked to serve as detachment commander for the Da Nang detachment of the 311th Air Commando Squadron, which had transferred to Phan Rang when all of the C-123s in Vietnam were consolidated there.²⁵



On the morning of May 12, Jackson went out on a routine cargo mission that was supposed to be his proficiency check. Major Jesse Campbell, an experienced C-123 standardizations/evaluation pilot, was flying with him as the evaluator and

²⁵ Although the 315th bore the air commando designation, it was actually a tactical airlift wing and would be so designated the following year when air commando units were redesignated as special operations. 315th reported directly to 834th Air Division headquarters.

performing copilot duties. His engineer was TSgt Edward Trejo and his loadmaster was SSgt Manson Grubbs. When ALCE diverted them to Kham Duc on a combat emergency mission, Campbell terminated the check ride and they proceeded to the vicinity of the camp where they arrived, according to an account in AIR FORCE magazine, at approximately 1530 hours. After Jeanotte's failed attempt, HILLSBORO directed Jackson to attempt a pickup. The extent of the ground and artillery fire directed toward his airplane is usually presented as intense, but his C-123 was the sixth transport to land on the Kham Duc runway since Delmore was shot down and none of the preceding five airplanes had received more than minor battle damage and most had taken no hits at all. Although nine airplanes and helicopters were lost at Kham Duc prior to and during the evacuation, none were lost during the last hour or so before Jackson's landing. There is no doubt that the heavy air attacks on the communist positions had greatly lessened the opposition or there would have been other losses. The crew saw tracers crossing over the runway and artillery rounds were still impacting around the airfield while explosions were breaking out around the camp where the defenders had placed charges. Jackson made a steep approach – he denies that he side-slipped – and landed.²⁶ The three men ran out from the ditch and Grubbs and Trujillo pulled them into the airplane. While they were parked, a rocket landed in front of the airplane but failed to explode. Jackson taxied around it and took off. His airplane did not receive a single hit.

Jackson was awarded the Medal of Honor for the rescue while Campbell got the Air Force Cross and the two enlisted men received the Silver Star.

The author heard a rumor in 1969 that if Jackson hadn't made the pickup, the C-130B crew commanded by Major Robert Archer, who had General MacLaughlin onboard, was going to make the attempt. Whether this is true or not is uncertain, but there were other C-130s in the vicinity, including crews containing TCTAA members Ernie Gassiot, Ralph Bemis and Ken Jarosz. Later that evening a BLIND BAT C-130 flareship crew was supposed to drop flares over the camp but the pilot refused to go into the area because there were so many airplanes around and no one was providing altitude information.



KHAM DUC 1970 (MCGOWAN)

For over two years the camp at Kham Duc sat empty. In the spring of 1969 President Richard Nixon kept his campaign promise and began withdrawing troops from South Vietnam. By the

²⁶ Jesse Campbell's Air Force Cross citation says that they did, in fact, sideslip the airplane.

summer of 1970, the withdrawals were well underway and attention was turned toward finding the remains of soldiers missing in action. The 196th Infantry went back to Kham Duc to search the area around the camp for remains. 834th Air Division provided logistical support for the operation, particularly fuel for their helicopters. The operation was plagued by the loss of a CH-47 with a loss of all on fire due to ground fire. The C-130s and C-123s that landed at the camp were escorted, usually by helicopter gunships or armed FACs. When the author went in there on a bladder bird, we had a Marine Corps OV-10 flying off of our wing – for part of the approach, he was flying upside down!



C-130B BLADDERBIRD AT KHAM DUC (J. GARY FENDERBOSCH)

When the 196th returned to Kham Duc, they found the camp generally intact, with no evidence that the North Vietnamese had ever been there. Equipment and ammunition was lying around untouched. The combat control team's Jeep was found just like they had left it (the Jeep was reported as inoperable because shrapnel damaged the engine.) The Americal Division troops remained at Kham Duc for two months – July and August 1970.

The war eventually came to an end and Americans became focused on the idea of retrieving the remains of all men lost in Vietnam. Several expeditions returned to Kham Duc to look for remains, including those of the Bucher crew. Several attempts met with failure due to the rugged terrain where the airplane had gone down and the triple-canopy jungle that quickly grew back over the burned site. Finally, in 1993 local Vietnamese led a team to the crash site. It took fifteen years but by 2008 the remains of the crew as well as those of Army Special Forces officer Captain Warren Orde had been found. However, “remains” is a relative term and means only that elements identified as human remains were discovered. They were identified through the use of DNA.

For some reason, the battle of Kham Duc has never received the attention that other actions have. There have been no books, no movies and only one historical study (written by our own Dr. Al Gropman.) Most of the magazine articles that have been written have focused on the Medal of Honor winning flight flown by Lt. Col. Joe M. Jackson. Outside of airlift and Vietnam helicopter circles and then mostly among those who were there, the names of the pilots who overcame their fears to land in a hot cauldron of boiling metal at the risk of their own lives and those of their crewmembers to pick up fellow soldiers and Vietnamese civilians have been mostly forgotten. Instead of being recognized as one of the most heroic days of the war, the evacuation of Kham Duc has been relegated to a footnote to a long and controversial war.