

The Otter

Back on Dayshift, mid-tour, I wanted something to do at night, and took two college-credit courses on base given by GI's, one in Sociology, and one in Aeronautics. Ed LaChance did a great job in Sociology, but he was a professional instructor, going to teach at the University of Evans-something on his return to the States and his retirement.

The guys teaching aeronautics were interesting and earnest fighter pilots from the 388th but we never got much past the theory of how a wing works, and they argued with my notion that reaction motors push against their ejected products of combustion. But they gave us what they could in the restricted time and place.

At the end, it got interesting. There were maybe five or six of us as students, and one of the three instructors announced that they had a special treat for us: We were getting to fly a real airplane! *Sure* we were. The Air Force was NOT going to let our non-commissioned little hands drive their aircraft, and sure as hell not in a war zone.

Yup, the guy insisted, just “show up at 07:00 down at the left end of the flightline”. Well, I had to go just to see the BS. It was the Transient Aircraft area, . . . and cluttered with counter-insurgency Short Takeoff and Land (STOL) aircraft. I had a (very) little knowledge of the Helio Stallions, Pilatus Porters and De Havilland Otters, and saw several of the odd-looking aircraft there. The five students and the instructors got together, and we met the pilot out on the expansive ramp. He would have been perfect in Hollywood of the 1930's - 50's, handsome, friendly, competent and confident.

Our aircraft would be the one out at the end of the line. Heading for the large tail-dragger in the distance, we seemed to walk and walk, but not get any closer: we just watched the plane get bigger. It had the biggest radial engine I had seen in a single engine aircraft, and a fuselage to match, a very large scaled-up version of a Piper Cub. The pilot described as the Otter, the biggest single-engine aircraft in the world. But it wasn't an Air Force aircraft, it was Air America, the CIA front, and we were going to point that fat thing all over the sky.

We climbed up and got into the back, with one of the other four going in front with the pilot for his turn in the Right Seat. Each would get 15 minutes or more at the controls, and I wanted to go last. I marveled at the spacious cabin as the others got their turns, and mine came quicker than I had expected. Having soloed about eighteen months before in a Piper Tri-Pacer (a comparative canary), I knew the



controls, and we talked for only a moment before he had me take over, suggesting a standard two-minute turn to the right. I rolled the wheel to the right and pushed the rudder, but it wouldn't move. Trying again, I accused the pilot of playing a trick and putting on the rudder lock. Nope, it was that barn-door rudder in the windstream, which needed some genuine muscle power to heft. He laughed. I pushed hard as I dared, and we did a decent rotation.

We putted around the clouds in two-minute turns, steering between the big white puffies, keeping the “ball” centered in the turn and bank indicator, as the scenery slowly rolled by. The Central Casting-version Air America pilot was a friendly guy as well, and it was almost more B-movie stuff, . . . unusual experiences about which I could never guess: But the war zone was real, and so was the use of that capacious Otter. There were persistent rumors of high-level drug-running by the Air America contingent on base (later substantiated), but how do you ask the really nice guy who is letting you fly his airplane if he is one of those dirty bastards who run heroin?

He asked me if I was with the 388th Tactical Fighter Wing, but when I informed him that I was with the 553d Recon Wing with the old aircraft on the other end of the flightline, the ones that looked like porcupines in silhouette, I thought I perceived some professional acknowledgment. Maybe it was because we were spooks as well, dealing in raw intelligence, even doing our own Crypto maintenance, or that we were the bright idea of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who funded the hell out of us, or perhaps because of the other part of us, Task Force Alpha, the Air Commandos in Nahkon Phanom at the edge of Thailand and Laos. But he knew something, and more than I did.

Hoping to figure out the drug issues, I asked what he did with such an interesting aircraft, and he joked how they dropped supplies to our folk who “aren't there” in Laos, and other stuff that everyone knew about but the American People, I guess. To us, it was a normal part of the war, and we were all over Southeast Asia. I didn't push it.

We headed back, just after a small squall went over the flightline, now a dazzling ribbon in the intense sun. Over the runway, he deployed the flaps, and as if someone grabbed us by our collars, we hung on the straps, suspended in space, the flaps and leading edge devices trading speed for lift, while both slowly decayed, the stall warning screaming.

Just above the runway, we flared, and flared, and flared, . . . feeling, . . . feeling, for the runway now evolving with steam and mist, . . . and I still don't know when the wheels touched, and neither did the pilot: It was a perfect slide onto the mirrored, sun-drenched runway.