

U.S. POW Remains in Vietnam -- Flying Them Out of Hanoi --

C-130s in Hanoi

Some of you may know Jack O'Connor, who is the author of this missive. I'm sorry this has taken so long. I would be a great procrastinator if I ever got around to it!! I've been toying for years about writing the full story, but just haven't done it. May still do it some day. I'll give you a down and dirty version so I don't waste too much of your time.

A little background first: I had flown in and out of Hanoi twice before---flying out of U-Tapao AB, Thailand---with the peace negotiating team. Both times, we were ordered to wear civilian clothes and be nice to them. They took our pictures as we sat around a table for a briefing. The infamous "Rabbit" was in charge. At least that's who we thought it was. Big ears. They then took us to a hotel and fed us in a banquet room. The food was delicious and we were ordered to drink their beer when offered. It didn't taste too bad and was only about 2-3% so the brass weren't concerned about us being able to fly afterwards. Then they took us to museums---their War Museum on the first mission. They had parts of our warplanes that had been shot down and also showed us the gun where Hanoi Jane Fonda sat for that infamous picture. I don't know if it was the real gun or not---didn't matter---I think they just wanted a reaction. They got none from any of us. We were allowed to take photos of certain areas. They wouldn't let us take pix of their rail marshaling yard which was full of bomb craters and wrecked engines---I got some anyway with my little Minox spy camera.

On the next trip they took us to the Peace Museum. Absolutely stunning!!! Lots of HUGE White Jade figures. A beautiful museum. Our bombs never got close to it. Strangely enough---they told us that the wrecked train yard was where they were fixing their engines. If you didn't know better, it could have looked true. There was not a single bomb crater outside of the yard. All buildings were intact!! A lot more happened there, but don't want to bore you with all the details. They were very proud of their many manhole covers in the sidewalks which they used to hide from our bombing raids. All three trips were interesting!!

Anyway, that was why I was chosen to lead a two ship formation to retrieve our Heroes. I just happened to be TDY at U-Tapao from Clark AB where I was stationed. That should set the stage. a little too wordy, but it should help you to understand my involvement.

I was one of only a few crew members on either plane to have been there before. Our Mission Commander was Col Novas and we had a One Star on board with an open line to President Nixon. It was a fairly high priority mission.

After stopping in Saigon for a final briefing in Saigon, our two C-130E's (with augmented crews) left Tan Son Nhut AB and went "feet wet" up the coast of Vietnam. We stayed about 30 miles off the coast so as not to bother anyone. We hit the mouth of the Red River and turned upstream toward our destination---Gia Lam Airport just east of Hanoi. We were encountering broken clouds which were getting worse. After going over Thuan Nghiep, the river straightens out considerably so I requested we drop to about 1500 ft so I could better make out the landmarks---both on radar but mainly visual---when I could see the ground. I wasn't about to trust the radio aids from Gia Lam nor Hanoi. Before we

descended, we could easily make out Hai Phong harbor on our radar about 40 miles to the Northeast so we were on track.

We made contact with Hanoi and advised them of our impending approach into their territory. This had all been pre-arranged, so no problem there. It was on up-river that they started screwing around with us and trying to subtly get us confused. They were trying to get us lost and force us to abort the mission so they could say we caused an international incident by not picking up those who died in captivity when everything had been arranged. That's another reason I had been picked to lead. They tried to spoof us on earlier missions by moving the ADF and VORTAC ever so slightly to locations which would cause us to fly into restricted airspace. In fact, a crew a few weeks earlier bought the spoof and was threatened with a "shoot down" if they didn't abort the mission, so that made this mission even more critical. If you were watching closely enough, you could see the needles quiver a little each time they changed location. They were good at it though, so I had the other nav continually watch for that in case we lost visual or radar contact. I had my head out the front searching for ground fixes.

Then, they really tried to get us fouled up. The second plane was following closely, mainly by keeping us on their radar---depending on us to lead them in. Hanoi Approach Control called us and told us to take up a heading to final. The pilot started to turn and I virtually screamed into the mike "Negative, Negative--Maintain Heading." That was the first of three times they tried to get us to turn too soon. After the second time, Col Novis told the pilot to ignore the tower and go by my direction only. I knew we were still about 30-45 miles out and they were doing their best to get us off course and lost in that bad weather with low ceilings and get us to an area with which we were not familiar. The weather was really bad---the cloud cover was closer to full than "broken." We would get a break in the under cast every mile or so. We descended to about 1000 ft which helped some.

Now---remember that bridge that they tried so hard to take down during the war?? We lost a lot of Thuds & F-4's there. That bridge and a huge sand bar about 3 miles downstream were my aiming points. I was getting a little concerned when they weren't coming in view as fast as I thought they should. Guess I was just overly anxious. I checked radar and found both about 15 miles ahead. I alerted the pilot to be ready to turn and he relayed to #2 that we would turn in a couple of minutes. Ground Approach had given up trying to get us to turn early after a few scoldings from them that we were ignoring their instructions. We did not answer. We descended a little farther so I could get a visual on both the sand bar and the bridge. I remembered where we had turned on my earlier approaches. We flew about 30 seconds past the sand bar, and with the bridge in sight, I told the pilot to turn to the appropriate heading---I seem to recall it was 335 degrees---but not sure now. Descent was begun and both planes broke out at about 750 feet. There it was---right in front of us. I strapped myself in. The other aircraft radioed a "Talley Ho" so we knew everything was fine---or so we thought.

After we landed, Ground Control took over and marshaled us to the proper area to pick up the remains of our Guys. There were two green tents and they were having us come in and turn so that our prop wash would flow directly on the tents---probably blowing them away. Our Aircraft Commander called for neutral props and warned the second aircraft to do likewise. Both planes coasted in to a nice easy stop in the right place---I'm sure to the disappointment of the martialing crews.

Col Novas made the decision on the spot to set up an Honor Guard in front of each tent. This time, we were in our Class A's and were not under orders to associate with the enemy. We all felt better about that!! He sent us out two at a time at 15 minute intervals; each pair did facing movements to relieve the previous pair as time dictated. The first pair at our tent was Col Novas and our pilot. The tent flaps were tied wide open. What the first set of Honor Guards---and ultimately all of us---saw was several stacks of green boxes with a rock on them with white painted names and dates. The sight was shocking and really ticked us off. Unfortunately, I do not remember any of the names. The boxes---

which in reality were coffins---were about 30 inches by 18 inches by 18 inches. It tore us up to think that our guys who had suffered so much were in those tiny green boxes. We all decided individually and as a team that the Vietnamese would never touch our fallen comrades again.

The Honor Guard rotation was maintained for well over two hours while the final release papers were being signed at their government offices in downtown Hanoi. Obviously, the North Vietnamese didn't know what to think of the Honor Guard. We saw the guys who had been our escorts on earlier trips. They smiled and waved at us. We glared back at them. Some civilians tried to get close to watch--- they were chased back over the dikes by armed guards.

We were finally given the OK to load our precious cargo onto the waiting C-130's---their cargo ramps open, sat waiting. As the word came that we could begin returning our Guys to American Soil---in this case---our C-130's, the North Vietnamese moved in to begin loading. We immediately formed a cordon around the tents and, though unarmed, we motioned for them to stop and basically dared the armed Northern troops to try us. They stopped with a puzzled look on their faces---but never tried to cross the line. They had touched our Heroes for the last time.

It was early evening by then and the General was back by then and became part of our new makeshift Honor Guard---set up on both sides of the ramps. I was part of three pairs who tenderly picked up a "coffin" with its "headstone" and proceeded up the ramp. Two more were inside the plane to place an American Flag over each man as he came on board. We exited thru the crew door to go retrieve another Hero. The General led the others on either side of the ramps in a "Hand Salute" as each box of remains passed on board. I don't remember exactly how many bodies we recovered---seems like 36---but each was treated with ultimate respect. We took our time to make sure all were properly honored. It took a considerable amount of time, but we didn't care. We did it right.

We finally all boarded and buttoned up the aircraft. As we were getting all four turning, I noticed the pilot had a wicked smile on his face. I listened on a discreet channel while he suggested to the other pilot to change pitch after they began moving and turn the planes so that the prop wash would now hit the tents and the Vietnam officials and soldiers gathered around them. The turn was smooth, slow and graceful until the Load master gave the word. Suddenly eight turboprops were at full forward pitch for about 3-5 seconds and brakes on. They changed the pitch back to the taxi setting but we got turned around in time to see the tents flying and some of the folks we left were on the ground. We received departure instructions from the tower and thus began an uneventful trip back to Saigon and on to U-Tapao to the Identification folks stationed there. The General informed President Nixon that extraction had been completed successfully.

Further ID would be performed at Hickam AFB as necessary. Our Heroes were taken to Hickam AFB by C-141's. I have talked to many people about this extraction of our Fallen Comrades---and to a man---they thought that the C-141's did the entire mission. I hope someone will set the story straight someday. In fact, I have never seen anything about C-130's being involved with the extraction of the first of those who died in captivity. Believe me---I know they were!! I may have missed some story about it because I had to get busy for my PCS stateside the next month. I have never heard anything about that mission since.

Well, Bill, that's about it. As I said a lot more little things happened on all three trips---even some funny things on the first two, but that third mission was the best thing I ever did in my 24 year USAF career. Sorry to be so wordy, and focused on "I" & "me", but I'm not sure how else I could tell it with any conviction.

PS: Somehow, I forgot to turn in my log and charts from the mission, and no one else thought about it. I had them for a long time, but they disappeared---probably on my move to CO from AL. I sure wish I could find them again!! They are really historical documents.

I did meet a woman at one of our OCS reunions whose husband was onboard that day. I was completely speechless as she thanked me.