

THE MEN OF THE  
458th TACTICAL AIRLIFT SQUADRON

by  
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Dedicated to Lt Col John W. Polk, Jr

Commander - 458th TAS

Truly the best Squadron commander in Southeast Asia

I wish to acknowledge my most sincere appreciation to the men of the 458th TAS, without whom this publication would have been impossible.

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There have been, since the beginning of aviation, men and their aircraft who have become famous. The Wright Brothers and their first flight that memorable day at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, are at the top of the list. The German Ace Dogfighter, Baron Von Richtofen surely ranks near the top. Billy Mitchell, who dared do what others felt impossible, must be included. Jimmy Dolittle and his Tokyo Raiders will never be forgotten. The Spirit of St. Louis, piloted by a young and gallant Charles Lindburgh will long be remembered. The brave, heroic astronauts of the early 1960's, facing a new era in aviation, will live in the pages of history forever. Then, of course, we must also include, "Snoopy" and his Sopwith Camel.

But of the men and their flying machines that would be famous, none are more famous than the men of the 458th TAS, who flew the "Red Tail Caribous". These gallant, fearless men boarded their twin engine, all weather aircraft day after day, battling insurmountable odds of return and completed their missions... sometimes! Disregarding their own personal, safety-and well being, these brave warriors flew into airfields carved out of mountains, jungles and rice paddies. They delivered such loads as rations, ammunition, barbed wire, rice, chickens, cows, pigs, Papa San, Mama San, and his entire family, each chewing bettlenut sipping on a bottle of Nookbomb and flashing that 24 karate gold smile.

Who were those pilots, co-pilots and flight mechanics? Its hard to decide who to begin with when there are so many "Greats" on a long list of eligibles. So rather than trying to name these highly proficient individuals, we shall let their heroic deeds speak for themselves.

First of all there was the pilot who made his approach into an airfield with a stiff right crosswind. At touch down point, he discovered he was at a 90° angle as the mighty Bou jerked, shuttered and finally straightened itself out. It seems he must have once flown the "heavy" B-52 with a swivel landing gear. However, he was quick to note the C-7A was not thusly equipped.

Then there was a newly checked out co-pilot who was flying a GCA back into Cam Ranh and went from well below glide path slightly left of course to well above glide path well right of course during a single radio transmission.

Of course no one can forget the Flt Mech who was nearing his DEROS and was worrying about enough missions for the first Air Medal. He was given the "Perfect Medical Speciman of the Year" Award instead.

Remember who the pilot was who, on engine start, discovered to his surprise that as he placed mixtures to auto rich, the throttles followed causing a terrible backfire?

No one could ever forget that historic day when one young co-pilot watched in utter dismay as his helmet exited the aircraft via his sliding window and drifted gently into the sunset.

Who was the flight mechanic who wrote this in aircraft forms, "Chocks need to be replaced. Rope keeps slipping out causing chocks to fall on fit. mech's foot"?

The identity of this next crew is still a secret. After take-off, the pilot called gear up, flaps up and so: on. As the fit mech checked cargo compartment and engines he asked if there was any particular reason why the gear was still down. The reply over interphone was an exclamatory statement of profanity as the pilot placed the gear selector handle in the UP position.

Who was it who gave a briefing to a crew one morning and said, "Flt mech help the pilot monitor the 30 min. starter time limitations." Wonder what dash one he's been reading?

An IP must really get great feelings of grandeur when he gives a student a simulated engine fire on engine start and have that student put out the simulated fire with an unsimulated fire extinguisher.

Then what Fit Mich hasn't gotten ready , to start number 2 engine on pilot's signal, only to watch number 1 begin to turn over and hear the pilot shout great obscenities at himself.

What can be said for a co-pilot who was flying above the clouds with his visor down and as he descends, ask the pilot or flt mech to turn on the instrument lights because it has suddenly gotten so dark he can hardly see the gauges.

I dare say more than one of these heroic crew members have discovered it is almost impossible to maintain perfect balance while trying to walk on the ramp rollers.

Then there was a certain field grade officer among these gallant war heroes who, on his cherry flight as an aircraft commander, came to a screeching halt with all available brakes locked and using all the reverse power at his disposal in an effort to prevent making hamburger out of a cow who had absolutely no respect for the mighty Bou.

There are numerous occasions when an instructor flight mechanic demonstrated proper procedures for a student. For instance, one instructor was demonstrating a proper "speed off-loading" procedure and at the completion of the procedure the instructor asked the student to help him get the ramp rollers out from under the load that had just been dumped. Then of course no one has yet to figure how the instructor and student always got ACG of 35.0% on every load for two days in the Delta. Could it be they left CRB without a slipstick aboard?

Imagine how the alert crew felt the day they were alerted to go to Pleiku to deliver 2 pallets of perishable rations which must be delivered ASAP. Upon arrival they discovered the load consisted of 1 pallet of 3 pigs and one pallet of nookbomb. If you care to check, never in the history of the world has a live pig spoiled. Not to mention the fact, how can something spoil that already smells dead?

Unbelievable? Not really! If you were to become acquainted with these highly skilled, highly trained proficient men, you would realize that this group of professional aviators can and do accomplish, not only these but an infinite number of others too wild to expect even the most simple-minded person to believe. Like the student AC who ran over the taxi-way lights at Song Be, or the flight mech who flew with STAN/EVAL aboard as he does when he's alone; or the FCF crew who goes to the aircraft without knowing their call sign. How about the fit mech at Bien Hoa who went to open the troop door and as he pressed the release button, watched the entire handle fall completely out and to the ground. Doesn't it seem funny that regardless of weather, a pilot is always at 9500' on long legs? Or when the pilot turns in the 781 and discovers he will not have landed for another half hour.

These men will live forever in the minds of many people for these are the magnificent men of the 458th Tactical Airlift Squadron and their equally magnificent Red Tail flying machines!