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A Professional Publication by the Air Commando Association  
Dedicated to Air Commandos Past, Present, & Future

# JOURNAL

Vol 9: Issue 3

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Massively Successful! I save all mine.”

**Lt Gen Marshall “Brad” Webb  
Former AFSOC Commander**

*(Used with permission by Lt Gen Webb)*

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The *Air Commando Journal* publication is free to all current members of the Air Commando Association.

Membership is open to persons who served with or supported USAF Air Commando/Special Operations units. To include Guard and Reserve Special Operators. Other interested parties may join as non-voting associate members with the approval of the Board of Directors. To join our association visit [www.AirCommando.org](http://www.AirCommando.org) and click the membership link or call our office Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

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## ON THE COVER:

The Air Commando Hall of Fame honors the 2020 inductees of special operators who are selected and remembered for their lifetime of service and accomplishments that made a significant impact to the continuing mission of the USAFSOC.

Visit [www.AirCommando.org](http://www.AirCommando.org) to learn more about the Hall of Fame and the inductees.

# FOREWORD

I've written and re-written this sentence a dozen times as I tried to pen a suitable foreword to the first issue of *Air Commando Journal* in 2021, but there's just no way around it: 2020 was a wretched year in many respects. In a year when we planned to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Son Tay Raid, the 45th anniversary of the Battle of Koh Tang Island and the recovery of the USS *Mayaguez*, the 40th anniversary of Operation EAGLE CLAW, and the 30th anniversary of AFSOC's birth, we instead found ourselves in the midst of an historic pandemic, widespread social unrest, and a fractious election year. But despite it all, professional Air Commandos continued to stay ready, relevant, and resilient—supported and encouraged throughout the year by the Air Commando Association.

Reflecting on 2020, among the things of which I am most proud is the way AFSOC leaders at all echelons handled the turbulence of the year. Dealing with crises is, after all, what Air Commandos do. I found myself providing broad intent and watching commanders and senior enlisted leaders—from the wing to the flight—execute brilliantly. In this issue, Col Nate Scopac reflects on his own experience in crisis leadership during a year which also found him in combat command. \*Yawn\*...just another year in AFSOC.

This issue also features articles and a book review which illuminate various other strands of our shared history. For instance, we learn about Combat Controllers in early 1975, during the evacuation of Saigon. We also find an article describing an early Air Advising effort in China during the Second World War. Additionally, this issue contains a great rundown of the impressive 36 year history and significant contributions of the humanitarian arm of the Air Commando Association, the McCoskrie Threshold Foundation. Finally, the book review of COL (Ret) Joe Celeski's chronicle of Air Commandos in Laos from 1964-1975 highlights a fascinating look at a shadowy chapter in our history, written by a retired Special Forces soldier, no less!

But of all the rich content contained in this issue of the *ACJ*, none is more important than the recognition of deserving Air Commandos past and present. The 2020 Air Commando Hall of Fame inductees represent a spectrum of leaders and operators whose fingerprints remain on those of us serving in 2021. Meanwhile, the individual and unit-level award winners among today's Air Commandos remind us that no matter how turbulent the world becomes, Air Commandos will be ready to face it. Today's Air Commandos are so much better than me and my generation...I lose no sleep worrying about the future because of the talent and commitment of these Airmen.

As we turn the page and drive forward into a new year, I'm thankful for the friends, mentors, and role models who fill the ranks of the Air Commando Association. What a privilege to be in your midst at this moment in time!



With sincere affection and respect,  
James 'Jim' Slife, Lt General, USAF  
AFSOC Commander

# HOTWASH

## Dear Members and Readers,

Almost 10 years ago, ACA set out on an endeavor that many did not think would succeed; we launched the inaugural edition of the *Air Commando Journal*. This edition is the 30th....a great milestone.

When we started, we had three primary players to give it a go. Rick Newton was our first true editor and of course we were fortunate enough to have (then) Jeanette Moore (now Elliott) on our office staff that was also qualified as a graphics designer and a very good one at that. We also had some great initial volunteer authors and a significant Air Commando who also happened to be serving as the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Gen Norty Schwartz, willing to take a chance on us and pen the first foreword.

The other of the three primary players was yours truly, who knew nothing to begin with about publishing a magazine. We did a lot of research; talked to a couple of publishers; had great top cover by the then president of the ACA, Maj Gen Secord, and we decided to go for it. We also had several volunteer “cold eyes” readers help us edit those first few editions, including my wife Pat.

I am very proud of the result. Along the way we have received a lot of accolades and even were asked to contribute our copies to the Library of Congress.

Since then we have had several others join our mostly volunteer team and Paul Harmon has become a mainstay. In fact, he along with Rick Newton, have truly become the “heavy lifters” for the last few editions. It is for that reason, that I feel comfortable handing over the reins as Editor-in-Chief to Paul. His team is already growing and I have no doubt he can carry the load and continue to produce a great product.

It has been a great run and I must also thank all the folks I coerced into telling their stories and many that offered theirs up with no arm twisting. Also, thanks to Shannon and Melissa for assisting with acquiring advertisers and also to all of ACA board members for the support given along the way. I am pleased to have been able to play a small part in this “questionable at the time” endeavor and am here to serve as a consultant if needed. Any Time Any Place

Dennis B

## **Air Commando Journal Vol 9, Issue 2**

Congratulations on another great edition of the *ACJ*. I would like to comment on two articles related to early actions in OIF by the 16th SOG and the 7th SOS. As good as the two articles were, they did not cover a lot of the geopolitical issues that the crews had to deal with in executing the missions and other background information that would have added additional substance to great articles. The bottom line is the crews completed two very complex missions under extreme circumstances, and fulfilled one of

the SOF truths: “People are more important than hardware,” as well as a supporting thought, you train for your toughest mission and attain standards to safely execute with as much impact as possible. These crews and these people, whether flying, maintaining, or supporting, were truly special and it was my honor to have served with them. Thanks for keeping ACA running, as well as moving forward for the next Air Commando generation.

Regards,  
OG Mannon, Maj Gen, USAF (Retired)  
ACA Life Member #3949

## **Vol 9, Issue 2**

Just finished reading *Air Commando Journal* cover to cover as usual. During 50 years of professional reading of professional journals, in three professional career fields, *ACJ* stands above all in content and readability. It should be mandatory reading for all past, current, and future Air Commandos.

Yours,  
Clay T. McCutchan, Maj Gen, USAF (Retired)  
USAF Pilot/Officer  
USAF Civil Service Historian  
ACA Life Member #1846

## **Ugly Baby Article, by Cory Peterson**

Thank you for your wonderfully detailed and descriptive telling of the mission. Although it has been over 17 years, your play by play commentary took me right back to the moment we stepped onto the cold Romanian flight line to prepare the base to stage for follow on aircraft. All the missing details still cause me to wonder how we didn’t sustain more damage to the formation. The 7th indeed lived up to its motto as “The Finest Flying Squadron in the US Air Force.”

Thanks again for such a wonderful read.

Chris Feltner  
(Comments first appeared on [Linkedin.com](https://www.linkedin.com))

*Editorial Note: The article “Task Force Viking and the Ugly Baby Mission” written by Cory Peterson, Col, USAF (Ret) is in Volume 9, Issue 2 of the Air Commando Journal available online at [www.AirCommando.org](http://www.AirCommando.org).*

## **Heroism at Na Khang**

It is always difficult for an historian to admit they have made an error in their research and reporting, but at the same time the right thing to do is to own up and take responsibility for one’s mistakes, even when unintentional. In the most recent issue of this journal, in an article I penned describing the heroism of Air Commando Ramon Horinek, I stated that in January 1967 Capt Horinek flew as Butterfly 44, an airborne FAC during second defense of LS-36. In the course of researching the story of that second defense, I have been introduced to the Butterfly FAC who was on the ground that



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# HOTWASH CONTINUED

day and who clarified for me that Horinek was not the pilot. While this factual error in no way diminishes Capt Horinek's heroism during the 1966 battle, I am unhappy about this flawed research. To the Horinek family and to our readers, I apologize and promise I will try to be better in the future.

Dr Richard Newton, Lt Col, USAF (Retired)  
ACA Life Member #4670

## Son Tay Raider Article in 9/2

I extend my appreciation for the excellent October 2020 issue, and especially the recognition of the Son Tay Raiders article by Col John Gargus. I continue to applaud Col Gargus for his several contributions to our Talon history.

I am proud to personally know three of the surviving Son Tay crew members who I flew with when we were all based with the original MC-130E Blackbirds at Nha Trang in 1966-67. They are Lt Col Irl Leon Franklin; Capt William Guenon who is author of the book *SECRET AND DANGEROUS, Night of the Son Tay POW Raid*, and MSgt Mel Gibson (my loadmaster on Crew SG-5). They all earned the Silver Star that night in 1970, along with many awards for their previous experiences over North and South Vietnam in 1966-1967.

Sincerely,  
Richard H Sell  
Former pilot, Talon Crew SG-5, Nha Trang.  
ACA Life Member #3749

Dear ACA,

Thank you for continuing to send my mother, Barbara, the *Air Commando Journal*. She especially enjoyed the October journal and seeing my Dad's picture in the Son Tay Anniversary article.

Good luck with your raffle and know we appreciate all your hard work.

Sincerely,  
Bonnie Britton  
Mobile, AL

The *Air Commando Journal* wants to hear from you!! Send in your comments or thoughts about our publication for the HOTWASH section

Online blog at [www.aircommando.org](http://www.aircommando.org)

Email: [info@aircommando.org](mailto:info@aircommando.org)

or write to ACJ, P.O. Box 7, Mary Esther, FL 32569



# CHINDIT CHATTER

Happy New Year from the Air Commando Association and *Air Commando Journal* staff! 2020 was a challenge, and as you know by now, the annual ACA Convention and many other events were cancelled because of Covid-19. Rest assured, your Air Commando Association is working hard to adapt and overcome the circumstances while continuing to work for America's Air Commandos.

First, as a manner of a short introduction, Dennis Barnett asked me to take over editor-in-chief duties for your journal as he again moves up to become the president of our ACA. For those of you who do not know me, I retired in 2010 after a 30-year career with my early flying assignments in rescue units before moving over to special operations with the 20th SOS in 1988. Over those 22 years in special operations, I was afforded multiple opportunities to meet, work with, and learn from the tremendous professionals in the other AFSOC "tribes" in operations, maintenance, medical, and support. I've been working with the *Air Commando Journal* staff since 2013, at first writing a couple of articles and later serving as the Research Editor assisting Jeanette, our talented graphic-designer, to help bring the articles alive. As the editor-in-chief, my goal is to build on the first nine years of the *Air Commando Journal's* success and keep it interesting, relevant, and accurate reading for our members and the wider special operations community.

This is always a special issue of the *Air Commando Journal* because we highlight the newest Hall of Fame inductees and Commander's Leadership Awards recipients. This year we included the active-duty award recipients who normally would have been recognized during the Heritage Seminar at the convention. Because of that, it is most appropriate that the Air Force Special Operations Command commander, Lt Gen Jim Slife, graciously agreed to write the foreword for this issue. Thank you, sir!

This year the 2020 Hall of Fame inductions were conducted virtually. We held five separate ceremonies online and each inductee invited a number of guests to participate virtually to make the occasion special. It was an ACA team effort to make it all come together with special thanks to Jeanette Elliott and Melissa Gross for working through multiple technical issues and assisting many guests to get online and attend the events from the comfort of their homes.

2020's Commando Cash drawing was held in December and the big winners were notified. Congratulations to all! For those who are not aware, the Commando Cash Drawing net proceeds go to support the ACA's overhead costs, which among other things enables the Air Commando Foundation to put 100 percent of its donations to help past, present, and future Air Commandos in times of need. With everything going on in this crazy year a big THANK YOU goes out to all the members who participated in this year's drawing making it the best response in eight years!

General Slife's words in the foreword set the stage for this issue and I want to thank the active duty contributors assigned to Hurlburt Field for taking the time to write articles, we genuinely appreciate your help. In the spring issue of the *Air Commando Journal*, we will feature articles focused on Air Commandos during humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations around the world. The summer issue will offer our readers insights into the special operations joint terminal attack controllers and precision strike mission. Also in 2021, the ACA plans to mark the 30th anniversary of Operation DESERT STORM, as well as commemorate the 20th anniversary of 9/11...more to follow.

Finally, we ask you to mark your calendars—the ACA's annual convention will be held 14 - 17 October 2021. Details are being worked, but it will be a great opportunity for old and new friends to get together again after missing in 2020 and we promise it will be a lot of fun. Hope to see you there.



Paul Harmon, Col, USAF (Retired)  
*Air Commando Journal*  
Editor-in-Chief

Salutations Air Commandos,

Hope you all had a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! I wanted to share a quick note about some of the ways your Air Commando Association supports Air Commandos and their families. You will be pleased to know the ethos of the original Air Commandos of World War II of making things happen when others do not even try is being sustained today.

First the awards program. Let us start with a little background on the ACA awards program. In 2010, Lt Gen Donny Wurster had an idea about how to get ACA more involved with the active duty force. As a result, the Squadron Commander Leadership awards were the first AFSOC level awards sponsored by the ACA. Since that time the list has grown to encompass even more operational specialties across the command. We work hand-in-hand with amazing teammates at AFSOC/A1, specifically Mr. Jeff Greenberg and Mr. Kyle Ingram, to bring recognition to AFSOC Airmen.

Awards normally presented to outstanding Air Commandos during the October ACA Annual Award Banquet include:

- Squadron Commander Leadership Award - 20 squadrons
  - SRA Julian S. Scholten ISR Operator of the Year
  - Hap Lutz Medic of the Year
  - Heart of the Team
  - Special Tactics Officer of the Year
  - Special Tactics Enlisted of the Year
  - Deployed Aircraft Ground Response Element (DAGRE)
  - Operational Squadron of the Year
- SPECIAL ACTIVITY AWARDS:**
- AF JROTC
  - Hoyt/Tunner Outstanding Aircrew Awards
  - Red Erwin Outstanding Enlisted Aircrew of the Year Award
  - Levitow Awards for Airman Leadership School at both Hurlburt and Cannon

In the last SITREP, Mr. Bill Rone mentioned the Air Commando Foundation (ACF) was established in 2012 to fund unmet needs for Air Commandos and families in need. The ACA, through the Foundation, continues to

provide support to Air Commando families around the world. In 2019 the ACF assisted 21 families in the amount of \$39,637.66 and we expect to assist another 15 families in 2020 with approximately \$21,504.65. The amazing part in this, is all requests were reviewed, validated, and approved, and funds released in hours versus weeks that is normally seen from larger organizations.

For example, we had an Airman in ICU with severe liver failure being transported to University of Florida Shands Hospital in Gainesville. The USSOCOM Care Coalition reached out for assistance because the Airman's mother had limited income and could not afford hotel costs. In a matter of hours, the ACA approved funds to cover at least a week's hotel for the mom – estimated to be around \$840 to \$1,000.

Your ACA was also represented at the 2020 Emerald Coast Honor Games "Ruck 22" on 7 November, in Destin, FL. The Honor Games support five local charities with the objective of sharing awareness of veteran suicide. The ACA sold over 100 tickets for the event and our own Mr. Steve Connelly won one of the raffle prizes. Another major win is the ACA was one of the five charities presented with

a check for \$4,000 at the Honor Games ceremony on 11 November!!!

Finally, I want to send a heartfelt thank you from the Commando Quilters. Our quilt group was founded in 2014 by local quilters whose mission is to bring comfort to AFSOC wounded, ill, or injured warriors. Due to your contributions and generosity in purchasing raffle tickets each year during the ACA Annual Awards Banquet, you have enabled us to make 73 quilts! Sixty-five quilts have been delivered to KIA families and wounded, ill, or injured Air Commandos, and eight were made for fund raising efforts that each of you graciously supported. Of special note, we were able to make and deliver 12 quilts this year, despite COVID-19. Thank you for believing in our mission and supporting our fundraising efforts. Finally, on behalf of the Commando Quilters, Cathy, Laura, Janet, Donna, Tammy, Lynnette, Betty, CeCe, and myself, please accept our deepest gratitude and thank you for your service to our country.

It is an honor serving and look forward to seeing all of you in 2021.



Mrs. Sherri Hayes  
*ACA Civilian Advisor*





# 2020 Air Commando HALL OF FAME



**COLONEL  
DENNIS L. BARNETT**




Colonel Dennis L. Barnett, USAF, Retired, distinguished himself through superior service and selfless duty as a highly respected Air Commando and visionary leader of the Air Commando Association (ACA). His more than 30 years of uniformed and voluntary service included critical leadership roles in the 9th and 17th Special Operations Squadrons, 352nd Special Operations Group, 16th Special Operations Wing, Headquarters Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC), and the ACA. Time and again Colonel Barnett was recognized for exceptional performance, including leadership as a deployed commander, and repeatedly credited with actions vital to mission success across the globe. As AFSOC's Director of Staff, Colonel Barnett's experience and expertise were instrumental in sustaining wartime readiness, addressing specific needs of deployed forces, and shaping budget and programming priorities. He also guided the professional development of a generation of AFSOC officer and enlisted leaders. His vision for the ACA drove a needed change in priorities and organizational culture. As the ACA Vice President, President, and Chief Operating Officer, Colonel Barnett delivered unprecedented leadership, implementing numerous programs to better serve Air Commandos and their families, including the Air Commando Foundation, *Air Commando Journal*, Symposium/Heritage Seminar, and individual and unit awards honoring still-serving Air Commandos. Colonel Barnett is exceedingly worthy of induction into the Air Commando Hall of Fame. The singularly distinctive accomplishments of Colonel Barnett reflect great credit upon himself, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Air Commandos of every generation. 🦅



# 2020 Air Comma




**LIEUTENANT COLONEL  
BERNARD A. FRAKES**

Lieutenant Colonel Bernard A. “Bernie” Frakes, USAF, Retired, distinguished himself in service to special operations and Air Commandos from May 1972 to December 2019. Lieutenant Colonel Frakes duelled with anti-aircraft artillery over Vietnam while raining devastating fire down on enemy supply lines with his AC-130 gunship. Rising quickly to instructor and evaluator pilot, he prepared his fellow crewmembers to employ the gunship to maximum effect; a lifelong passion he pursued to prepare future generations of Air Commandos to succeed in combat. He displayed his extraordinary aviation and leadership skills again in Operations JUST CAUSE in Panama and DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM in Iraq, and concluded his 26-year active-duty career in 1992 with over 5,000 flight hours in every version of the AC-130 gunship, twice receiving the Distinguished Flying Cross, while earning 10 Air Medals. Following 1992, now as a gunship legend, he continued to serve in a variety of support and teaching roles with Air Force Special Operations Command, including classroom and simulator instructor, as well as government flight representative for the U-28 aircraft program. In December 2019, Colonel Frakes retired again, with more than 10,000 flight hours, having served the special operations community for 44 years. He has trained thousands of AC-130 gunship crewmembers and prepared them for combat in every conflict from Vietnam, to Panama, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and other contingency operations. The singularly distinctive accomplishments of Lieutenant Colonel Frakes bring great credit upon himself, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Air Commandos of every generation. 

# Commando HALL OF FAME




**MAJOR GENERAL  
RICHARD S. HADDAD**

Major General Richard S. “Beef” Haddad, USAF, Retired, entered active duty in 1981 from the Air Force Academy. He transferred to the 16th Special Operations Squadron, at Hurlburt Field, FL in 1985, and served as an instructor/evaluator in the AC-130H Spectre gunship and flew BLINKING LIGHT missions over El Salvador. In 1988, he transferred to the Air Force Reserve serving in the 711th SOS at Duke Field, Florida, flying the AC-130A. He volunteered to fill a staff position and deploy for Operation DESERT SHIELD and later redeployed as an AC-130A aircraft commander for DESERT STORM. Later, he volunteered to command a 711th SOS gunship for Operation UPHOLD DEMOCRACY over Haiti. Given command of the 711th SOS after he transitioned to the MC-130E Combat Talon, he led the squadron through Operations ENDURING FREEDOM in Afghanistan and IRAQI FREEDOM in Iraq as it became the most combat decorated Air Force Reserve Command squadron. He deployed again to Iraq in 2006 to serve as the senior advisor to the Iraqi Air Force and followed this tour as Reserve Mobilization Assistant to the Commander, 23rd Air Force, Hurlburt Field, and later acting commander 23rd Air Force. He was the first Air Force officer to serve as Commander, Special Operations Command Korea, US Forces Korea, and United Nations Command Special Operations Component. He returned to serve as Air Force Reserve Command’s Vice Commander before retiring with 35 years total service. The singularly distinctive accomplishments of Major General Haddad reflect great credit upon himself, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Air Commandos of every generation. 



# 2020 Air Comma



Major General Michael J. Kingsley, USAF, Retired, distinguished himself in multiple special operations positions performing with distinction throughout his career from duty as an Air Force special operations combat pilot to Vice Commander, Headquarters Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC). His exceptional leadership and guidance further distinguished the command as the dedicated air arm for joint special operations spanning the globe. On 16 January 1991, as an MH-53J Pave Low aircraft commander, he led a composite flight of Pave Lows and US Army AH-64 Apache helicopters on a daring raid attacking Iraqi radar sites. Their “radar blinding” of Iraqi forces contributed immeasurably to the success and tactical surprise that opened the air war campaign of Operation DESERT STORM. As Aviation Component Commander for a joint task force on six occasions ranging from 2004 through 2006 in support of Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM, his exceptional effort and superior leadership resulted in the successful accomplishment of numerous highly sensitive operations vital to the national security of the United States. As Vice Commander of AFSOC, General Kingsley’s leadership was key to the rapid assimilation of 29 new weapon systems in transformational mission design series, and fielding of the new MC-130J Commando II, the AC-130W Stinger II, and the CV-22B Osprey aircraft. His bold service to country has resulted in an unmatched record of performance spanning his career. His contributions have marked his legacy as the embodiment of the true Air Commando. The singularly distinctive accomplishments of Major General Kingsley reflect the highest credit upon himself, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Air Commandos of every generation. 

## MAJOR GENERAL MICHAEL J. KINGSLEY

# Commando HALL OF FAME



Lieutenant Colonel James D. “JD” Walker, USAF, Retired, served on active duty for 21 years, most notably as an MC-130 navigator in Air Force special operations. Since his retirement in 2007, “JD” has served as the Director of Staff for the 1st Special Operations Wing. Throughout his almost 35 years of service to the United States, Lieutenant Colonel Walker has been instrumental in developing a generation of Air Commandos and setting the foundation for the command’s success for decades to come. A combat-tested warrior, he has supported operations in Rwanda, Liberia, Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Notably, he was in the initial wave of special operations forces sent forward after 9/11 to conduct offensive operations in Afghanistan. He flew 92 combat sorties in challenging conditions and his team dropped the first BLU-82 bomb on Al-Qaeda positions. A little over a year later, he served as the J3 for special operations aviation missions into Iraq, leading the planning and execution of 770 combat missions in the early weeks of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. Furthermore, as the 1st Special Operations Wing’s Director of Staff, he has expertly supported 10 wing commanders tasked with executing combat operations around the globe. Between his active duty service and his role as the Director of Staff, “JD” Walker’s vast knowledge of the 1st Special Operations Wing and Air Force Special Operations Command has been and continues to remain invaluable. The singularly distinctive accomplishments of Lieutenant Colonel Walker reflect great credit upon himself, Air Force Special Operations Command, and Air Commandos of every generation. 🦅



**LIEUTENANT COLONEL  
JAMES D. WALKER**



# 2020 COMMANDER'S

*This award recognizes AFSOC's outstanding performers from any AFSC/career field who have made the most significant contributions to mission accomplishment as determined by their respective commanders. Their outstanding accomplishments make them truly deserving of this prestigious recognition.*

## **Technical Sergeant Ryan D. Ackerman**

Distinguished himself as CV-22 Osprey Program Manager and Evaluator Special Missions Aviator, 58th Training Squadron, 58th Special Operations Wing, Air Education and Training Command, Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico from 1 June 2019 to 31 May 2020. During this period, Sergeant Ackerman proved himself a leader in special operations aviation, with significant impacts on present and future operations. He spearheaded the joint CMV-22 Deep Dive initiative, providing critical insight on rescue tactics, techniques, and procedures, which formulated how the Navy's Osprey fleet employs during rescues. Additionally, Sergeant Ackerman flew as the lead Special Missions Aviator on a United States Central Command-directed pararescue pre-deployment exercise, providing 16 combat-ready battlefield airmen to 2 combatant commands. He inspired 4,400 future leaders at the Air Force Academy's CORONA airpower demonstration, where he showcased the CV-22's capabilities with 8 aircraft from two major commands. While serving as CV-22 Program Manager, Sergeant Ackerman was critical in managing eight mission design series' training programs for 26 crew positions. His efforts led to the execution of 331,648 academic and simulator hours, producing 1,425 aviators at the Air Force's most complex training squadron. Sergeant Ackerman also set a positive example to his students and peers by completing 2 Senior Enlisted Joint Professional Military Education courses spanning 85 hours, poising him for success in a joint leadership role. Finally, Sergeant Ackerman led 4 major commands in a 6-month initiative to write the new CV-22 modular syllabus, setting the framework for a 39 percent increase in student production. The distinctive accomplishments of Technical Sergeant Ackerman reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

## **Captain Lee G. Bussey**

Distinguished himself as Commander of Maintenance Operations, 27th Special Operations Maintenance Group,

27th Special Operations Wing, Air Force Special Operations Command, Cannon Air Force Base, New Mexico from 1 June 2019 to 31 May 2020. During this period, Captain Bussey commanded 123 Airmen to provide command and control, fleet health, and sortie production for 143 aircraft valued at \$5 billion dollars. He developed the flying hour program for 2 fiscal years, posturing the wing to generate 5,600 sorties and 20,000 flight hours ensuring readiness for 4,000 personnel. Additionally, as the 20th Expeditionary Special Operations Squadron's Maintenance Officer-in-Charge, he led 89 personnel in support of Operation FREEDOM SENTINEL, generating 122 sorties and 329 combat flight hours, enabling the transportation of 253 special operations forces, 56,000 pounds of cargo, and 316 surgical resuscitation teams. Furthermore, his logistical expertise oversight on \$89 million in supply accounts ensured the \$460 million fleet was combat ready. He directed a 4-month trend analysis on 540 supply assets directly aiding the geographic combatant commander's decision on future deployed operating locations for the CV-22 fleet. Finally, he managed an unprecedented Class-A mishap by liaising with 7 joint agencies to transfer 1,800 maintenance assets to a remote out-station and built 2 maintenance recovery teams, leading to the recovery of a \$115 million aircraft and him being awarded the Combined Joint Special Operations Air Component-Afghanistan's Company Grade Officer of the Month. Captain Bussey's exceptional leadership culminated in his selection for the competitively boarded Base Leveling Broadening Program ahead of his peers. The distinctive accomplishments of Captain Bussey reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

## **Technical Sergeant Daniel Butler**

Distinguished himself by meritorious service as CV-22 Evaluator Special Missions Aviator, Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge of Standardizations and Evaluations and additional duty First Sergeant, 20th Special Operations Squadron, 27th Special Operations Wing, Cannon Air Force Base, New Mexico from 1 June 2019, to 31 May 2020.



# LEADERSHIP AWARDS

Sergeant Butler was the sole enlisted aviator overseeing the standardization and evaluation of 74 aircrew conducting 44 individual evaluations and enabling 1,871 flight hours while achieving an effective rating on a unit compliance inspection. Furthermore, as the additional duty First Sergeant, he played a crucial role in maintaining good order and discipline while managing pandemic restrictions, coordinating 25 exceptions to policy for travel and visit requests over the course of 11 changes to guidance and policy. Sergeant Butler also served as the acting deployed operations superintendent, where he synchronized operations for 4 aircraft and 16 aircrew enabling the execution of 245 combat hours and 43 joint task force operations. Additionally, he was the lead planner for the strategic re-posture of the expeditionary CV-22 unit, driving the relocation of 3 aircraft, and 84 personnel while interfacing with Air Mobility Command and Central Command to prioritize and move 240,000 pounds of critical equipment across component commands, ensuring combat readiness forty-eight hours ahead of the deadline in support of national strategic objectives. Finally, Sergeant Butler facilitated 7 professional development sessions across 3 major commands cultivating leadership and promoting cross command broadening opportunities among 63 Airmen. The distinctive accomplishments of Technical Sergeant Butler reflect credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

## **Captain Zachary A. Christensen**

Distinguished himself as a U-28A Evaluator Combat Systems Officer, 5th Special Operations Squadron, 919th Special Operations Wing, Air Force Reserve Command, Duke Field, Florida from 1 June 2019 to 31 May 2020. During this period, Captain Christensen deployed 135 days in support of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. He flew 94 combat missions that totaled over 460 hours. During this deployment, Captain Christensen supported 13 different special operations force missions that eliminated 8 high value individuals and captured 10 others. Captain Christensen also coordinated multiple key leadership engagements across two different areas of operation, which

established critical lifesaving capabilities for elite special operations force teams. Furthermore, he also mentored 33 Airmen, 9 Combat Systems Officers, and 17 maintenance personnel while performing 15 professional development briefs and U-28 capability briefs throughout the deployment. While at home station, Captain Christensen performed duties as a Flight Training Unit instructor for the 19th Special Operations Squadron and taught over 40 different syllabus events, totaling over 100 hours of instruction to new students. Finally, Captain Christensen streamlined the U-28A instructor syllabus allowing faster use of instructors, which in-turn reduced the stress on the entire instructor cadre. The distinctive accomplishments of Captain Christensen reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

## **Technical Sergeant Marcus A. Cortez**

Distinguished himself as MC-130J Instructor Loadmaster and Flight Chief, 67th Special Operations Squadron, 352nd Special Operations Wing, Royal Air Force Mildenhall, United Kingdom from 1 June 2019 to 31 May 2020. During this period, Sergeant Cortez established his unit's first Air Force Special Operations Force Generation structure as Flight Chief of a 30-person expeditionary force. While in the early stages of development, Sergeant Cortez short-notice deployed with his flight in support of Special Operations Command Europe's medical response plan for the Coronavirus pandemic. While deployed, Sergeant Cortez led efforts to develop tactics, techniques, and procedures to employ the Chemical and Biological Survivability Barrier System for the first time in theater, validating his team's posture to respond to time-sensitive medical evacuations. Additionally, as an Instructor Loadmaster, he led a team of four personnel to validate loading procedures of Naval Special Warfare's sensitive equipment onto MC-130J aircraft, ultimately impacting future engagements with joint partners. Finally, Sergeant Cortez was instrumental to the success of a short-notice mission, directed by the President, where he executed the expeditious delivery of 75,000 pounds of cargo, 56 personnel, and transfer of 32,000 pounds of

fuel as part of a 5 aircraft package. His superior airmanship and courage led to the insertion of four CV-22 aircraft into contested territory while being exposed to significant risk of enemy small arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades. The distinctive accomplishments of Technical Sergeant Cortez reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

### **Technical Sergeant Ryan R. Farrington**

Distinguished himself as Non-Commissioned Officer In Charge of Strike Flight, 19th Special Operations Squadron, 492d Special Operations Wing, Air Force Special Operations Command, Hurlburt Field, Florida from 1 June 2019 to 31 May 2020. During this period, Sergeant Farrington exemplified the qualities of a leader as he provided critical risk mitigation measures and innovative virtual training conferences in order to continue the AC-130J formal training program for 135 students all while severely undermanned during civilian contractor negotiations. Additionally, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, Sergeant Farrington developed an action plan to enable sustained training operations, which maintained full formal training production. Furthermore, Sergeant Farrington led a 24-member team to evaluate critical tactics, techniques, and procedures of the AC-130J, thereby establishing policies, procedures, and a unit training plan that resulted in the accomplishment of an on-time goal for combat readiness of 83 members. Finally, Sergeant Farrington was hand-selected to lead a 14-member team in the planning and execution of the initial deployment of the AC-130J. He coordinated the movement of two aircraft and managed critical logistics, flawlessly standing up the 73d Expeditionary Special Operations Squadron. These actions enabled the establishment of combat flight operations within 48 hours, achieving Special Operations Command's number one priority by enabling sustained close air support for forces in Afghanistan. The distinctive accomplishments of Sergeant Farrington reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

### **Technical Sergeant Balfour G. Hutton Jr.**

Distinguished himself as a Dedicated Crew Chief Program Manager, 353d Special Operations Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, 353d Special Operations Group, Kadena Air Base, Japan, from 1 June 2019 to 31 May 2020. During this time, Sergeant Hutton spearheaded the creation of the squadron's Dedicated Crew Chief Program. His superior leadership enabled the implementation of operational instructions, training and evaluation curriculum, and recognition events to uphold this time-honored Airmen-empowered initiative. Additionally, Sergeant Hutton's excellent supervisory skills made him the go-to choice to lead 98 Airman as one of our elite Section Chiefs. His managerial prowess facilitated the generation of 887 sorties and 4,300 flight hours, delivering Special Operation Forces for the largest diverse area of responsibility, encompassing 13 partner exercises with 8 nations. Furthermore, Sergeant Hutton deployed as the senior enlisted leader for exercise GRYPHON JET. He

guided nine airmen across six Air Force Specialty Codes on rectifying three non-mission capable discrepancies. His outstanding direction allowed the generation of six sorties and two CV-22 air-to-air refuels, culminating in his selection as the Noncommissioned Officer of the Quarter. Finally, Sergeant Hutton led the squadron's exercise planning for 10 MC-130H/J assets valued at \$1.8 billion. He seamlessly coordinated logistics for 5 agencies within the Indo-Pacific region resulting in the successful execution of 10 joint combined training exercises and 2 higher headquarter missions. The distinctive accomplishments of Sergeant Hutton reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

### **Technical Sergeant Travis S. Lester**

Distinguished himself as Noncommissioned Officer in Charge, Special Tactics Element, 22d Special Tactics Squadron, 24th Special Operations Wing, Air Force Special Operations Command, Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, from 1 June 2019 to 31 May 2020. During this period, Sergeant Lester deployed as element leader for a six-month period where he managed \$850,000 of equipment; conducted 9 missions where he developed personnel recovery plans covering 20,000 square miles; and protected 1,300 joint personnel in his area of responsibility ultimately saving 45 American and coalition lives. Additionally, Sergeant Lester supported a six-day Special Operations Command reconnaissance mission. He served as the sole technical rescue specialist and primary navigator for a joint vehicle recovery mission and built travel routes and medical plans, and identified five potential helicopter landing zones, significantly reducing operational risk while sustaining a sensitive Department of State initiative. Furthermore, he served as the sole special tactics medic for a multinational operation responding to 2 separate enemy attacks, treated 30 patients, and earned recognition with an Air Force Commendation Medal for his actions. Moreover, his leadership was further displayed as Noncommissioned Officer in Charge of six airfield assessments, where he coordinated with the State Department and joint partners to open strategic access to key terrain, earning high praise from multiple United States ambassadors and the Commander, Special Operations Command-Africa. Finally, he served as his flight's lead pararescueman during the unit's predeployment train-up, planning and executing six missions over a 14-day period, leading to the successful squadron validation for overseas contingency operations. The distinctive accomplishments of Sergeant Lester reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

### **Captain Yra Meehleib**

Distinguished herself as the Logistics Flight Commander, 353d Special Operations Support Squadron, 353d Special Operations Group, Kadena Air Base, Japan from 1 June 2019 to 31 May 2020. During this period, Captain Meehleib oversaw the planning and execution of 9 Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Combined Exchange Training, and Contingency



# Enhancing SOF Survivability



**Rolls-Royce Infrared Suppression Systems** are built on a legacy of success for Special Operations Forces. Using our unique knowledge and experience working on the world's most advanced engines, Rolls-Royce IRS Systems meet the demanding requirements of USSOCOM while having minimal impact on engine performance. Based on our legacy MH-47 IRS, our newest IRS design has accumulated over 3,600 hours in 3 years of combat operations on the AC-130W. Our AE 1107C engine IRS variant has flown on the V-22, and our design for the AE 2100D3 engine on the C-130J is ready for production today.

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Response Force exercises across 6 countries, mobilizing a total of 22 aircraft, 568 personnel, and 174,588 pounds of cargo. These exercises highlighted the efficacy of United States relationships with coalition partners and fulfilled key Special Operations Command Pacific theater objectives. Additionally, Captain Meehleib and her team enabled the assembly of 532 various airdrop bundles, providing 180 aircrew members with integral training sorties and earning the 353d Special Operations Support Squadron's Flight of the Year award. Furthermore, Captain Meehleib's leadership enabled innovative aerial delivery solutions, such as air-to-sea bundles which maximized retrieval capabilities in low visibility areas. This project outpaced emergent combat requirements and was earmarked by Air Force Special Operations Command for future enterprise-wide use. Finally, at the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic, Captain Meehleib supported the Kadena Air Base Emergency Operations Center as its Executive Officer, managing the base command and control element in order to effectively distribute guidance from the Department of Defense down to the local level, ultimately safeguarding the health of 20,000 military members and their families. The distinctive accomplishments of Captain Meehleib reflect great credit upon herself and the United States Air Force.

### **Captain Charles T. Ogren**

Distinguished himself as Director Standardization and Evaluation, 22d Special Tactics Squadron, 24th Special Operations Wing, Air Force Special Operations Command, Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, from 1 June 2019 to 31 May 2020. During this period, Captain Ogren commanded a 16-man Special Tactics team while deployed over six-months, leading 17 missions to conduct 6 austere airfield surveys, 22 forward area refueling point surveys, and 6 micro-weather sensor emplacements. As the senior airfield authority for 3 mission support sites, he facilitated the transfer of 350,000 pounds of fuel, transport of 400 personnel, and the safe execution of 8 medical evacuations. On one of four missions as the ground force commander, Captain Ogren led his team during the execution of a helicopter assault force operation outside of established medical evacuation rings, inserting onto an austere mountaintop at 12,500 feet to conduct reconnaissance and emplace sensors along a critical air corridor. Additionally, he was a key planner for a task force offensive to counter Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Captain Ogren's leadership was vital in integrating his team across 3 different Army Special Forces teams over 30 days of offensive operations in contested regions. Furthermore, he was handpicked to liaise with joint base leadership to enable a visit from the Commander, United States Special Operations Command, and was later recognized and coined by General Clarke for excellence. Finally, Captain Ogren was selected to establish and lead his squadron's Standardization and Evaluation Flight, revamping the program for 110 Special Tactics Airmen. In this capacity, he directed a squadron culmination exercise of 5 dynamic full mission profiles, evaluated 80 Airmen, and certified five flights for worldwide contingency

response. The distinctive accomplishments of Captain Ogren reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

### **First Lieutenant Taylor M. Pearson**

Distinguished herself as Section Commander, 901st Special Operations Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, 1st Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, Florida from 1 June 2019 to 31 May 2020. As Chief, Command Force Development, Lieutenant Pearson's innovative efforts led to the development of virtual management level reviews which saved over \$180,000 in senior rater travel costs and cut man-hours by 80 percent. Additionally, she was handpicked by the Director of Manpower, Personnel, and Services to lead the Headquarters Air Force Special Operations Command Commander's Support Staff, serving on G-series orders while filling a Lieutenant Colonel billet for 56 days. Lieutenant Pearson's efforts led to winning the 2018 Headquarters Air Force Special Operations Command A1 Company Grade Officer of the Year. Moreover, she was selected to lead the Operation Air Force program for Air Force Special Operations Command in which she coordinated 6 base tours for over 130 cadets including engagement of 4 wing commanders and the Commander of Air Force Special Operations Command. As section commander, she stood up the squadron's first-ever section commander program, overseeing 68 programs, 15 military and civilian personnel, servicing 475 squadron and group members. Furthermore, Lieutenant Pearson's management and oversight led to the generation of 5 aircraft which were utilized in the evacuation of 2 air bases prior to an Iranian missile strike, ultimately saving 261 personnel. Finally, she developed a Commander's Support Staff database which automated processes and cut man-hours by 75 percent, ultimately securing her win of the 2019 1st Special Operations Maintenance Group A1 Company Grade Officer of the Year Award. The distinctive accomplishments of First Lieutenant Pearson reflect great credit upon herself and the United States Air Force.

### **Captain Charles G. Spencer**

Distinguished himself as a Combat Systems Officer, 193d Special Operations Squadron, 193d Special Operations Group, 193d Special Operations Wing, Air Force Special Operations Command, Middletown, Pennsylvania from 1 June 2019, to 31 May 2020. During this period, Captain Spencer deployed in support of Operation INHERENT RESOLVE, amassing 175 combat flight hours, resulting in broadcasting over 300 hours of Military Information Support Operations. Selflessly, Captain Spencer forward-deployed to an austere location where he stood up a temporary base of operations in less than 20 days. He tirelessly performed his aircrew duties and successfully navigated the EC-130J Commando Solo over hostile territory. Additionally, Captain Spencer took the initiative to revitalize the squadron's training program, restructuring the process for 140 aircrew members to gain and maintain

combat readiness. His successes led him to be selected as the Group Executive Officer, where he effectively increased continuity of processes for over 200 group personnel. Amidst the Coronavirus pandemic of 2019, Captain Spencer diligently produced status briefings to members of the wing leadership and successfully secured over 300 masks for wing members, ensuring their health and safety. The distinctive accomplishments of Captain Spencer reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

### **Staff Sergeant Brandon Thames**

Distinguished himself as an Integrated Electronics Systems Specialist, 193d Special Operations Maintenance Squadron, 193d Special Operations Maintenance Group, 193d Special Operations Wing, Air Force Special Operations Command, Middletown Pennsylvania from 1 June 2019, to 31 May 2020. During this period, he was instrumental in the success of a dynamic basing concept, where the EC-130J episodically deployed within the Central Command area of responsibility. He expertly maintained the Ku Band Spread Spectrum system, performing three-level maintenance that allowed for real time communication and ensured reliable coordination with the EC-130J and the command and control cells. He directly contributed to a deployed ninety eight percent aircraft in-commission rate, earning maintainer of the month as part of a deployed Total Force Special Operations Maintenance Squadron. Next, he reached out to the 193d Special Operations Group to facilitate four classes on Identify Friend or Foe loading procedures for the Combat Systems Officers. After installation of the Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast system, he qualified 20 Airmen on proper code loading and synchronizing to the aircraft. He confirmed proper communications security was established to support the new and legacy systems, which were installed and used on the aircraft. This upgrade was critical to the EC-130J and aided with higher headquarters to acquire and install fourth generation satellite communication radios, which seized the advantage of integrated waveform capability. As an expert instructor and leader, he trained seven Airmen in both five and seven level tasks. In addition, he led his team as Fitness Improvement Program Monitor and worked closely with those failing fitness assessments, guiding Airmen back to success. The distinctive accomplishments of Staff Sergeant Thames reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

### **Technical Sergeant Ramon L. Torres III**

Distinguished himself as a Combat Aviation Advisor, 711th Special Operations Squadron, 919th Special Operations Wing, Air Force Reserve Command, Duke Field, Florida from 1 June 2019 to 31 May 2020. As lead Force Protection advisor for Operational Aviation Detachment 6CL94, Sergeant Torres led the development and execution of an Air Base Defense course in cooperation with the Lebanese Air Base Commander. This course qualified 10 Lebanese Force Protection experts and initiated a resourceful defense plan for the security of 152 partner nation and US Special

Operations Forces personnel. Additionally, Sergeant Torres represented Combat Aviation Advisor interests to the resident Army Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha and the US Embassy in Lebanon to significantly revise standing retrograde and Noncombatant Evacuation Operations plans. These revisions were critical to the safety of American personnel in Lebanon, particularly in light of the country's growing political and economic challenges during the team's deployment. Finally, Sergeant Torres authored specific medical evacuation, casualty evacuation, and vehicle extrication tactics, techniques, and procedures in order to codify sustainment measures for task force and US Embassy personnel. While in garrison, Sergeant Torres liaised with the Air Force Office of Special Investigations and local law enforcement to execute two pre-deployment exercises to ensure the combat readiness of 33 Combat Aviation Advisors across 23 unique training objectives. He also oversaw a unit-wide 100-hour training program to qualify 62 Combat Aviation Advisors. The distinctive accomplishments of Sergeant Torres reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

### **Captain Joshua R. Vaden**

Distinguished himself as Operations Flight Commander, 492d Special Operations Advanced Capabilities Squadron, 492d Special Operations Wing, Air Force Special Operations Command, Hurlburt Field, Florida from 1 June 2019 to 31 May 2020. During this period, Captain Vaden led his unit's largest and most dynamic flight comprised of enlisted, civilian, and contract personnel. The 33 member team provided unparalleled support to Air Force Special Operation Command's \$14 million mission network systems across eight geographically separated locations. This network infrastructure directly enabled 21,000 combat missions in support of 5 named operations. Additionally, he orchestrated a critical \$3.5 million upgrade for the Air Operations Center, improving system availability to an unprecedented rate of 99.7 percent allowing the command and control of 230 assets for combat operations. Furthermore, in a time of crisis, his quick thinking saved the command's 45 million dollar global command and control infrastructure from collapsing by revitalizing the primary data center's heating, ventilation, and cooling system resulting in zero degradation of capabilities. Finally, his team became the first Department of Defense unit to conduct engineering support and testing with SpaceX satellites in support of exercise GLOBAL LIGHTNING. This technological leap enabled an AC-130J gunship to pass secure video, chat, and positional data utilizing the SpaceX constellation, allowing 10 times the bandwidth and recognizing a 90 percent cost savings over conventional systems. The distinctive accomplishments of Captain Vaden reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

### **Technical Sergeant Ryan T. Vaughan**

Distinguished himself as Noncommissioned Officer, Explosive Ordnance Disposal Training, 1st Special

Operations Civil Engineer Squadron, 1st Special Operations Wing, Air Force Special Operations Command, Hurlburt Field, Florida from 1 June 2019 to 31 May 2020. During this period, Sergeant Vaughan expertly filled a Master Sergeant position within the Operations Section, where he led a complete overhaul of Hurlburt Field's Explosive Ordnance Disposal training program. He eliminated 32 critical training shortfalls, led explosives training for 174 special operators and guided anti-terrorism training for 300 United States Air Force Special Operations School students. Additionally, he guided two teams on three emergency response operations. His skills successfully eliminated a civil war-era munition from Pensacola Naval Air Station and enabled the safe recovery of a MC-130J aircraft. Furthermore, he led 17 Total Force Airmen from 3 major commands across 24 events covering urban warfare, unexploded ordnance procedures, and tactical combat casualty care. His leadership earned him Noncommissioned Officer Academy Distinguished Graduate and the 1st Special Operations Wing's best Explosive Ordnance Disposal Technician of the Year award. Finally, Sergeant Vaughan was hand-selected to be squad leader for a foreign internal defense force during a 28-day Marine Corps Mountain Warfare course. He provided critical instruction on medical evacuation procedures, small unit tactics, and counter-improvised explosive devices techniques for 40 joint service members which allowed him to be the second airmen ever to attend the Marine Corps Special Operations level one course where he graduated at the top of his class. The distinctive accomplishments of Technical Sergeant Vaughan reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

### Second Lieutenant Heather E. L. Veldhouse

Distinguished herself as an Information Operations Planner,

352d Special Operations Wing, Royal Air Force Mildenhall, United Kingdom from 1 June 2019 to 31 May 2020. During this period, Lieutenant Veldhouse led research and analysis for the Wing's first Information Operations air campaign. Her meticulous research aligned the European Theater's special warfare lines-of-effort by way of a comprehensive plan to synchronize full-spectrum battlespace data. As a testament to Lieutenant Veldhouse's groundbreaking and strategic blueprint, the operation was lauded by the Commander, Special Operations Command to the Secretary of Defense. Additionally, she was an integral member of the first tactical unit to collaborate with Headquarters Air Force on command and control of information in the information environment. Furthermore, Lieutenant Veldhouse leveraged her mission planning expertise to create an Information Warfare Cell for implementation as the United States Air Force's first tangible concept for future information operations development. This achievement paved the way for her and her team's selection as Air Force Special Operations Command Information Operations 2019 Team of the Year. Moreover, Lieutenant Veldhouse led the development of a Memorandum of Understanding between the 352d Special Operations Wing and Royal Air Force Mildenhall's host wing, synchronizing installation efforts and protecting critical information which saved 3,000 man-hours. Finally, her determination fueled a prioritized and tiered proposal of 30 memoranda of execution and requests for information that initialized assessments for two higher headquarters commanders while establishing an Air Force benchmark for information operations policies. The distinctive accomplishments of Lieutenant Veldhouse reflect great credit upon herself and the United States Air Force.



The ACA has become a destination for those who have performed the SOF mission, shared the risks, celebrated the successes and honored the sacrifices of our fallen teammates. ACA maintains the history, the culture, the friendships and professional associations essential to sustaining the capability in the best of and the most trying of times. It operates as a trusted business and offers its members value: associations, education, exchanges and family and wounded warrior support. And, it remains small enough to offer all members a family-friendly venue through which alumni, those currently serving and those who will serve share the excitement and promise of the special operations warrior discipline.

-- NORTON A. SCHWARTZ, Gen (Ret) Former USAF Chief of Staff

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The appearance of military and government personnel is not meant to suggest an official endorsement by the Department of Defense of the Air Commando Association or its fundraising efforts.



# 2020 AWARDS

## SrA Julian S. Scholten Award

Staff Sergeant Patrick E. Dixon distinguished himself in outstanding leadership and performance under combat conditions as an AC-130J Sensor Operator in the 73d Expeditionary Special Operations Squadron. During this deployment, Sergeant Dixon provided on-call precision close air support for Special Operations Forces, flying a total of 49 sorties while protecting 3,900 joint and coalition forces. Additionally, Sergeant Dixon took on the role of deployed AC-130J liaison officer where he provided aircraft capabilities and weapon effects briefs to Special Operation Forces teams, aiding the seamless employment of the next generation gunship. On one perilous combat mission, he expertly employed the 30-millimeter cannon within danger close of friendly forces, ultimately ensuring the safety and recovery of four coalition personnel.

## Air Force Outstanding Airman of the Year 2020

Senior Master Sergeant Verna Cannon-Golemboski led a team of 48 airmen charged with advising senior leaders on the AFSOC's 19,000 personnel authorizations. Her leadership

and expertise were vital in delivering the command's first-ever 207-member munitions squadron and maximizing combat capabilities. She led the command's Chief Grade Review, teaming with 8 Command Chief Master Sergeants to adjudicate 136 positions and resulting in 9 position upgrades. Additionally, as a personnel and manpower subject-matter expert, she assisted in the design of a 17-lesson course to provide in-depth training for more than a 1,000 manpower analysts. Finally, she was hand-selected as one of 15 Senior Noncommissioned Officers by the Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force to serve on a think tank to develop enlisted progression courses of action to shape the Air Force development plan for 264,000 Airmen.

## Special Tactics Operator of the Year (Officer)

Captain Kyle B. Whittier distinguished himself as the Officer Special Tactics Operator of the Year while assigned to the 321st Special Tactics Squadron, RAF Mildenhall, United Kingdom. Captain Whittier proved himself to be an ambassador for international collaboration and capability

improvement, developing and leading special operations air-land integration training, exercises, and operations with key strategic allies in Europe. His leadership ensured that US allies on Europe's eastern flank are fully prepared to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with each other and our nation to resist hybrid threats to NATO and to each other. In addition, he served as the ground force commander for multiple joint and interagency operations in high-risk environments to achieve US national objectives. His outstanding leadership was recognized by senior leaders from the wing commander to the Secretary of Defense.

## Special Tactics Operator of the Year (Enlisted)

**Technical Sergeant Anthony J. Marzilli** distinguished himself as the Enlisted Special Tactics Operator of the Year while assigned to the 24th Special Tactics Squadron, Pope Army Airfield, North Carolina. Sergeant Marzilli delivered outstanding technical rescue training to joint and international partners, to include high angle urban climbing, military free-fall parachuting, collapsed structures, and mass casualty events. While deployed in support of an elite joint special operations force, he was usually the only rescue specialist on the team, ensuring casualty care and effective personnel recovery operations. His outstanding leadership was demonstrated multiple times in high stress situations—during mountain operations, against fortified enemy cave systems, and during a high-risk, nighttime, parachute insertion to capture a national-level high value target.

## Deployed Aircraft Ground Response Element (DAGRE) of the Year

**Staff Sergeant Tyler M. Jeffreys** distinguished himself as the 353d Special Operations Group's Deployed Aircraft Ground Response Element (DAGRE) of the year by his exemplary leadership and performance as a DAGRE Team Leader. During this period, Sergeant Jeffreys was recognized as a "Top Performer" for his outstanding professionalism and dedication during Thailand Joint Chief of Staff's (JCS) exercise, COBRA GOLD '20, that supported 255 deployed special operations personnel, 10 aircraft, and 3 Special Tactics Teams. His dedication resulted in 83 sorties, flying 445 hours, and 163 aircraft controlled. Further, Sergeant Jeffreys was recognized by the SOCPAC commander for his decisive actions to stop an out-of-control bus traveling at 35 MPH for over a half-mile. His swift action saved the lives of 11 passengers and the partner nation bus driver without any serious injuries. He also spearheaded the first joint personnel recovery training with US Navy Helicopter Sea Combat Detachment and 33d Rescue Squadron personnel, validating recovery capabilities as well as establishing tactics, techniques, and procedures throughout the area of


responsibility. While in-garrison Sergeant Jeffreys completed the Air Advisor course and the 80-hour Principles of Instruction course and developed training plans leading to flight continuity for future training iterations. Additionally, he led two Tactical Vehicle courses for the host base wing's Security Forces squadron qualifying 30 Airmen to perform side-by-side driver duties, increasing their response capabilities. Finally, Sergeant Jeffreys completed the Senior Enlisted Joint Professional Military Education Level I. Sergeant Jeffreys' leadership, dedication, and performance directly contributed to the success of the DAGRE Program, and the 353d Special Operations Support Squadron being named AFSOC's Special Operation Squadron of the Year.

## Air Force Outstanding Airman of the Year 2019

### TSgt Kenneth T. O'Brien

Special Tactics Team Element Leader  
320th Special Tactics Squadron, Kadena AB, Japan (AFSOC)  
Technical Sergeant O'Brien seamlessly embedded with the Secret Service and Joint Special Operations Forces as part of a President of the United States protection team, ensuring safety and security during the first United States and North Korean negotiation summit in history. While on temporary duty, he charged into a burning vehicle in South Korea where he extracted an injured civilian and successfully performed life-saving procedures. Additionally, he played an instrumental role in the Thailand cave rescue mission. He was essential in creating the rescue plan, which placed himself as the furthest American inside the cave. During the mission, he also led the effort to retrieve and successfully resuscitate a Thai navy SEAL. His team's heroic efforts led to the rescue of 13 Thai civilians.

## The Heart Of The Team Award

**Captain Tyler A. Roten** is an inspiration to the men and women with whom he serves despite great adversity and countless personal challenges. With his determination, will, and mantra "a setback is a set up for a comeback," he beat the odds following a stroke and after two months of extensive physical therapy, he learned how to walk and use his fine motor skills again. Once fully recovered he returned to his unit family where he put his infectious attitude and drive back to work. Captain Roten oversaw the group's procedures for the Chemical Aircraft Support Survivability Barrier ensuring the fleet of MC-130J aircraft could respond to any COVID pandemic needs, he also was selected to fill a critical position as the Maintenance Operations Officer leading 404 personnel. His unique challenges made him even more eager to get after the unit's tough issues and contribute. Captain Roten's unflinching professionalism and care for his fellow Airmen, the mission, and Air Force Special Operations Command, epitomize the individual who is the Heart of the Team! 

# AIR ADVISING IN WORLD WAR II

## THE CHINESE-AMERICAN COMPOSITE WING

By Daniel Jackson, Major, USAF



**B-25 Mitchells and P-51 Mustangs of the Chinese-American Composite Wing adorned with both US and Chinese roundels cruise through the wartime skies of China. During World War II, US and Chinese airmen served side-by-side in the same squadrons in combat against the Japanese.** (Photo credit: LIFE Magazine)

Combat Aviation Advisors (CAAs) deploy in operational aviation detachments (OADs) to conduct special operations activities by, with, and through foreign aviation forces in permissive, hostile, and denied terrain. In carrying out foreign internal defense, security force assistance, and unconventional warfare tasks, the 6th and 711th Special Operations Squadrons have a rich history of combat aviation advising from which to draw upon—stretching all the way back to World War II. While Colonels Phil Cochran and Johnny Alison built the precursor to US Air Force Special Operations in India during the fall of 1943, Army Air Force airmen pioneered another mode of irregular aerial warfare on the other side of the “Hump,” the nickname American airmen gave the Himalayan Mountains.

In China, the forbears to all modern USAF air advisors—including CAAs—embarked on Operation LOTUS, working shoulder-to-shoulder with Chinese airmen to resurrect the mostly defunct Chinese Air Force (CAF) and turn it into a modern, lethal

fighting force able to help eject the occupation forces of Imperial Japan. Their effort became the Chinese-American Composite Wing (CACW), a CAF unit jointly manned by airmen, ground crews, and support personnel from both nations and under the tactical control of the US Fourteenth Army Air Force. As today’s CAAs construct a nascent in-house program for adaptive precision strike (APS), they look to past operations like LOTUS for inspiration and lessons learned to help partner nation air forces deliver lethal effects against shared enemies.

Long before the attack on Pearl Harbor—since the late nineteenth century, in fact—Japan had steadily chipped away at China’s territorial integrity. Though not ignorant to the threat, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, leader of Nationalist China, prioritized defeat of the warlords and his domestic political foes to unite the fractured country under his regime. He found his task far from complete when the Imperial Japanese Army began its full-scale invasion in July 1937.

Chiang had long believed a modern air arm essential to his project of uniting China. However, as with many cash-poor nations already mired in conflict, he had to take help where he could find it. The resulting air force he built consisted of a hodgepodge of aircraft and patchwork of training programs from the Germans, Italians, Soviet Union, and the United States. Most of these programs merely put airplanes and pilots on the ramp, rather than building real combat capability or the capacity to leverage that capability toward integration with ground forces and intelligence. Courses of instruction usually prioritized political considerations over tactical effectiveness and safety.

In May 1937, Chiang hired a retired US Army Air Corps captain by the name of Claire Lee Chennault to make a comprehensive evaluation of the CAF. “The Italian flying school at Luoyang was unique,” Chennault later wrote of one of the training programs he reviewed. “It graduated every Chinese cadet who survived the training course as a full-fledged pilot regardless of



**A Chinese airman plots a course on a briefing table while others look on. Chinese aircrews expressed admiration for thorough American planning—lessons they carried with them throughout their military careers.** (Photo courtesy of National Archives)



**Chinese and American pilots discuss plans for the next day's operations.** (Photo courtesy of National Archives)



**Curtiss P-40 Warhawk in the colors of the CACW's 7th Fighter Squadron (Provisional).** (Photo courtesy of Kimball Chen)

ability.” While this arrangement pleased the politically connected families who sent their sons to serve in the air force, in Chennault’s estimation, the graduates proved to be “a menace to navigation.”

Alone among the Westerners advising or lobbying the generalissimo, Chennault realized effective airpower required an interlocking system of systems: aircraft, maintenance, logistics, air and ground crew training, intelligence, tactics, and air-ground integration. When war broke out just six weeks after his arrival, he pressed Chiang to let him test his ideas in combat. That summer, he built an air-raid warning network around the Nationalist capital at Nanjing which guided Chinese fighters to a number of successful intercepts. During three days in mid-August 1937, Chinese airmen claimed an astounding 54 Japanese bombers destroyed.

But the network only solved one of the CAF’s many problems. “When the Japs returned to Nanjing in October with swarms of monoplane fighters buzzing around their bombers the jig was up,” Chennault reported. “The Chinese with guts to fight were shot down like flies. When the rest scuttled and ran off at full throttle, skimming the rice paddies, I really couldn’t blame them.”

Chennault’s early efforts to help the CAF brought him into close proximity with its leadership. He formed many important relationships, especially with Major General Mow Pang-tsu, the CAF’s deputy commander-in-chief, and Colonel Wang Shu-ming, commander of the Chinese Fifth Air Force. He learned a lot about how to make airpower work in a Chinese context—and a lot about what not to do. Alongside a short-lived Soviet volunteer air group, in the fall of 1938 he attempted to build a volunteer unit of his own: the International Squadron. “We hired a weird collection of four Frenchmen, a Dutchman, three Americans, and a German and filled out the squadron with six of the best Chinese bomber pilots,” he recalled.

The scheme fell apart when it ran afoul of clashing cultures, “I planned to use the foreigners as flight leaders,” Chennault wrote. When the Chinese pilots learned of this, they refused to fly on the ground that they would lose too much face following a foreign pilot. Their exit was followed by a sympathy strike of the Chinese bombardiers, who were also officers. Our sole survivors were the rear gunners, who had been recruited from the Chinese ground armies. They were enthusiastic about flying—they didn’t have to walk.

Chennault learned the hard way

that building a partner nation’s aviation capacity is highly contingent on its culture.

From 1937 to 1939, Japan’s armies pushed the Nationalist Chinese into the hinterland, where Chiang reconstituted his capital at Chongqing, in Sichuan Province. With the ground war increasingly bogged down in a stalemate, the Japanese were determined to bomb China into submission. Day after day, scores—sometimes hundreds—of Japanese bombers winged their way up the Yangzi River to the new Nationalist capital. The CAF continued trying to intercept the raids, but to little effect. Finally, in September 1940, the Japanese unleashed their new A6M Type Zero carrier fighter. On September 13, in its combat debut over Chongqing, 13 Zeros downed 13 Chinese fighters and damaged 11 more without taking any losses. “I surveyed the whole combat space as we engaged the enemy,” recounted Sub-Lieutenant Hsu Hua-chiang. “I saw our planes being chased away and some of our pilots bailing out. I was also hit many times.” With black smoke billowing from the exhaust pipe of his Soviet-built I-15 biplane, and its engine hemorrhaging oil, Hsu managed to crash-land in a rice paddy. China’s Aeronautical Affairs Commission



immediately ordered the remnants of its air force withdrawn from combat. The new Zero made it clear the CAF would not be able to stand on its own.

Within two months, Chennault found himself en route to the United States with General Mow, dispatched by the generalissimo to assist in ongoing lobbying efforts for a volunteer fighter group equipped with modern interceptors and manned by experienced American aviators. President Roosevelt felt the US had clear strategic interests at stake, including freedom of navigation in the Pacific and an open door to trade with China. Over the preceding years these interests had increasingly brought America into conflict with the Empire of Japan. As Japanese troops pressed from the Manchurian provinces to the Yellow and Yangzi River valleys in 1937, and French Indochina in 1940, Roosevelt escalated diplomatic and economic pressure, imposing an embargo on shipments of scrap iron and oil, forward deploying the US Pacific Fleet from San Diego to Pearl Harbor, and secretly authorizing the formation of the volunteer fighter group destined for China.

The American Volunteer Group—popularly known as the Flying Tigers—carried the germ of Chennault's later ideas for the CACW. The US Army, Navy, and Marine Corps released one hundred pilots to serve as “instructors” for the CAF. Though Chennault always intended for the American aviators to participate directly in combat with the Japanese, he envisioned Chinese pilots eventually taking instructors' places in the fight after receiving sufficient training and lend-lease aircraft. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and subsequent conquest of Burma delayed these plans. The air war for China became a unilateral US effort for the better part of two years.

Reinstated in the US Army Air Forces (USAAF) and rising to command the Fourteenth Army Air Force as a major general, Chennault reinvigorated his goal of resurrecting the CAF in early 1943. On January 21, he sent a memo to Lt Gen Joseph W. Stilwell, the American theater commander: “I have given very careful thought to the matter of supervising and commanding Chinese air force units in China,” he

wrote. “The supervision and control of Chinese air units by foreigners acting in an advisory capacity never produces the best results.” Instead, he recommended a “joint or allied air force organization which could be commanded by a foreign officer assisted by a staff composed of officers from all the nationalities having combat units operating in China.” His idea received a boost from the commanding general of the USAAF, Lt Gen Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, who told him he had more planes available than pilots and wanted the Chinese to start shouldering more of the load.

The concept evolved into a four-phase program to rehabilitate the CAF, with some of the pieces already in motion. First, pilot candidates would go through ground school and English

squadrons would go into combat in China. In this comprehensive effort it is easy to see the roots of both the USAF's conventional air advising enterprise and AFSOC's CAAs. According to pilot Ho Weng-Toh, the Chinese cadets called the year of training their “miracle year,” because in the space of twelve months they went from being war refugees to trained combat pilots. “When we started this ‘miracle year,’ we felt very lost and powerless,” he later wrote. “We wanted to do something for our country but we couldn't. And now, after traveling and training in far distant lands, we finally did. We can now return to defend and protect our land.”

Chennault planned for the CACW to include two fighter groups and one bomber group of four squadrons each.



**Each leadership position in the CACW had Chinese and Americans working in tandem. Maj Bill Reed and Capt Hsu Hua-chiang co-commanded the 7th Fighter Squadron as it opposed the Japanese Ichi-go offensive north of the Yangzi River in the spring and summer of 1944. Here, two ground crewmen stand in front of a sign decorating the front of the 7th's alert shack. (Photo courtesy of Carl Molesworth)**

language instruction in China and then flight screening in India, where American instructors would evaluate their suitability for training in the United States. Second, they would attend basic and advanced pilot training programs at Luke and Thunderbird Fields in Arizona. Many of those who washed out of pilot training would divert to bombardier or navigator training instead. Third, air and ground crews would go through six weeks of transition training in lend-lease aircraft alongside their American counterparts in an operational training unit (OTU) outside Karachi, India (now Pakistan). Finally, the joint Chinese-American

Reflecting the lessons he had learned the hard way since 1937, he planned to equip the wing with just two types of aircraft: Curtiss P-40 Warhawk fighters and North American B-25 Mitchell medium bombers. These would come from lend-lease stocks and belong to the CAF. Standardization would help with training and logistics and mitigate many of the problems he had seen with the hodgepodge of equipment with which the CAF had been equipped at the outset of the war. Though most air force commanders considered the P-40 obsolete, it was still proving its utility in the guerrilla air war in China. Chennault's experience had taught him



**The view from the control tower at Zhijiang. The People's Republic of China has preserved the CACW's wartime base as a monument to Chinese-American cooperation.** (Photo courtesy of the author)



**A granite statue of Maj General Claire Lee Chennault at the old CACW airfield at Zhijiang. Alone among the Westerners advising Chiang Kai-shek, Chennault thought of airpower as a complex system of systems and devised the CACW as a way to build a modern, effective Chinese Air Force.** (Photo courtesy of the author)

the best aircraft and equipment for the partner force need not necessarily be the “high tech” solution. Rather, it needed to be the “right tech” for their particular environment and circumstance.

Chennault also invented a novel scheme to integrate American advisors without offending Chinese sensibilities. Instead of placing Chinese airmen directly under American control, each leadership position had Chinese and Americans working in tandem—Chinese and American co-squadron commanders, for example. Essentially, a skeleton crew of Americans would serve as line instructors and advisors for each twelve-aircraft squadron. In the 5th Fighter Group (Provisional), for instance, 61 US officers and 116 enlisted men served alongside 91 Chinese officers and 150 enlisted. The wing’s first monthly historical report included a clear statement of the desired end state:

The mission of the CACW will be completed when CAF personnel are capable of efficiently operating the fighter and bomber groups and squadrons under actual combat operations without further supervision on the part of the USAAF personnel. At this time all American personnel will be withdrawn from the entire wing and the composite units, welded into a smooth working organization, will be turned over in their entirety to the Chinese Air Force.

Training began in Karachi on August 5, 1943. The OTU could accommodate two fighter squadrons and a single bomber squadron at a time for the six-week transition course. Demonstrating Chennault’s conception of airpower as an interlocking system of systems, the OTU taught flying transition courses in the P-40 and B-25, ground training in navigation, gunnery, communications, medium-altitude and skip bombing, armament, fighter and bomber tactics, line maintenance, administration, and technical supply methods. Tactical training began with the P-40s and B-25s operating individually, and then integrated the fighters and bombers to tackle more complex scenarios together.

Many of the American pilots came from the USAAF Proving Ground Command at Eglin Field, Florida. Col Winslow C. “Winnie” Morse, the US wing commander, had been in command of the test and evaluation wing there prior to going overseas and brought with him a hand-picked group of former test pilots and instructors. Though few of them had yet to see combat, each had hundreds of hours more flying time than the average American pilot reporting to frontline units in the summer of 1943. Chennault had hoped to bring back several AVG veterans to add their experience to the wing, but he got only two. One of them, Maj William “Bill”

Reed, became co-commander of the 7th Fighter Squadron (Provisional). “This outfit is regarded as one of the top-priority projects by the higher ups,” he journaled soon after arriving in India:

*It could be called the real beginning of a new and potentially great Chinese Air Force. It is what the original AVG had hoped to be, but it was rather an abortive attempt. I have no doubt that this, too, is General Chennault’s idea. It is a good one, and there is no doubt that it will succeed if it gets the proper backing. This makes the second time I’ve been in on the ground floor, and I’m glad of the opportunity.*

As could be expected, the CACW experienced a multitude of novel problems in training, the language barrier chief among them. Only half the Chinese officer aircrew had attended training programs in the United States and many of those still struggled with English—though a few had picked up some colorful bits of American slang. None of the enlisted aircrew and none of the ground echelon had received training in the US and most did not speak a word of English. A Chinese tail gunner once even bailed out of his B-25 over the Sindh Desert after misunderstanding instructions from American aircrew over the intercom.

The Americans received a series of three lectures from the wing intelligence officer, Maj Frank Metcalf, in Chinese

geography, language, and culture, but the lessons did not go into sufficient depth to aid day-to-day communication. “They are really an eager bunch,” Bill Reed journaled enthusiastically after meeting the Chinese pilots in his new squadron. “Bet they will prove to be good fighters, too. This time I am going to really learn their language. If I am going to lead them into battle, I want to be able to give them definite commands and have them executed.” Despite his best intentions, though, as Reed’s biographer notes, “there is no evidence Bill ever succeeded in mastering Chinese.”

Interpreters worked long hours to translate courses of instruction and eventually the wing’s personnel developed a combination of spoken pidgin and sign language to handle most routine situations. But the language issue never really reached a satisfactory solution. Modern CAAs are language-enabled, coping with this need via months of schooling by Defense Language Institute instructors as a key part of their four-phase training pipeline. In the absence of a shared-language with a particular partner force, CAAs have also learned to create brevity terms, comm-out procedures, visual signals, and other workarounds. Ultimately, regardless of language, the best way to learn to operate together is to train together—frequently and realistically.

Culturally, the Americans’ straightforward bluntness clashed with the reserved, “face”-conscious Chinese. Both sides had to adjust. In the 7th Fighter Squadron, Captain Hsu Hua-chiang, who had barely survived the first dogfight against Japanese Zeros in 1940, served as Reed’s co-commander. Reed thought Hsu did not much care for him at first. “I like Chinese people and would like to be friends with all the Chinese people,” Reed told him through an interpreter one day. “But it seems that you don’t like me. Every time we work together, your attitude is distant. Is there something wrong?”

“No, it’s not that!” Hsu replied. “I’m just a quiet person who does not like to socialize with people, and my English is also poor. That’s why we have this misunderstanding.” Reed and Hsu worked to better understand each other after that exchange and eventually

became a close command team. Still, the wing leadership thought it best for the Americans and Chinese to have separate messes and living quarters, though most of the squadrons used frequent parties and team sports to bring the two cultures closer together.

In addition to issues of language and culture, once the CACW commenced combat operations, it initially suffered heavier loss rates than other units in the China Theater. A study by the 24th Statistical Control Unit found the CACW’s losses per one hundred sorties nearly two-and-a-half times higher than the Fourteenth Air Force average. Many of those losses were due to accidents, rather than combat, including the loss of Bill Reed, who died in an accident on December 19, 1944. The commander of Fourteenth Air Force’s forward echelon noted in his diary on November 4, 1943, “The first mission by the Chinese-American Composite Wing was not so good. We lost two planes.” Progress reports from group staffs recorded problems many modern CAAs would find familiar, such as with the 5th Fighter Group’s Chinese comm troops: “It is difficult to get the communications personnel to the line on time,” noted the report:

*Preventative maintenance is unknown. They are satisfied to let things slide until something is out of order, then repair it. They do not check the IA Forms after the morning preflight or after each mission. Even if the trouble is corrected the IA Form will not show it as it is never written up. The communications officer has been told of these delinquencies and it is hoped he will correct them.*

Another report noted difficulties integrating with Chinese ground forces: “Conflicting intelligence reports make selection of front-line targets difficult,” wrote the 5th’s American co-commander, Col Frank Rouse:

*Information from Chinese ground forces has no similarity to information from CAF Headquarters here. The Chinese 5th Group commanding officer cannot speak to Chinese ground force personnel on the phone without permission of General Chong. Information from General Chong’s headquarters is rated as being unreliable and is not used.*

The CACW worked diligently to reverse these negative trends and began to rack up some impressive victories, beginning with the Fourteenth Air Force’s famous Thanksgiving Day raid on Taiwan on November 25, 1943. Six of the wing’s bombers accompanied the strike force, which claimed 46 Japanese aircraft destroyed for no losses. Just three weeks after his first gloomy remarks, the forward echelon commander began to change his tune: “The Chinese-American bomber outfit got in it with six of their B-25s and did admirably,” he wrote. “I’m thinking they’re going to be a damn good outfit.”

In the spring of 1944, the Imperial Japanese Army launched Operation Ichi-go. It would be the largest Japanese ground offensive of World War II and it was aimed squarely at the Allied airfields in central China. The CACW’s 3rd Fighter Group (Provisional) and 1st Bomb Group (Provisional) served as the primary resistance to this offensive north of the Yangzi River and when the 5th Fighter Group finally reached full strength that summer, it entered the fray in Hunan Province to the south. In July 1944, the 5th made three devastating surprise attacks on the Japanese forward airfield at Bailuozhen, claiming a total of 47 enemy aircraft destroyed on the ground for the loss of only one P-40. Throughout the war, Chinese pilots flying with American squadrons and the CACW accounted for 112.5 aerial victories—more than ten percent of the total number of claims made by American air forces in the China Theater. They proved that while capacity is culturally contingent, capability is not; whether a Chinese or American sat in the cockpit, he either shot down the enemy “Zero” or he did not. Lieutenant Leng Pei-shu, for example, a fighter pilot with the 5th, scored four confirmed aerial victories in two intense months of combat in the summer of 1944.

The number of successes increased due to hard work and careful planning. Chinese airmen noted their admiration for their American counterparts’ attention to detail: “The US military had a comprehensive intelligence network that provided detailed and accurate information on enemy activities,” recalled Hsu Hua-chiang:

*Before every mission, the Americans*

would provide an English mission briefing and then an English-proficient Chinese pilot or interpreter would interpret the contents into Chinese. American mission briefings were usually very accurate. On top of combat procedures, matters such as logistical support, even parachute jump, were all planned in great detail. This attention to detail was extremely beneficial in actual combat. The American military's focus on every single detail was something I truly admired. I always carried this principle with me in my nearly 40 years of service in the air force.

The Fourteenth Air Force eventually solved the problem of air-ground integration by embedding US air-ground liaison teams—each

expending in excess of 2 million rounds of .50-caliber ammunition and making liberal use of napalm. An average of 6 B-25s from the 3rd and 4th Bomb Squadrons flew 183 sorties, dropping more than 200 tons of bombs. “These air units wrote the final chapter in the Fourteenth’s long record of combat in support of Chinese troops,” Chennault continued:

*In a bitter six-week campaign this combination stalled the enemy drive well short of Zhijiang and then turned the enemy’s retreat into a bloody rout. After the war Japanese commanders said CACW air attacks had cut the mobility of their troops in half, forcing them to avoid daylight movements and advance and attack only at night.*

his recommendation. The former units of the CACW struggled through the Chinese Civil War that immediately followed.

Though Chennault had done more than any other foreigner to deliver an airpower system to the CAF, he never managed to incorporate intelligence and air-ground integration. Throughout World War II, the CACW depended on American intelligence briefings; in the paranoia-ridden atmosphere of the Civil War, information did not flow freely and target selection proved difficult. Furthermore, the air-ground liaison teams that worked closely with CACW aircraft during the Battle of Zhijiang never trained the Chinese to perform that function. Having learned these lessons well, modern CAAs prioritize intelligence and air-ground integration as essential to the functioning of a modern air force.

Despite the Nationalist defeat in the Chinese Civil War, the effort put into building the CACW was not in vain. The wing’s three combat groups still exist today as units of the Republic of China Air Force (ROCAF) on Taiwan and CACW veterans became its top leaders. During the Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1958, Leng Pei-shu, who had scored four aerial victories flying with the CACW, commanded the ROCAF’s 11th Fighter Group. On September 24, his pilots, flying American-built F-86 Sabres and using American heat-seeking Sidewinder missiles for the first time in combat, claimed four Chinese MiG-17s destroyed for no losses.

General Wang Shu-ming, Chennault’s good friend from during the war, was the ROCAF’s chief of staff throughout the crisis. Ho Weng-Toh, who served as a B-25 pilot during the war, put his American training to good use in civil aviation, eventually rising to become the chief pilot of Singapore Airlines. He has fond memories of his American comrades and even traveled to the United States several times after the war to visit them. And in a weird twist, the People’s Republic of China has preserved the CACW’s control tower, operations building, and recreation hall at Zhijiang as a monument to Chinese-American cooperation.

Modern CAAs have taken to heart



**Chinese and American pilots of the 26th Fighter Squadron (Provisional), which fought through some of the war’s toughest battles from the airbase at Zhijiang, in western Hunan Province. Standing second from the right is Capt James R. McCutchan. Fourth from the right is Maj Robert L. Van Ausdall, the squadron’s American co-commander. Sixth from the right is Chinese-American pilot Bill King. To the left of him is Capt Glyn W. Ramsey. Kneeling in front of McCutchan is his close friend and fighter ace Capt Philip E. Colman.** (Photo courtesy of Maj Gen (ret) Clay McCutchan)

consisting of one officer and two enlisted men—with front-line Chinese troops. The CACW worked with eight such teams in the spring of 1945, when the Japanese launched their final offensive in China, in a drive to capture the airfield at Zhijiang, in western Hunan Province. “Opposing the Japanese drive were ragged troops of the Sixth War Area,” wrote Chennault, “battered and worn by the Battle of Changde in 1943 and the 1944 summer campaign. Backing these ground troops were the 5th Fighter Group of the Chinese-American Wing and two CACW B-25 bomb squadrons.” Fifty-six P-40s and P-51s from the 5th flew 3,101 sorties in 6 weeks of operations,

Though the Japanese made repeated advances, by the beginning of May 1945 their progress had ground to a halt. The mountainous terrain funneled their troops along the main highways, leaving them particularly vulnerable to air attack. On the ninth, the Japanese suspended their operations. It was the first time in history Chinese air and ground units had worked together to stop an enemy offensive.

Judging the CACW able to stand on its own, Chennault recommended withdrawing its American personnel and returning the wing to the tactical control of the CAF in May 1945. The war had ended, however, by the time Fourteenth Air Force fully carried out

the many principles of combat aviation advising learned by Chennault and the veterans of the CACW more than 75 years ago. The operational aviation detachment, programmatically built and resourced since 2014, includes up to 16 airmen with 14 different Air Force specialty codes working as a cross-functional team to create the interlocking system of systems Chennault envisioned as fundamental to a modern air force. Now, just 16 CAAs can integrate a partner force wing where before, it required an entire advisory wing to do the job. The inclusion of experts in intelligence and air-ground integration in particular work to overcome challenges like those experienced flying and fighting alongside Allied airmen in China during the dark and dangerous days of World War II.

While those days are long past, since 1994 the 6th and 711th Special Operations Squadrons have worked with several partner forces to develop their precision strike capabilities—not necessarily with the most “high tech” solutions, but always with the “right tech” adapted for the partner force’s needs.

Until recently, however, the community did not have an in-house precision strike program. Engagements depended on a hodgepodge of spin-up training for “one-off” deployments. While this might have been sufficient in countering violent extremist organizations, the rise of revisionist states and increased great power competition in the so-called “gray zone” have signaled the need for something more. The security situations faced by the United States and its allies in Iraq, Syria, Ukraine, Libya, the South China Sea, and elsewhere have demonstrated why US partners require the capability and capacity to conduct integrated air-ground operations in each of their particular operating areas.

By pulling from its existing talent pool and targeting its recruitment in assessment and selection, the 6th and 711th assembled an initial cadre which brought together the aircraft, technology, and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) to build an adaptive strike program in just seven months. In February 2020, the cadre served as the operational test and evaluation aircrew



**Lebanese Air Force armament crews load AGR-20s on an Embraer A-29 Super Tucano. CAA aircrew and JTACs worked closely with LAF aviators learning to employ the laser-guided rockets.** (Photo courtesy of Lt Col Brian Raridon)



**CAA pilot Capt Kevin Skelton (right) and Capt Charbel Rizik, Lebanese Air Force, fly a Cessna Caravan over Lebanon in 2019.** (Photo courtesy of Maj Keven Skelton)



**A Cessna 208 from the 6th Special Operations Squadron loaded down with four Hellfire missiles over White Sands Missile Range in February 2020.** (Photo courtesy of Maj Brian Schaf)

for live employment of AGM-114 Hellfire missiles, AGR-20 laser-guided rockets, and unguided 2.75-inch Hydra rockets fired from Cessna 208 Caravans modified by MAG Aerospace. By the fall of 2021, the CAA community expects to receive its first Embraer A-29 Super Tucano, a military trainer adapted as a light attack aircraft. Air Commandos have a long history of leveraging this type of platform to enable partner nation air forces, including the AT-6 Texan, the AT-28 Trojan, and the A-37 Dragonfly. As CAAs expand, innovate, and execute their capability and capacity to enable partner nation air forces to deliver lethal effects against their shared enemies, the legacy of the CACW is alive and well in Air Force Special Operations Command.

Many thanks to Maj Gen (ret) Clay McCutchan, Lieutenant Colonels Andrew Bruce and Brian Raridon, Majors Brian Schaf, Kevin Skelton, Roy

Stone, and Paul Tandberg, Mr. Samuel Hui, and Mr. Carl Molesworth for their contributions to this essay.



*About the Author: Major Daniel Jackson is a combat aviation advisor in the 6th Special Operations Squadron, drawing from his years of tactical ISR experience in the U-28 “Draco” to train partner nation aircrews. He has a masters degree in history and has written three books, the most recent of which, *Fallen Tigers: The Fate of America’s Missing Airmen in China during World War II*, will be published by the University Press of Kentucky in May 2021.*

*ACJ Staff note: The ACJ staff did not include Major Jackson’s extensive endnotes and research sources due to space limitations within the Journal. They are available upon request from the ACJ staff editor.*



# FREQUENT WIND Phase I:

## *Combat Controllers and the Evacuation of Saigon*

By Air Commando Journal Editorial Staff

*Editor's Note: In Vol. 7, Issue 1 (2018) we published a story about the 29 – 30 April 1975 helicopter evacuation of almost 7,000 US and Vietnamese citizens from Saigon, nicknamed Operation FREQUENT WIND (OFW). That article only told half of the Air Commando story, though. During the prior four weeks, USAF and civilian contract air carriers airlifted more than 45,000 US, Third Country, and "at risk" Vietnamese from Tan Son Nhut AB to safety. This is the story of the USAF combat controllers who were on the ground in Saigon, managing the largest aerial evacuation in history during its most hectic and harrowing phase. Curiously, their story was omitted from all official reports with the consequence that all accounts of what happened in Saigon during the evacuation make no mention of their heroism and service.*

### **The Beginning of the End**

The story of the evacuation of South Vietnam began two years before the artillery and rocket shells began landing on the runways at Tan Son Nhut AB while the C-130s were trying to save the last groups of frightened civilians. Operation LINEBACKER II, the massive bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong in December 1972, had allegedly convinced the North Vietnamese to return to the peace negotiations. On 27 January 1973, the Paris Peace Accords were signed and on 29 March 1973, the United States' combat role in Vietnam officially ended. Military Assistance Command – Vietnam (MACV) was replaced by a Defense Attaché Office (DAO) and the primary focus of US support

to South Vietnam changed from ground combat operations to logistics, local maintenance, and contractor support. American air power based in Thailand, the Philippines, Guam, and offshore on US Navy aircraft carriers, still provided limited air support to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), but unknown to the Vietnamese, the USAF had decided to begin removing all aircraft from Thailand during fiscal year 1976. By late 1974, most Americans in Vietnam felt an evacuation was imminent. The US ambassador to South Vietnam, Graham A. Martin, directed his staff to project an aura of calm and confidence, but also tasked them to update the evacuation contingency plan, TALON VICE (later FREQUENT WIND), to reflect the changing numbers of US and Third Country nationals likely to need evacuation.

During the plan review, the number of US and other eligible citizens seemed to stabilize at around 8,000 people. The huge unknown was how many Vietnamese citizens would need evacuating as a result of their close association with the US over the past 20 years. The estimates ranged between 1,500 and 1 million. Airlift was deemed the only safe and reliable means of getting everyone out of South Vietnam, but the problem was that Tan Son Nhut AB, the primary aerial port that shared its runways with the civilian Saigon International airport, was located on the outskirts of Saigon, about 15 miles from the city center. No one could say with certainty how long Tan Son Nhut

AB would remain safe for aerial port operations.

As the new year, 1975, began, the sense of impending disaster within the DAO was becoming palpable. The ARVN was demoralized, and the military situation in South Vietnam was rapidly going from bad to horrible. North of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), five North Vietnamese corps, comprising over half a million soldiers, were prepared to invade the South. By the end of March, all major South Vietnamese cities between Saigon and the DMZ: Song Be, Pleiku, Quang Tri, Hue, Ban Me Thuot, and Da Nang, had fallen to the communists, many without a fight. Refugees were clogging roads and choking the seaports. ARVN soldiers were leaving their units to find their families and take them away from the fighting. The last flight out of Da Nang, a World Airways Boeing 727 on 29 March, carried 290 refugees, over twice the normal passenger load of 134, with 7 people hanging on in the wheel wells. The stage was rapidly being set for the finale, the battle for Saigon.

When, in December 1974, the US failed to resupply the ARVN garrison at Song Be, 75 miles north of Saigon, the North Vietnamese knew the Americans were not going to help South Vietnam this time, as they had in 1972 during the Easter Offensive. To be fair, the US was dealing with severe domestic troubles as the result of Watergate and President Richard Nixon's resignation. President Gerald Ford was unable to convince a Congress that was completely opposed to any

further role in Southeast Asia to honor the commitments President Nixon had made to come to the aid of South Vietnam.

By March 1975, 6 of 13 ARVN divisions in Military Regions 1 and 2 (MR-1 and MR-2), the northern 2/3 of South Vietnam, had been rendered combat ineffective. By 3 April, the communists held all of MR-1 and MR-2, and communist divisions began to converge on MR-3 and Saigon. During a press conference in San Diego, CA, that same day, President Ford made a commitment to the humanitarian evacuation of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese trying to escape the North Vietnamese invasion. The President also made \$2 million from a foreign aid fund available to fly 2,000 South Vietnamese orphans to safety in the US, what became known as Operation BABYLIFT.

The plan for Operation BABYLIFT was to fly the children from Vietnam to safety on Military Airlift Command (MAC, now AMC, Air Mobility Command) airlifters carrying war reserve materials into Saigon that were returning empty to Clark AB, Philippines. Unfortunately, the administrative, logistical, and command and control (C2) requirements for Operation BABYLIFT had not been addressed in the FREQUENT WIND planning.

Among the major obstacles to effective planning was MAC's internal conflict between inter-theater and intra-theater airlift. 7th Air Force, headquartered at Nakhon Phanom in Thailand controlled intra-theater airlift and the facilities at Tan Son Nhut AB. Inter-theater airlift was controlled by the Airlift Control Center at Scott AFB, IL, with local assistance provided by airlift control elements (ALCEs) at aerial ports. In 1975, because of restrictions on the number of US military personnel allowed in South Vietnam, there were no ALCEs in Vietnam. The Americans were counting individuals in order to comply with the Accord's agreed-to limits while the communists had quietly inserted over 100,000 fresh combat troops.

In February, 7th Air Force designated Maj Robert Delligatti as the Supervisor of Airlift at Tan Son Nhut

AB. Because his team was working out of the Flying Tiger Airline's operations center, their office was known as Tiger Ops. Col Earl Mickler, also from 7th Air Force, arrived a few weeks later to assist with the evacuation C2 and add some senior rank to the Supervisor of Airlift office. When it became obvious that tens of thousands of people were going to need airlift evacuation from Saigon, the Supervisor of Airlift, because of their location, local knowledge, and communications capabilities, became the logical choice to control and manage the flightline portion of the operation.

### **Operation FREQUENT WIND**

The Evacuation Control Center (ECC) at Tan Son Nhut AB stood up in the DAO compound on 1 April to coordinate the withdrawal of all US agency personnel still in Vietnam and to also serve as the communications link between the different organizations involved with FREQUENT WIND. By the second day, 2 April, the ECC was working 24 hours per day, every day. The ECC worked in concert with the Supervisor of Airlift and the Evacuation Processing Center to coordinate the airlift movements, evacuee screening and processing, passenger and aircraft security, passenger manifesting, and aircraft loading, including support to Operation BABYLIFT.

One of the early challenges facing the Defense Attaché Office as they and the embassy attempted to reduce the number of Americans and dependents remaining in Saigon was the administrative bureaucracy on both the US and Vietnamese sides. The US civil service system was designed to protect the job security of its employees and the DAO commander did not have the authority to order government civilians, especially those assigned to non-Department of Defense agencies such as Department of State, US Agency for International Development, and US Information Services, to evacuate. Americans with Vietnamese dependents were understandably quite unwilling to leave their family members behind as they waited for the Vietnamese bureaucracy to process the paperwork. The Republic of Vietnam required all Vietnamese departing the country,

regardless of age, to have a passport and an exit visa, even if they were US dependents. In a rapidly deteriorating situation, the administrative burdens were substantial obstacles to an early and orderly evacuation.

On 4 April, MAC was given permission to use military aircraft to evacuate the Vietnamese orphans along with necessary escorts. That day, an unexpected Lockheed C-5 Galaxy was reported inbound with howitzers and ammunition for the ARVN. Very quickly, 36 female analysts and administrative personnel from the DAO were assembled to accompany 228 children being evacuated. The huge airlifter delivered its cargo and departed Saigon without incident, but during climbout tragedy struck. At about 23,000 feet, the airplane's rear cargo door failed, causing an explosive decompression that blew out a large section of the cargo ramp, disabled two of four hydraulic systems, and cut all control cables to the rudder and elevator. The pilot turned and limped the crippled airplane back to Saigon while the crew and medical staff attended to the frightened and injured passengers. Despite amazing airmanship by the pilot and his crew, the C-5 landed in rice paddies a few miles short of the runway, bounced, and broke into four major pieces when it finally came to rest. About half of the 314 people on board did not survive the crash, including 78 children, 35 of the 36 DAO escorts, 11 USAF crewmembers, and 3 dependents. Despite the accident, Operation BABYLIFT continued, but without further use of C-5s and with increased security for the aircraft and passengers to ensure no possibility of sabotage or hijacking.

On 7 April, a small ALCE finally arrived at Tan Son Nhut AB to help sort out the airlift flow, passenger handling, and aircraft handling. To allay the ambassador's concerns about violating the terms of the Peace Accords, the team, except for the chief, would fly in each morning on the first aircraft and depart on the last flight out each night.

Between 5 – 19 April, the airlift evacuation proceeded at an agonizingly slow pace. The C-141s and C-130s bringing supplies into Saigon were

empty or not being filled to capacity on their backhaul because of the personnel processing challenges. American citizens refused to leave because their dependents' paperwork was not in order or because they felt an overwhelming sense of loyalty to the Vietnamese. Despite constant warnings, regular information updates, and even begging at times, as of 19 April only a quarter of the Americans with legal passports in South Vietnam had left.



**Vietnamese civilians awaiting evacuation.**  
(Photo courtesy of Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University)

In early April the North Vietnamese cut all major roads leading into Saigon. By 9 April, communist divisions were within 35 miles of the capital. The end was fast approaching, but still the number of evacuees was far below the capacity of the available airlift. Less than a week later, the US evacuated almost 300 Americans from Phnom Penh, Cambodia, during Operation EAGLE PULL. It was yet another signal that the North Vietnamese need not fear US intervention to save the South Vietnamese. Communist divisions were racing each other towards Saigon, but on 15 April, their offensive stopped. While the Americans and South Vietnamese initially thought the defensive perimeter had successfully checked the North Vietnamese advance, the truth was that the enemy had outrun their logistics. The communists spent the next seven days regrouping, resupplying, and reinforcing their divisions, preparing for the final assault.

On 20 April, Ambassador Martin approved an innovative scheme to get around the red tape blocking effective personnel processing and hindering the evacuation. From that day on, a single piece of paper whereby the American sponsor only needed to

certify that the personnel he listed were his dependents and that he would be responsible for them after departing Vietnam would suffice to allow the Vietnamese dependents to leave. With the administrative obstacle cleared, recalcitrant Americans had no reason to remain in Vietnam. While only about 5,000 people had evacuated during the first three weeks of April, the conditions were set for the numbers to explode.

### **The Floodgates Open**

With the number of evacuees now set for exponential increases, the Evacuation Processing Center (EPC) was moved to a larger facility on 20 April. On the 21st, with the number of evacuees now exceeding the capacity of daytime only flights, MAC approved 24-hour operations. C-141s would handle the daylight sorties and C-130s would fly the night sorties. On the 22nd, the ECC was informed that C-141s would be arriving at a rate of one every 30 minutes. Because



**6th Aerial Port Squadron.**

of ramp space limitations at Tan Son Nhut AB – only three C-141s could be optimally handled on the ground at a time – Col Mickler, the Supervisor of Airlift requested a combat control team (CCT) deploy to Saigon to assist with ramp control, communications, and possible loss of Vietnamese air traffic controllers.

At 10 pm on 23 April, combat controller MSgt Lewis O. Brabham, Jr. of Detachment 6, 6th Aerial Port Squadron (APS), was alerted to assemble a team and report for transport to Saigon. Less than two

weeks earlier, MSgt Brabham had been one of four combat controllers supporting Operation EAGLE PULL, the evacuation of US, Cambodian, and Third Country nationals from Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Surprisingly, given the large number of armed South Vietnamese soldiers threatening the DAO compound and the runway areas, the CCT was not allowed to take their individual weapons. In 1975, CCTs were part of MAC and the 6th APS was assigned to the 374th Tactical Airlift Wing based at Clark AB, Philippines. Brabham and his team, SSgt James D. “JD” Burch, SSgt Guy T. “Tom” Fagan, and Sgt John E. Lebold, departed U-Tapao Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB) about 90 minutes after alert and arrived at Tan Son Nhut AB shortly after 2 am on the 24th of April. The full-blown evacuation of Saigon was in full-swing. 20 C-141s per day and 21 C-130s per night were arriving in Saigon. As long as the aircraft arrivals proceeded at or near the schedule, the EPC was able to process and deliver ready airplane loads of people. At night, C-130s would do engine-running turnarounds, often spending 15 minutes or less on the ground.

When the CCT landed they and the other aerial port personnel collocated. Once settled, the combat controllers set up their equipment, including their MRC-108 communications jeep, and



**Lew Brabham and MRC-108 Jeep.**

got to work surveying the current status of facilities, runways, and taxiways. They also developed a contingency plan for routing aircraft should any of the taxiways or ramp spaces become unusable or too dangerous.

By 25 April, the now frenzied evacuation was proceeding without letup. The four combat controllers were fully embedded in the 24-hour





## SPECIAL OPERATIONS ASSOCIATION

The primary mission of the SOA is to unite fraternally, Veterans or members of a branch of the US Armed Forces Special Operations Community who have conducted Special Operations as an operational combat element or provided direct support to that element within an assigned area of operations.

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operations, working communications and coordinating airlift operations in Tiger Ops, while also helping manage aircraft flow on the ramps, and the safe loading of the anxious evacuees.

On the 26th, North Vietnamese forces had cut the highway between Saigon and Vung Tau, on the coast 40 miles southeast of Saigon, where hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese had fled hoping for evacuation by sea. The South Vietnamese Marine Division had regrouped at Vung Tau after their defeat at Da Nang and their US liaison officer, Lt Col Anthony Lukeman, USMC, was coordinating their resupply and refit. They promised to fight to the end if the Americans would guarantee the safety of their families. With the US officer's assurance regarding the reliability of the Vietnamese Marines, the ECC asked for two C-130s to go to Vung Tau and pick up the Marines' dependents. Because the air base at Vung Tau had been closed for a while, the 13th Air Force command post at Clark AB questioned the ECC's request. Maj Gen Leroy Manor, at the time the 13th Air Force commander, personally got on the phone to confirm the reliability of the Marines and the security of the airfield. It took most of the day to secure the permissions needed to divert the airlift into Vung Tau, but later that evening, the ECC



**Vung Tau, looking south in 1975.**

was granted permission to send two aircraft in the next morning.

Early in the morning on 27 April, Guy Fagan deployed to Vung Tau via an Air America UH-1 Huey. He was armed with a borrowed 9 mm pistol and an AN/PRC-66 UHF radio to coordinate the airlift of South Vietnamese Marines' families. Because the condition of the runways was unknown, the Clark AB command post needed Fagan to certify the runways as safe for landing, recommend a

relatively secure flight route in and out of the airfield, and survey the loading area, all before the C-130s arrived. Then, once the aircraft were inbound, he would provide a communications link between the aircraft and the Marines securing the airfield. Fagan's assessment was that runway was usable, but only the south end of the airfield was large and clear enough for the two C-130s to turn around and to load the passengers. After briefing the Marines' commander, the airlift was on.

At about 2:30 pm, the first C-130 landed. Within 20 minutes, the first load of Vietnamese civilians were loaded and secured, and the airlifter was airborne and enroute to Clark AB. Less than five minutes later, the second C-130 was on the ground and ready to load the remaining dependents. Ten minutes after coming to a stop at the loading area, just after 15:00, the second airplane was airborne. After two quick, but uneventful landings, 183 dependents were evacuated to safety. Thirty minutes later the Air America Huey had picked up Fagan and by 16:15, the combat controller was back at Saigon, immersed in the chaos that was Tan Son Nhut. The South Vietnamese Marines kept their word, keeping the airfield secure until their families had departed, and then fighting bravely until the end of their nation.

The 27th also saw the first communist rocket artillery striking downtown Saigon in years. Stress levels at the DAO compound were compounded by the knowledge that if enemy gunners could reach the city, they could also hit Tan Son Nhut. From that point on, all C-141 flights were suspended and the airlift continued using only C-130s. Peacetime rules for passenger loads, normally 75 people on a C-130, were dropped. The EPC began preparing manifests with up to 180 people per aircraft. Aircrews, though, were reporting passenger loads of 250 or more.

On 28 April, just after 6 pm, five Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) A-37s, flown by North Vietnamese pilots and led by a renegade South Vietnamese pilot attacked the VNAF parking ramp at Tan Son Nhut with 250-lb bombs. No US aircraft were damaged although a few of the bombs landed in the DAO

compound. North Vietnamese rockets and 130-mm artillery began attacking the airfield. John Lebold was working the radios in Tiger Ops that day and advised all military and civilian airlift aircraft supporting the evacuation that the base was under attack. JD Burch ran to the airfield control tower and found it empty. He immediately took control of the tower and began controlling the VNAF and USAF aircraft in the area, while also passing reports from Brabham and Fagan, who were on the airfield assessing the condition of the runways and ramps, to Tiger Ops.

Lt Col Art Laehr, one of the team chiefs in the ECC, commented that he was amazed at how quickly the flow of inbound C-130s had been stopped when the A-37 attack happened. What he did not know at that time was that the combat controllers had advised all



**Tan Son Nhut AB at the end.** (Photo courtesy of John Lebold)

aircraft in the air to return to home base and to contact the airborne command & control aircraft, Blue Chip, for instructions. Radio communications between the combat controllers and Tiger Ops was intermittent, so with the airfield under attack and enemy anti-aircraft weapons in the area threatening the inbound airlifters, it made tactical sense to shut down the air flow. The command post at Clark AB agreed with the CCT's call and when the ECC tried to turn the flights back on, 13th AF would not resume the flights until the airfield was again deemed safe.

There were three C-130s holding out over the South China Sea. After a couple of hours, the tower controllers returned and the runways were cleared and checked, the holding C-130s were cleared to Saigon. At about 9 pm, the ECC received word that the 29th was to be a maximum effort day – 60 C-130 sorties were planned to evacuate 10,000 people.

Before dawn on 29 April, MSgt Brabham and the CCT were woken up by intense rocket, mortar, and artillery shelling. The North Vietnamese had begun their final push to take Saigon. JD Burch was sent back to the tower to replace the Vietnamese civilians who had taken shelter once the attack started. While running for the tower entrance, he struck a guy wire across his chest and neck, ending up flat on his back. After a moment or two of lying there in the dark, thinking he had been shot, the combat controller got up, and made his way to the tower. He restored communications with the 13th Air Force command post to report the situation on the ground.

On the parking ramp the three C-130s had unloaded their cargos in the ordnance storage area and relocated to the passenger loading area. When the attack began, one was loading passengers and the second was about to begin loading. The pilot of the first C-130 ordered the loadmaster to get the last passengers on board, leave their baggage, and close the ramp. With 260 passengers aboard and artillery bracketing his airplane, the pilot got the C-130 into the air.

The second C-130 could not wait for passengers, so immediately followed the first and started taxiing to the runway. The third USAF C-130 was hit in the wing by a 122-mm rocket and the aircraft caught fire. No one on the crippled airplane was severely hurt and the crew jumped onto the second, the empty, C-130, as both Herks taxied for immediate takeoff. That second C-130 was the last USAF airplane to leave Saigon.

At about 6:45 am, Col Mickler tasked the combat controllers to survey the airfield and determine if it was possible to resume C-130 flights into Tan Son Nhut. JD Burch was back in the control tower again. Throughout the morning, the enemy's artillery became more accurate and seemed to settle into a regular pattern. Fuel storage, aircraft revetments, and critical buildings were attacked with what was described as artillery being adjusted by an observer. To make matters even more difficult, VNAF fighters trying to get out were dropping their fuel tanks and ordnance on the taxiways and runways before

taking off. MSgt Brabham took charge of clearing the runway, trying to make it safe for operations. Even though 40 or more enemy rounds were impacting the runway per hour, Brabham, Fagan, and SSgt Kitterman from the 6th APS pushed unexploded ordnance out of the way, by hand or with a forklift.

Any South Vietnamese aircraft that could fly was trying to leave, all of them overloaded with people. There were C-130s, C-123s, C-47s, C-7s, helicopters, and fighters all in a panicked attempt to leave. Aircraft were taking off in any direction, from any hard surface long enough to get up to flying speed, and taxiing wildly trying to get away from the incoming rounds. Scared civilians were fighting to get onto the aircraft, even as they were taxiing. At one point, hundreds of civilians blocked two C-130s trying to leave and force their way on board. One VNAF C-130 took off from an



**Tan Son Nhut under attack, looking from the parking ramp towards the tower and the operations building.** (Photo courtesy of James "JD" Burch.)

unused parallel taxiway. Another had 450 people on board, 32 of them in the cockpit. A C-47 designed for 30 passengers escaped and landed at U-Tapao RTAFB with over 100 people on board. One C-7 Caribou tried taking off on one engine. It spun around on the runway, though, and ended catching fire in the grass infield. The pilot of another Caribou forgot to remove the control locks and his overloaded airplane never got airborne. It plowed straight ahead into the fences at the end of the runway. Fighters were taking off with two or three people in each seat of their cockpits. The situation was crazy. JD Burch recalled one C-130 taking off and barely missing hitting him and the control tower as it took off.

During all this chaos, though,

some of the VNAF pilots were fighting back. Off the east end of the runways one AC-119 had been up all night dropping flares for the ground forces and using its Gatling guns to beat back the attacking enemy. Before dawn, the gunship landed, refueled, rearmed, and took off to search for the rocket launchers pounding the base. At daybreak, the AC-119 found one of the batteries and laid down a cone of fire. As it did so, an SA-7 shoulder-fired missile failed to lock onto its target and flew past the gunship. A second one, though, hit the aircraft in the right engine. The AC-119 rolled inverted, turned, and slammed into the ground at the end of the runway. Also at dawn, two VNAF A-1 Skyraiders took off and patrolled the perimeter of the airfield "trolling" for gunfire. One of the A-1s was also downed by an SA-7.

With the airfield under constant artillery fire, the debris being left by the panicked fighters, aircraft wreckage blocking taxi routes, and unattended human bodies all fouling the landing and loading areas, the CCT advised Col Mickler that the airfield was no longer safe for use. Just before 11 am, the decision was made to end the fixed-wing airlift. Brabham crossed the runways to rescue JD Burch, who was alone, still isolated in the control tower.

The four combat controllers proceeded from the airfield to the DAO compound to help organize passenger loads in case the airlift flow might resume. At about 6:30 pm, the CCT departed Saigon by helicopter. Their mission complete.

All four combat controllers were awarded Silver Stars for their actions to keep the airfield and facilities functioning. Their citations read in part, "...amidst heavy mortar, rocket, and artillery fire, ... panic-stricken Vietnamese ... under intense enemy fire, and with total disregard for [their] own safety...." In 1977, the Air Force Sergeants Association honored MSgt Brabham with its Pitsenbarger Heroism Award. MSgt Brabham was also the only combat controller to participate in both Operation FREQUENT WIND and the earlier evacuation of Phnom Pen, Cambodia, Operation EAGLE PULL.





By Nathan Scopac, Colonel, USAF  
492d Special Operations Training Group Commander

When I took over the 492d Special Operations Training Group (492d SOTRG) in the Spring 2019, I never would have expected that I would need to coach my group through a global pandemic while maintaining as close to full mission capability as possible. This was the odd place my acting Group Chief, CMSgt Mike Klausutis, and I found ourselves in April 2020. At that point, the world had started to become acquainted to the COVID-19 virus — Europe was in complete lockdown and the US was just starting to feel some of the effects. The Air Force had instituted its local leave only policy and both Cannon AFB and Hurlburt Field had gone to minimum mission essential – a term which seemed to be invented for this situation.

For those not familiar, the 492d SOTRG is AFSOC's training, education, and development group under the 492d Special Operations Wing. AFSOC's Formal Training Unit (FTU) squadrons include 19th SOS, 492d Special Operations Training Support Squadron, 492d SOTRG, Detachment 1 at Duke Field, and the 551st SOS at Cannon AFB. Our ground education squadrons are the 371st Special Operations Combat Training Squadron and USAF Special Operations School. Finally, AFSOC's developmental squadrons, the 18th Special Operations Test and Evaluation Squadron (SOTES), the 492d Special Operations Advanced Capabilities Squadron (SOACS), and the 492d SOTRG, Detachment

2 fall under the group's purview as well. It is a diverse set of missions executed by active duty and reserve military personnel along with a multitude of government civilians and contractor professionals all supporting nearly 350 students at any one time dispersed between three bases. The group's squadrons must adhere to the Hurlburt Field, Cannon AFB, and Eglin AFB installation commanders' guidance, which can differ slightly depending on their location.

Earlier in March 2020, I had to send the AFSOC Commander's Critical Information Report that every commander dreads. After consulting with the USAFSOS commandant, we determined that due to TDY restrictions, and the high number of vulnerable category civilians employed, I had to let the command know that the unit could not accomplish its mission and was shutting down. Over the next few weeks, my other commanders gave me their plans to shutter their squadrons. Throughout my flying career, I had always been told that "it's just training" and "we can complete it the next day," but as we would find out, this wasn't quite the case. Chief Klausutis and I started talking about how we would put the group on this new footing based on what the expectation would be. I was blessed to have strong command teams in each of my squadrons who creatively looked at the problem and figured out what was best for their units. I also had an excellent pair

of deputy commanders (one military and one civilian) who did an amazing job advising me and keeping the day-to-day operations flowing.

Just as we were enacting a much-reduced schedule, we started noticing that students kept flowing. In fact, Air Force leadership determined that Air Education Training Command's (AETC) initial training was considered mission essential. Immediately, Chief and I knew we had a problem — Hurlburt Field, Cannon AFB, and Duke Field/Eglin AFB were quickly drawing down their operations to the minimum needed to maintain war readiness, but we were told to keep our student production at capacity. This caused a reevaluation of the group's footing. We had to identify what missions we could accomplish, figure out how to do them, resource as well as we could, and then assume risk where we couldn't — all while trying to adhere to ever-changing guidance.

I wish I could say that there was some magic leadership principle that I applied to make this all easy, but like most SOF missions, success relied on the creativity of my subordinate commanders and the relationships I had developed with my fellow group commanders. Without them, we would not have been able to succeed.



**Nathan Scopac** (Photo courtesy of the author)

The group's developmental squadrons experienced probably the most straight-forward implementation. The 18th SOTES determined that none of their flight tests would be conducted without AF Material Command (AFMC) support, and it was largely suspending all operations. There were no major tests scheduled, so the 18th SOTES elected to put almost 90 percent of its force in a work-from-home posture and keep them that way.

The 492d SOACS has responsibility to maintain the AFSOC mission computer systems and has a deployed Mission Information Manager (MIM) requirement. Fortunately, we just brought on a new prime contractor and

there was a good plan in place to conduct work remotely. The command team ceased all developmental efforts and concentrated on keeping only the people needed to run the core computer systems. They also put together a shift-work schedule and came up with a true minimal manning scheme, creatively overlapping some responsibilities. The fact that they had a plan to run the squadron and maintain global C2 with a crew comprising less than 10 people is a testament to their resourcefulness. Fortunately, the MIMs who could not return from their deployment were in good spirits and were able to extend.

Our Detachment 2 is responsible for developing the new MC-130J terrain-following radar, electronic counter measures, and airborne mission networking systems, as well as tactics and training. They were also able to suspend operations, as their work was largely based on AFMC and Lockheed Martin support. Normally, this would have been an easy situation, but we learned that the 352nd SOW had an MC-130J at Hurlburt that needed to be returned, but due to the travel ban they could not send a crew. After wing-to-wing coordination, we determined that we could fly the plane back to RAF Mildenhall in England.

I remember sitting in my kitchen talking to my wing commander about the risk in sending the crew. The plan was to be a simple one, fly to Mildenhall using the most expeditious route, drop the plane off, remain overnight, and then take a KC-135 back to the US. The 492d SOG would send a C-146 to pick up the crew and get them back to Hurlburt. What could go wrong? Well, the flight over to England went fine, but when the crew got up the next day, they discovered that overnight all intercontinental military flights had been suspended — they were stuck. After a couple of calls with the Detachment 2 commander (who happened to be on the trip), we decided that the best way back would be commercial flights from London's Heathrow Airport back to Fort Walton Beach. This was before everyone was mandated to wear masks, but travel had already been restricted and flights were getting canceled at a moment's notice. The crew used some ingenuity and scrounged up some N95 masks, made their way to the airport, and fortunately caught one of the last flights back to the States.

The FTUs at Hurlburt, Cannon, and Duke took similar tacks, but adapted them to the local conditions and restrictions. We soon discovered that AETC was directed to continue producing and moving students, so we had to be ready to receive these Airmen; we had no choice but to keep the FTUs open. The host wings had significantly cut flying hours to reduce the number of people working in close-proximity conditions. I am very thankful to my fellow Operations and Maintenance Group commanders at Hurlburt and Cannon because they were completely supportive when I told them that I would need the bulk of their flying production to keep training students. We all agreed to allow the O-5 commanders to come up with a flying schedule that worked, and we would adjudicate when necessary. To their credit, the Operations Groups either took only enough lines to maintain currency or allowed student training on their flights. Leadership at the appropriate level worked, and the squadron commanders did a fantastic job of giving and taking to make

sure that both communities got what they needed.

The 551st SOS at Cannon AFB took the most aggressive stance. The command team realized that given the small number of MQ-9 instructors and the close proximity in which they work, they would have to go to a blue and silver team concept where only half of the instructors were in the building at any one time. This allowed us to avoid even one COVID-19 case bringing down all of the capability. Early on they had a potential case, but fortunately it turned out negative, which I believe reinforced their two-team system. The command team basically sent all the students and instructors home, and then slowly brought them back as they developed social distance techniques. More importantly, they did an amazing job taking care of their people by creating a plan by which the leadership visited everyone's home periodically — staying a safe distance away after they knocked on the door. They also used an app to disseminate information and practiced flat and fast communications.

The 19th SOS and 492d SOTRSS took a slightly different approach. Only students with active flights or classes were allowed to come in. All people in the buildings had to wear masks and use hand sanitizer while in the building, and significant social distancing was enforced. I worked with my commanders and my group standardization and evaluation section to direct flying with masks when possible. While this was a good idea in theory, I personally tried it in a U-28, C-146, and an AC-130J and found that while technically possible, it was not practical. Ultimately, we pushed the decision to the aircraft commanders to allow removal of masks, as necessary. We also engaged with our maintenance

teammates to provide cleaning and sanitizing supplies, which the crews used after each flight. I attribute the close adherence to these protocols to the strong leadership at the squadrons.

The 492d SOTRSS and 551th SOS also had the added challenge of student control. They found that students were showing up four to five months prior to the dates we expected them because their enroute stops had been cancelled. To their credit, the commanders did a great job making sure all the students were in-processed and billeted, even after Cannon and Hurlburt ran out of lodging. This took a lot of coordination with AETC units to start sending people who could immediately live downtown (i.e. officers and older enlisted members). They also worked to reroute many students, and then figured out how to take care of the students who had missed essential training, like Survival Evasion Resistance Escape and water survival.

The 371st SOCTS and USAFSOS also posed unique challenges. Both play an essential role in the Non-Standard Aviation/Combat Aviation Advisor (NSAv/CAA) pipeline, which we realized we could not cancel. The 371st SOCTS accomplishes most of its training on the Eglin Range Complex, whether it is field skills, shooting, or driving, most of the activities require close quarter contact. The leadership team quickly realized that they would have to impose a stringent testing and mask wearing policy. Each day, students had their temperatures checked and anyone showing symptoms was immediately sent home. The Combatives course was also modified to avoid contact and cleanliness was stressed. I have a great picture of what looks like a bunch of masked bandits on the Eglin Range learning field skills!

USAFSOS probably had the most amazing and long-standing transformation. The commandant cancelled all classes, but rather than sitting back on their decades-earned laurels, the team focused their effort toward figuring out how to provide ALL of their content online. With a shoe-string budget they immediately started retooling their class structure, using technology platforms like Microsoft Teams and Blackboard to figure out how to deliver content, including language training. They started with the core classes required for the NSAv and CAA FTUs, but quickly branched out. They even went as far as getting systems certified for FOUO (For Official Use Only) and explored providing classified content to cleared audiences. About two weeks after shutting their doors USAFSOS started with limited offerings, and quickly expanded from there.

Things were humming along pretty well. About 70 percent of our people were at work, but we soon realized that the unknown duration of the crisis and the lack of many primary services, especially schools, was exerting a massive amount of stress on our people. My leadership team quickly realized we needed to give the formation "permission" to take a knee where need be. Here are some excerpts of the direction we provided:

*I expect a reduction in work output. What does that mean? It means that you as leaders need to look your people in the eye and tell them that you understand they won't be accomplishing as much in teleworking status...and that's OK. It may take redefining what a successful day is. Success*



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may be getting my CAC reader to finally connect to access emails, or it may be getting ahead of a child's online school today so that tomorrow I can actually get some telework done. The important part is that it may be a moving target, and as commanders, we are OK with that. Don't undervalue the importance of professional development (military and civilian education, PME, getting into the flight pubs, etc.) and nurturing the family. These can often be done with little access to AFNET. It is a reality that work will probably surge once we are through this crisis. Commanders have a responsibility to preserve the force and the family, and that includes their own.

Admin tasks...as I am sure you have seen...keep flowing. This is where a commander's ability to prioritize and communicate are paramount. OPRS/EPRs/Awards – these should be your priority. The rest of it is flexible. The group will try to reduce the number of taskers, but more importantly if your unit is out of Schlitz to answer something, tell us. We will answer for you as best we can (we can always refine the answer later). This is an uncertain time, and the HQ will be an information sponge. Rest assured that the group staff, and the wing staff know this and are doing everything possible to protect the squadrons. I will repeat myself for emphasis, Commanders, prioritize and communicate. I understand that a dislocated force with spotty VPN access drastically slows your ability to conduct admin tasks. Keep this in mind when you give your people their expectations.

Stress...significant now, and it will get worse. We have an increase in self-imposed stress to accomplish the mission. This will become more acute as your people see that the rest of the base is in a much more reduced footing than the majority of the SOTRG is. Understand that mission capability is flexible and ebbs and flows. Just as an individual's work capability may change day to day, your units will change week to week, especially as you get multiple people in quarantine status or hospitalized (which I fully expect will come). One of the biggest stressors right now is our force's ability to conduct home schooling for their children. As I am sure all of you realize, this is a BIG DEAL. If your people are concerned about their family's well-being (and they are) then they will not be able to concentrate on the tasks you need them to do. Be PATIENT and COMPASSIONATE. There is a dichotomy between the relative structure of ops almost normal for the SOTRG and the public response to COVID-19. I also know that there is a concern about the diminishing availability of child care. The Wing Commander, Chief and I know that this is causing stress.

Many families feel that the government is unnecessarily putting the families at risk by having the military members go back and forth to work. I would encourage you to share the enterprise nature of our mission, whether it be initial qualification training, or essential communications systems maintenance, we need to continue executing or we risk having a problem that takes multiple years to solve. Stay transparent with your force. If you have a question, concern, or need to vent, call the Chief or me. This is the time for

you to do what's right by your people and we will adapt to accomplish as much of the mission as possible.

I believe this gave the commanders some freedom of maneuver, and overall, we received good feedback from the force.

So, it sounds like everything went great, but there were certainly things we could have done better. It took way too long for us to realize the strain the families were under. There was concern that due to our ops-tempo we were possibly putting the families at risk by making the military members vectors for COVID. We also had a scare where one commander was potentially exposed and due to contact tracing and a unique week where he spent time with all of his different weapons systems, we almost had to bring down the entire unit. Again, the ingenuity of a fellow group commander helped us get him a rapid test on a weekend, and fortunately he was negative.

At the group staff level, I failed to realize how important it was for me to get on a rotating schedule with my military deputy and stick to it. I was putting the whole group at risk because I was checking on units. Fortunately, my executive officers devised a workable schedule that allowed us to swap weeks in the office and stay connected on the teleworking days. There were many other things that could have bit us, but because of our units' strict adherence to policies, strong leadership, and a little luck, we were able to bring most of our classes back online and keep FTU production as high as possible.

So, what did we learn? I learned that AFSOC squadron commanders are well-trained to be creative and come up with unit-tailored solutions that enable them to accomplish the mission while taking care of our most precious resource – our people and their families. Good leadership is a series of small corrections, transparency, bold aggressiveness, and trust. Finally, this event hammered home the importance of relationships – between wing and group commanders and subordinate commanders; between squadron commanders and their people; between equivalent commanders supporting each other; and especially between the Airmen of AFSOC.

As I reflect back on this past summer, in the midst of the pandemic's "Wave 2," my group held five changes of command (all using innovative distancing and technology). The strong leadership that my commanders continue to display gives me confidence that the 492d SOTRG will turn this crisis into an opportunity, and will come out at the far side stronger than ever.



About the Author: Colonel Nathan Scopac is the current commander of the 492d Special Operations Training Group and previously commanded the Combined Joint Special Operations Air Component-Afghanistan and the 9th SOS at Cannon AFB, NM. He completed staff assignments as Executive Officer to the US Military Representative to NATO, Brussels, Belgium and as Chief, Tactical Airlift Branch, MC/HC/AC-130J Program Element Monitor, Office of the Secretary of the Air Force for Acquisition. Colonel Scopac is a command pilot with over 4,000 hours in MC-130E/P/J special operations aircraft.



# McCoskrie Threshold Foundation

## Humanitarian Arm of the ACA

### 1986-2020

By: Felix "Sam" Sambogna, Lt Col, USAF (retired)

Much needed medical  
equipment arrives in  
Honduras, 2009. (All photos  
provided by Felix Sambogna)

Air Commandos have had a humanitarian mission starting with the Vietnam conflict when Air Commando civic action teams in Thailand worked alongside their Thai counterparts to provide services and quality of life projects to local civilians near US air bases. From 1962 – 1975, military civic action teams operated in many villages in northern Thailand and Vietnam. John Grove, a helicopter pilot with the 606th Air Commando Squadron at Nakhon Phanom, Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB), flew medical personnel and supplies to many of these villages. Air Commando medic Hap Lutz managed a mobile medical facility that provided aid to so many local civilians. Brig Gen Aderholt was the driving force behind these humanitarian efforts when he was the wing commander at Nakhon Phanom, and he continued to inspire others, including family members, to volunteer, donate, and serve.

As was described in the fall 2019 issue of the *Air Commando Journal*, General Aderholt created the Air Commando Association (ACA) in 1969. Many of those early Air Commandos wanted to continue supporting humanitarian efforts around the world. General



**Donated medical beds and supplies at a Honduras military hospital.**



**MTF provided support for villages to farm and raise food for themselves.**



**Col John McCoskrie**



**The teacher and students at the John Grove High School.**



**Haitian orphans helped by Bless the Children and MTF.**

Aderholt, John McCoskrie, Hap Lutz, Dick Geron, and others created the Threshold Foundation as an all-volunteer, tax-exempt, humanitarian arm of the ACA in 1986. When John McCoskrie passed away in 1987, the foundation was renamed The McCoskrie Threshold Foundation (MTF) in his honor because of all the leadership, time, and funds he contributed to the formation and maintenance of the Threshold Foundation. John McCoskrie was inducted into the Air Commando Hall of Fame in 2004.

In 1984, John McCoskrie, as the leader of an MTF medical support team, coordinated with Guatemalan officials to develop the Medical Relief Program for that troubled nation. Volunteer



**MTF donations help Honduras street children.**



**Volunteers loading items in a semi tractor trailer bound for Honduras.**

doctors, nurses, paramedics, and support personnel were recruited to deliver much needed medical support. Civilians, retired Air Commandos, and spouses contributed their time, money, and labor to the program for years. The volunteers included Doc Fitzpatrick, Jim Boney, Les Hansen, Jo Bailey, Rose Dykes, Jodi Duncan, and many others.

In 1986, during one of the annual medical trips, Jodi Duncan, volunteer paramedic, was on a Guatemalan helicopter being flown between clinics when it came under attack. Jodi was seriously wounded in the foot. Because of the success of the medical team, the government of Guatemala awarded Jodi and the ACA their Order of the White Orchid in 1987. It is the highest award given for service demonstrating the embodiment of brotherhood, friendship, and loyalty to the population of Guatemala.

For 34 years, the MTF has collected and shipped millions of pounds of goods: clothing, shoes, furniture, bedding, medical supplies, bicycles, desks, backpacks, etc., to numerous countries. General Aderholt's close ties with the World Medical Relief, Inc. provided a valuable source of medical supplies. Hap Lutz would coordinate the pickup of the medical supplies that were then packaged and shipped, along with many other items to countries such as Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, El Salvador, Peru, Ecuador, Panama, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam.

After Hurricane Floyd devastated North Carolina in September 1999, the MTF gathered and packaged clothing and household essentials to send to the people of eastern North Carolina who had to evacuate and lost so much. When tornadoes devastated communities near Tuscaloosa and Birmingham, AL, in 2011, Clint Grizzell and other volunteers collected and delivered medical, food, and household items to the victims.

In 2002, the MTF provided assistance to help relocate Montagnard and Hmong refugees, Vietnamese and Lao tribesmen who had fought alongside US Special Forces during the Vietnam war. John Grove worked with a Special Forces coordinator in North Carolina and arranged for the delivery of a 52-foot-long trailer of supplies. Volunteers, including Tom Green, Ken Poole and his son, and Walt Heidmous, loaded the trailer with all kinds of supplies for the 705 refugees. The van was donated by Eulice Shelley, owner of A&A Moving & Storage. John rode with the driver to NC where the refugees were relocated. Mr. Shelley was a great supporter of the MTF for years, providing storage space in empty vans located on his lot, and also donating used wooden moving containers.

The MTF supported the Thailand-Laos-Cambodia (TLC) Brotherhood, a group dedicated to preserving the memories of those who served in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War. Their secondary mission is to provide humanitarian and charitable aid to those in Southeast Asia who may need



**Air Commandos and friends of John Grove donated so much of their time to help the MTF and Bless the Children over the years.**

some assistance. Working with John Schillo from the TLC Brotherhood, MTF funds were donated to support three water purification systems and a school bathroom project near Nakhon Phanom in northeast Thailand.

John Grove was a driving force within the MTF. He, Dave Freeman, and other volunteers collected all kinds of supplies. John's favorite saying was, "Some people's trash is other people's treasure." John's mother, Doris Eaton, would visit and spend many hours sorting the donated clothing. John arranged for the storage and coordinated the loading and shipment of the sea containers.

In 2003 John established a relationship with Bless the Children (BTC), a non-profit humanitarian organization



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# Air Commando Journal

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Our goal at the ACJ is to tell the Air Commando and USAF Special Operations story, from our beginning to today. We need your help to do that. We seek quality articles, well written, factually based, and reflecting your experiences living the special operations mission in all of its complexities. Submissions can be of any length, although 1500-3000 words would be an average suggestion.

All articles will be edited as per the Air University Style and Author Guide (please see the link online at [www.aircommando.org](http://www.aircommando.org) under the Journal tab, and at the Hurlburt Field library).

Submit your files electronically to: [info@aircommando.org](mailto:info@aircommando.org). We use MS-Word, and we also appreciate accompanying photos. Photos should be high resolution (300 dpi) and must indicate the source, have a release for use, and a brief description. If your submission is copyrighted, we will indicate that on the article.

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**AIR COMMANDO**



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based in Clearwater FL. BTC is a tax-exempt charity that serves children internationally. For several years MTF and BTC partnered to ship sea containers of supplies to local organizations serving the needy. John helped four elementary schools in Honduras that BTC supported with shipments. In 2006, he learned from BTC these mountain children had no further chance for education. For these children, government schooling only covered grades 1 – 6. John knew they needed further education if they were to have greater opportunities in life. Working with BTC, he purchased land in the Mico Quemado mountain region and in 2006 he helped establish the very first high school in this area. John visited Honduras at his own expense in 2007. He funded the high school by himself, providing the teacher's salary, textbooks, school supplies, computers, a generator, and a motorcycle for the teacher to get from home to the school each day. John did this for two years, until his death in 2008. The school is now named the John Grove High School (JGHS).

One of John's passions was that the children of the Mico Quemado region have an opportunity to learn a trade and to turn those skills into sources of employment. He even talked about buying and sending a pre-fabricated building to the area to be used as a trade school. Unfortunately, John died before that dream came to pass, but he was able to establish a scholarship program to support JGHS graduates attending an occupational training school nearby. Since John's death, dozens of volunteers, including Steve Connelly, Dave Freeman, and other friends of John have continued to fully support the school financially and work towards providing a new school building. BTC oversees all aspects of managing the school through the John Grove Memorial Fund. According to Karen Hubbard, the BTC president, "Through the John Grove High School [the Air Commando Association and the McCoskrie Threshold Fund] are giving these children an opportunity that never existed before in the history of this mountain range."

In 2019, the school had 33 students. In 2020, enrollment was nearly 60 students. In the last 12 years approximately 78 students have graduated from JGHS. Several have been sponsored to further their education. Cindy Ramos, for example, received a scholarship to nursing school and is now a nurse at the top Honduran hospital. Without the JGHS, Cindy's education would have ended at the 6th grade. Other graduates have continued their education in cosmetology and other occupational areas.

In 1992, Manny Torres (then a technical sergeant) and Ken Poole (then a major) were on a training mission to Honduras and noticed the extreme poverty in the orphanages. They initiated the beginning of the Christmas Wish program where, for 16 years, a C-130 from the 16th SOW



**John Grove with student at the John Grove High School.**



**Bob White, Felix 'Sam' Sambogna, John Grove's mother Doris Eaton, his brother (name not available), Dave Freeman, and Jim Boney at the ACA after John's death.**



**John Grove with his truck and trailer he used to collect items.**



**Dave Freeman, Jim Kradle, an unidentified Air Commando, and Steve Connelly work loading a truck with donated items.**

delivered Christmas gifts to the children. Once again, John Grove was the wing project officer who, with the help of active duty and retired volunteers, acquired the gifts and prepared them for loading on the C-130. Ken Poole became a willing and cheerful supporter of the MTF. He and his family often helped in sorting and packing supplies for shipment.

While serving as the ACA President from 2000 – 2004, Robert Downs approved the use of the ACA roster to mail out requests for financial support to cover the MTF's storage, shipping, and miscellaneous expenses. Robert totally supported the MTF and was a regular volunteer. Jeanette Elliot, ACA graphic designer, prepared the mailing list, designed the letterhead and brochure, and assisted with other administrative and marketing requirements. It is testimony to Air Commandos' humanitarian spirit that ACA members have continued to generously donate. Significant donations were made by the McCoskrie family members. Other large donations were received in honor of Jessie Aderholt and General Aderholt when they passed.

In 2003, Bob White and volunteers picked up 100 desks from the St Joseph School in Tuskegee, AL, that had been donated to the MTF. The desks were shipped to JGHS. In 2004, John organized the collection, restoration, and distribution of 650 desks donated by Okaloosa County School District to schools in Guatemala and Honduras.

A storage facility large enough to accommodate the tons of donated supplies and materials was always a problem. John worked tirelessly trying to find free storage space and he usually did, but it was normally on a temporary basis. Working with the Okaloosa County Superintendent of Schools, a vacant school in Crestview was made available

to the MTF. The school had a loading dock so that the trailer with the sea container could back right up for the loading. Roger Klair and Clyde Howard, both retired combat controllers, were experts in preparing the desks and bicycles for loading. Also, a vacant auto dealership building on Eglin Parkway was used for a short time. However, because so many items were picked up, it was necessary to rent storage units to store them until a sea container arrived for the next loading and shipment. MTF rented some and John personally rented others.

Because of John Grove's extraordinary service and humanitarian spirit, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) awarded John the CSAF Public Service Award. John was buried at Arlington National Cemetery and the CSAF, General Norton Schwartz, presented the flag to John's mother. John was inducted in the ACA Hall of Fame in 1996.

When John passed away the scope of the MTF decreased. After his death, almost 30 storage units containing the surplus goods John had collected: medical equipment, tools, clothing, shoes, toys, bedding, furniture, and much more were cleared, sorted, and packed. With support from BTC, seven sea containers were shipped to poor communities in Honduras, Jamaica, and Guyana.

Over the past 10 years, volunteers made about 50 round trips between Ft Walton Beach and Clearwater to deliver the items collected. Using Jim Connors' truck and trailer, volunteers picked up articles not sold at rummage sales at two local churches and medical supplies from Fort Walton Medical Center and Twin Cities Hospital. Additionally, Bob White was the manager of the Eglin Airman's Attic and he donated numerous excess items. Jim Connors and



**Active duty Air Commandos and civilians unload a truck of Christmas presents and donations bound for needy children and villagers.**



**A group of children gather to receive gifts.**



John Easley made most of the trips to Clearwater using Jim's truck and trailer. They would unload the trailer in a BTC warehouse and return on the same day. Dave Freeman and Steve Connelly also made several of the trips. Jim Kradel was always available to help with the loading. Karen Hubbard and Rebecca Smith, the President and Vice-President of BTC, frequently commented on the great effort of the MTF volunteers to provide so much for the needy children. Items provided by the MTF were combined with other items collected by BTC and shipped to many countries.

The names of all the volunteers who supported the MTF over the years are too numerous to list. Many have passed on, but their efforts, dedication, and legacy of service have made an impact on the health, education, welfare, and future of thousands of people.

In 2020, MTF President Robert White had a special meeting to discuss the future of the MTF. Because of the lack of young volunteers and the aging of the current group, the MTF Board, with concurrence of the McCaskrie family, decided it was time to retire the MTF. A motion was made, and the decision passed by majority vote. It was also

approved to send all remaining funds, approximately \$5,000, to BTC to support the John Grove High School.

The difficult decision to conclude the MTF signaled the end of an era, but it does not mean your ACA has ceased its humanitarian and service functions. In 2012, the ACA established the Air Commando Foundation as a tax-exempt charitable organization to support Air Commandos and their families who need some help. ACA's humanitarian work continues.

*To make a donation to the John Grove School, search for the John Grove Memorial Fund to donate on BTC's website or send a check made out to Bless the Children to: Bless the Children, Inc. 411 Cleveland St., #195, Clearwater, FL 33755. Indicate the donation is for the John Grove High School. 100% of all funds donated go to support the John Grove Memorial Fund. The need is great.*



*About the Author: Felix "Sam" Sambogna is the final MTF secretary and assistant treasurer. He has served as a volunteer for 19 years for the Air Commando Association and the McCaskrie Threshold Foundation.*



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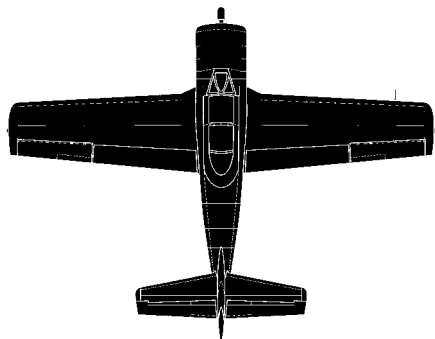
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## T-28 Trojan



Many trainer aircraft have been turned into warplanes. Few if any, however, have performed as well in that role, and in so many places, as the Air Force's T-28 Trojan. Its combat career began in the early 1960s in Vietnam. The good performance of the T-28 intrigued foreign governments, which used it for training, close air support, reconnaissance, and airborne patrol. Versions of the T-28 served with more than 20 air forces. They eventually saw combat on four continents.

The T-28A was designed to replace the obsolete World War II-era T-6 Texan trainer. The early version was powered by a troublesome 800-horsepower Wright R-1300 engine. Nonetheless, the Trojan performed well enough to convince the Navy to buy the T-28B and T-28C with a larger Wright R-1820. USAF used the Trojan as a trainer through 1956, at which point it was replaced by the Beech T-34 and

Cessna T-37. The Air National Guard retained it for a few years. Then, in the early 1960s, the aircraft was revamped and given a completely new purpose.

The first T-28s to serve in Vietnam were part of Operation Farm Gate's 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron. Rugged and reliable, it was well-liked by its air and ground crews. The original mission to train South Vietnamese pilots soon grew to include combat strikes. Then, in 1962, USAF began to modify some 300 T-28s as fighter-bombers for counterinsurgency warfare in Vietnam. These aircraft, redesignated as T-28D Nomads, provided years of stellar service. The aircraft was withdrawn from combat in Vietnam in 1964, but it continued to operate with the 60th Special Operations Squadron on missions over Laos and Cambodia.

—Walter J. Boyne

**This aircraft:** USAF T-28C—#140579—as it looked in the early 1960s when assigned to the 4400th CCTS in South Vietnam. It wore South Vietnamese markings because it flew in secret US Farm Gate missions.



### In Brief

Designed, built by North American ★ converted by Fairchild ★ first flight Sept. 24, 1949 ★ crew of two ★ number built (all services) 2,232 ★ single Wright R-1830 radial engine ★ **Specific to T-28D:** max speed 352 mph ★ cruise speed 230 mph ★ max range 1,335 miles (loaded) ★ armament two .50 cal machine guns, miniguns ★ bomb load up to 3,000 lbs of bombs, rockets ★ weight (max) 8,118 lb ★ span 40 ft 7 in ★ length 32 ft 10 in ★ height 12 ft 8 in.

### Famous Fliers

**Air Force Cross:** Bernard Lukasik. **Notable:** Robert Simpson, died Aug. 28, 1962 in first shootdown of US attack aircraft in Vietnam War. **Others:** Harry Aderholt, Robert Gleason, James Harding, William Hobbins, Benjamin King, William Palank, John Piotrowski, Richard Secord, Brien Ward.

### Interesting Facts

Saw combat in Asia, Africa, North America, South America ★ designed to transition pilots from prop to jet aircraft, the first to do so ★ given call sign Zorro by 606th ACS in Thailand ★ sold to French Air Force, which modified them and used them in Algerian War ★ used by 23 air forces ★ nicknamed Nomad, Fennec ("desert fox"), and Nomair ★ known as Tora-Toras in the Philippines ★ supplied by CIA in 1960s to Moïse Tshombe's regime in Congo.



**T-28s armed with machine guns, bombs, and rocket launchers.**

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# BOOK REVIEW

By Major Brian Raffa, USAF

## **Special Air Warfare and the Secret War in Laos** *Air Commandos 1964-1975*

**By Colonel Joseph D. Celeski, US Army, Retired**

(Air University Press 2019 518 pages)

In *Special Air Warfare and the Secret War in Laos*, Colonel Joseph Celeski, US Army (retired) and Special Forces Soldier, becomes one of the few authors to shine a spotlight on a relatively unknown aspect of the Vietnam War, the air war in Laos, where the seeds of Air Force Special Operations Command sprouted. His work also provides an absorbing and enriching narrative about Air Force

Special Operations heritage and, whether intentional or not, compels the reader to reflect on US strategy in Afghanistan and across the Middle East. Through interviews, previously classified documents, and references to other Air Commando books, Celeski offers a rare accounting of the air operations inside Laos that past and present Air Commandos can relate to, especially now that many have

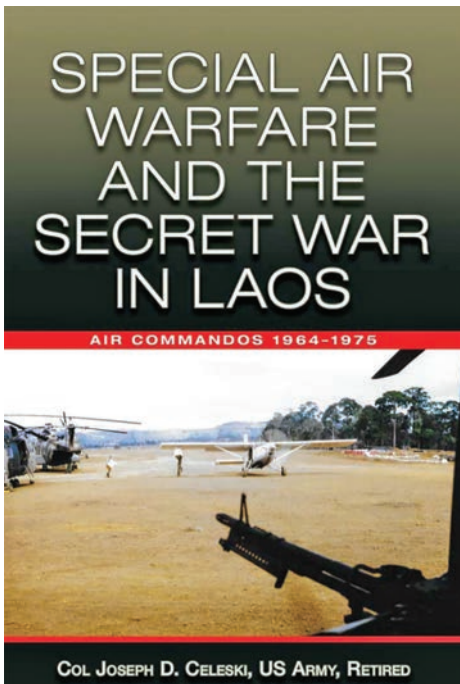
participated in similar advisory operations around the globe.

Divided into four parts, *Special Air Warfare* begins Part One with some well-needed context about one specific problem the US military faced in the early 1960s: how to counter Soviet and Chinese communist expansion without engaging in direct conflict. Without boring the reader, Celeski summarizes the efforts and discussions within the Air Force to establish an organization that could provide counterinsurgency, unconventional warfare, and psychological warfare capabilities similar to

what the US Army had established with its own Special Forces groups. He then takes some time to explain the doctrinal concepts of special operations, foreign internal defense, counter-insurgency, and the evolution of these operations in Laos. These explanations offer a glimpse of how the Air Force approached special operations in its early years.

Similar to the Army establishing their Special Forces groups, the Air Force established the Jungle Jim program in 1961 along with the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron, which served as the primary organization to conduct advisory operations with partner air forces. It is easy to get lost in the details of the organizational structure changes between 1961-1973, but the author does a commendable job of inserting diagrams throughout the book to help the reader untangle those relationships. Thus, in Part One the reader is enabled to grasp the doctrinal discussions about special operations and the military's need to counter communist adversaries asymmetrically, without large numbers of troops. Project Water Pump in Laos and Farm Gate in South Vietnam provided that capability in Southeast Asia.

Part Two of *Special Air Warfare* describes the early days of Air America in Southeast Asia, the efforts to build up capabilities of the Royal Laotian Air Force (RLAF) through Project Water Pump, and the maturation of forward air controller procedures. Here, the reader can experience the war stories of servicemen adapting to their complex environment and developing tactics for personnel recovery, air advising, and the evolution of tactical air control systems. In addition, the author explains the difficulties of working with Thai, Laotian, and South Vietnamese partners as they trained in T-28 close air support tactics and conducted combat operations. The standout example was that of the Hmong pilots who had no formal education, spoke little English, and needed blocks of wood to reach the T-28 rudder pedals. That US advisors were able to find a way to teach the students to fly the T-28 and eventually perform close air support was nothing short of a miracle under the circumstances. With these types of





vignettes, Celeski successfully conveys the challenges Air Commandos had to overcome while building the RLAF into an effective Air Force.

Parts Three and Four build on these themes as the author delves into the combat experiences of Ravens, combat controllers, maintenance technicians, and air operations center (AOC) commanders forming Project 404—the covert project that brought US personnel into Laos to conduct advisory operations against the North Vietnamese. In these sections, he brings to light the experiences of the AOC commanders from several locations within Thailand and Laos through extensive interviews. Their stories serve as a portal into the teamwork and creative solutions for which Air Commando detachments became known. The final portion of the book explains the expansion of special air warfare missions in Laos to include beacon placement for air navigation, insertion and extraction of special operations forces, and interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail by various attack aircraft. Despite these advancements in the later years of the Vietnam War, the overarching military strategy never put its full weight behind the interdiction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail by pairing conventional forces with special operations forces. The author identifies this failure as one of the major lessons learned in Laos.

During the height of Air Commando operations from 1966 through 1971, the brave servicemen who volunteered for Project 404 and Water Pump did so with the understanding that the operational environment in Laos provided few legal protections, featured rampant corruption, and held confusing rules of engagement. In overcoming these challenges, the interviewees credit their success to hiring the right people, a process they viewed as just as important as the missions themselves. Selected Air Commandos had to adapt to the battlespace's cultural nuances and limited resources, relying on ingenuity and commitment to accomplish the mission. Indeed, the underlying theme throughout *Special Air Warfare* is about how small teams of superb volunteers worked together and adapted to a complex combat environment, with limited resources, to improve RLAF units and advance US strategy, no matter how flawed it turned out to be.

The lessons learned from the US experience in Laos are spelled out in the epilogue. Here, Celeski says “the ways, means, and ends were out of balance,” a quote that resonates today given the heated discussions about ending America's so-called forever wars and the role our military should play in resolving conflicts overseas. We can also conclude from the US experience in Laos that operational successes can have strategic effects, but in the presence of flawed strategy or policy, they are likely short lived. The efforts of Air Commandos in Project Water Pump from 1965 to 1974 blunted the advances by North Vietnamese Army into Laos and caused the communist forces to change tactics. However, these operational wins did not lead to a US victory as we pulled out of South Vietnam and Laos due to dwindling public support. The fates of Laos and South Vietnam were sealed when the US military left. Most military members serving in country felt that both governments would not last long without a consistent US military presence and history

proved them right. Unfortunately, the similarities between Laos and current operations in the Middle East are obvious and plentiful. Throughout my time reading this book—and the past few years reflecting on our strategy in the Middle East—it was impossible not to draw the conclusion that Afghanistan is headed in the same direction as Laos was in the 1970s.

Military predictions aside, the true highlight of Colonel Celeski's *Special Air Warfare* is the opportunity it provides our AFSOC community to understand the experiences and trials by fire of our Air Commando forefathers. The rich accounts of early combat controllers, pilots, aircraft maintenance technicians, intelligence officers, and radio technicians provide a proud lineage to current Air Commandos serving in similar capacities. That should be enough to inspire more discussion of and appreciation for those who paved the way to our current successes.



*About the Author: Major Brian Raffa is a Foreign Area Officer currently serving in Air Mobility Command Headquarters. He was previously the Security Cooperation Division Chief for US Air Forces Central, as well as a Combat Aviation Advisor with the 6th Special Operations and 371st Special Operations Combat Training Squadrons.*

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Travis Norton	Charles "Snuffy" Smith	In Memory of Jockey 14, Wrath 11, Spirit 03 & Eagle Claw
Randy O'Boyle	John 'Smitty' & Charlye Smith	*Some members chose to remain anonymous
	Cat and Jack Spittler	

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The "ANYTIME FLIGHT" is a teaming opportunity to raise funds for mission needs. The goal is for members to pledge \$600 over a 3-year period. You can submit your contribution by monthly payments (\$20 a month), three annual installments of \$200, or \$600 lump sum -- you decide when and how much you want to donate. When members make a pledge to contribute \$600 and make their first installment, we'll add their name to the "ANYTIME FLIGHT" roster. Contributors are listed on our website and in the *Air Commando Journal*.

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As my brothers and sisters before me, I am proud to step into history as a member of the Air Force Special Operations Command. I will walk with pride with my head held high, my heart and attitude will show my allegiance to God, country and comrades. When unable to walk another step, I will walk another mile. With freedom my goal, I will step into destiny with pride and the Air Force Special Operations Command.

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