

THE LAST “CONNIE” OUT OF KORAT

By Ricky L. Dietsch

The stories that men (and women) tell of their service time in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and all the other places in the theater of operations are as varied and numerous as the numbers of people telling them. I have one such story to add, of a young man, far from home in a strange land, homesick and longing for home-cooked food and familiar faces. That young man was me.

I was station at Korat RTAFB with the 553rd Reconnaissance Wing as fully qualified as a crew chief on the EC-121-R “Connie”. I had been with the 552nd Reconnaissance Wing in Sacramento California for almost 2 years before being sent to the war. I was assigned to the non-powered Aerospace Ground Equipment are in the Field Maintenance Squadron. That was my day job and I got that assignment because the squadron commander found out I was an organist and he told me my new primary mission was to play the organ for the chapel. There was something going on every night and of course there were many Sunday services that I played for. After nine months I missed my family; I’d been in country long enough and I was past ready to get the mud of SEA off my boots once and for all.

My homesickness is what led me to the situation that got me a ride on the last “Connie” out of Korat. It happened quite suddenly, without much warning at all. I was told that if I wanted the opportunity, there was a chance I could be on a plane that was leaving for “the world” in less than 12 hours! If I wanted the opportunity? Did the NVA want us out of Vietnam? Hell yes I wanted the opportunity! No matter how many times in a military enlistment you have the awesome pleasure of going through the out-processing procedures on a base, it never gets any less cumbersome or tedious. Nevertheless my boots barely touched the ground and with a lot of cooperation from the many departments that are involved with out processing and I shot through there like JP-4 through an F-105! I made it just in time for the drug sniffing dogs to check my duffel bag. He took great interest in the ham sandwich I had stowed away. I never understood why they would put any great amount of trust in an animal whose specialty was snorting drugs anyway, but at that point in time I was chomping at the proverbial bit.

Please bear in mind that 37 years have transpired since that trip. Many of the details have faded and the few notes that I had were lost in a house fire in 1993. However, just as I was determined to get on that golden flight home, I’m determined to get this story out in as much detail as possible.

Even though the “Connie” rarely used a flight mechanic that is how I was manifested. You might say it was my “manifest destiny” to be onboard that bird! The Squadron Commander really wanted me on that flight. He said he had great

plans for me and had gotten me assigned to Richards-Gebauer AFB in Kansas City, Missouri, and (in case I omitted this before) I was home sick!

There was a small celebration in front of base ops with lots of saluting and handshaking. Then we fired up those 4 wonderful Wright R-3350 Cyclones. (They may have been Pratt and Whitneys but that detail has faded with time) No matter which, I will always remember the smell of the blue oil smoke that those engines belched out every time they sputtered to life. We had a full fuel load and a galley full of box lunches. We went wheels up at around 11:00 on December 16th, 1971. The last Connie was leaving Korat. The Aircraft Commander decided it would be a good salute to all the troops and especially the fallen comrades to feather number 4 engine for our out-bound fly by. As we flew over by we dipped the right wing as a salute to the squadron formation in front of base ops. Fortunately number 4 started back up, with a puff of blue smoke, and we were off on the first leg of the flight. Our first stop was Guam. As best as I can remember the flight was totally uneventful. I think I slept most of the way. It's not like they had an in-flight movie or iPods back in those days. You could read a book, write a letter, or sit and twiddle your fingers until you passed out from sheer boredom. I guess I twiddled and zee'd.

I was a fully-qualified 7-level crew chief so I knew that I would be recovering the plane when we touched down and I would also be helping with the preflight after the crew had rested. After I fueled the plane and did the post flight inspection I choked down a hot meal, cleaned up and went back to the plane. There was a lot of personal stuff left on the plane so I performed "guard dog" duty as well as crew chief duty. I considered washing and waxing the fuselage and putting some tire-black on the wheels to spiff it up a bit. That's how grateful I was to be on that flight. I would have done anything they asked. This flight home cut three months off my tour in SEA and (perhaps I've mentioned) I was really home sick.

It was right about this time during the flight home that things began to take a bit of a weird twist. It seems there was a small group of C-7A Caribous that were also headed back to the world. However, they did not have long range navigational equipment good enough to fly across the Pacific without the possibility of getting lost. So, being the nice guys that we were, we became their escorts to Travis AFB, California. Their top cruising speed was around 150 knots and their range was just over 1,100 miles. To carry enough fuel to make the long legs of the trip they each had several 55 gallon drums of fuel onboard and a hand pump in the cargo bay. I guess they were among the earliest instances of non-smoking flights. The "Connie" had a cruising air speed of 310 knots and we couldn't stay in the air at the Caribou's air speed so they would take off two hours before we would. We would catch up to them, orbit around them until we were two hours out from the next stop and then we would leave them and head for the landing strip. We were to do this in hops from Guam to Wake Island; from Wake to Hickam Field in Hawaii, and then on to Travis AFB. From Travis the "Connie"

was destined to go to Davis-Monthan AFB, the Air Force “bone yard” outside of Phoenix, Arizona.

The leg of the journey from Wake Island to Hawaii could have been very boring, like the rest of the flight had been. There is nothing out there except ocean; cold, deep ocean. At some point in the flight, I wandered up to the cockpit and was watching the instruments while the pilots napped (just kipping). A green mass materialized on the radar and way off in the distance was a black wall. It was the worst squall line I had ever seen, and we were heading straight for it. It was at least 400 miles wide and topped out at least two times above the “Connie’s” ceiling. As we got closer the Aircraft Commander said, “You’d better go strap in Sarge. This may have a bump or two in it.” I scurried back to one of the workstations and just as I was starting to sit down we hit an air pocket and dropped for what seemed like 5 minutes!

I was free falling in the center aisle of a “Connie” grabbing for a handhold and wondering if my stomach would ever catch up to me again. We must have dropped 2,000 feet before the “Connie” found some air and I got unceremoniously slammed to the floor. Not wanting to experience a repeat performance, I crawled into the chair and strapped in tighter than I knew a seat belt could be pulled. The squall line was only about 25 miles deep and on the other side was smooth air and bright sunshine, but after being tossed around like a green pea in a food fight that water below looked much colder and deeper than it had before. The “Connie” and its lumbering herd of Caribous made it through the weather OK . . . almost. When we were on approach to Hickam Field we experienced a partial loss of hydraulic pressure. Thankfully we had enough left to land and stop, but it still made everyone nervous. One of the accumulators had cracked. We assumed it had happened when we went over that speed bump in the squall line. Thank goodness for redundant systems!

Well, Hickam Field was where my stint as a flight mechanic on board the “Last Connie Out of Korat” ended, and is therefore where the story of my adventure on her comes to a close. Transient Maintenance at Hickam ordered another accumulator, but it was going to take 4 days to get there. The flight crew had to stay put, but I was just a “flight mechanic” (wink, wink). They didn’t need me and there was a C-141 leaving for Travis in about three hours. Did I happen to mention that I was homesick?