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VIETNAM AIRLIFT
For the CARIBOU, 800 feet is an airport



The statistics may be staggering, but one trip on the Caribou will convince you that

VIETNAM AIRLIFT IS A HUMAN THING

by Capt. ROBERT P. EVERETT

WHO would want a cargo aircraft with only two engines (old-fashioned piston type at that); an aircraft that grosses out with a mere 5,000 pounds of cargo; and sporting a maximum speed comparable to the venerable C-47 "Gooney Bird"? Who would?

The United States Air Force, that's who. Why?

STOL, that's why. STOL stands for short take-off and landing and you do a lot of that in Vietnam. STOL is one outstanding capability of the DeHavilland C-7 *Caribou*. So if there's such a thing as the right airplane for some very special air-lift jobs in Vietnam, the *Caribou* has got to be it.

The C-7 is one of three primary types of aircraft flying the airlift mission in Vietnam. Together, these three aircraft—the C-7, the Fair-child Hiller C-123 *Provider*, and the Lockheed C-130 *Hercules* — have virtually wrought airlift miracles in South Vietnam.

A *Caribou* day. It takes on a load of fresh vegetables, which the flight engineer/load-master checks for weight and balance while pilot and copilot scan maps; then carries group of apprehensive paratroopers to drop zone for their first jump from an aircraft.

Photos by MSgt. David L. Mayhew



- More than two and three-quarter billion pounds of cargo airlifted in a year.

- An airlift takeoff or landing every 38 seconds, around the clock.

- Nearly four million people transported in a 12-month period.

That's just a sampling of the imposing figures being tabulated by the people who do the airlift job in Vietnam. Dozens of other equally impressive statistics could be cited, but all the figures in the world could only tell part of the story. But more importantly, there's another story behind those figures, a story that deals with response, priorities, management and—mostly—with people.

Response is the Key

The fact that you haul a thousand tons of cargo to a battle area doesn't really mean a thing if you get it there too late to do any good for the ground force commander who needs it. *Response* is the key. When a ground force commander says he needs ammunition, weapons, supplies and troops, he also says when he needs them. Usually it's *right now*. And if you're the guy who pushes the airlift button, you've got to get the goods to him on time. That's where you succeed or fail.

The man who pushes the airlift button in Vietnam is Maj. Gen. Burl W. McLaughlin, commander of the 834th Air Division at Tan Son Nhut AB. He bears responsibility for all in-country airlift. The 834th's Air-lift Control Center (ALCC) is the nerve center of all airlift operations in Vietnam. It's where the ground force commander's request is translated into cubage, weight and sortie. Specialists take the airlift requests, which have been approved by Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, and program them against their available resources.

When you talk about available resources of the 834th Air Division, you're talking about those three reliables, the C-130 *Hercules*, C-123 *Provider* and C-7 *Caribou* aircraft, all assigned to or under the operational control of the 834th AD. ALCC's job is to match the right aircraft to the right requirement. This is to insure maximum, efficient use of the aircraft. You don't send a big C-130 with only a ton of rations to an outpost any more than you try to send 150 troops in a C-7.

Once the mission is scheduled the ALCC continues to monitor it until it is completed. Thus, the ALCC command post can tell you at any moment precisely where each of its aircraft is located, what it's carrying, where it will land and when it will complete its mission. On a typical day the command post controls more than 1,250 sorties. It's a big job, and a necessary one that insures quick response to vital demands.

Take an emergency medical evacuation request. The ALCC could quickly unload cargo from a lower priority mission and launch the air-craft to meet the need but a more likely response would be to divert airborne aircraft near the injured man. An emergency call for ammunition from a besieged outpost would be similarly handled.

Airplanes and Men

"Big Daddy" of the Vietnam air-lift is the C-130. It moves most of the tonnage, averaging more than 74,000 tons a month. The C-130 is a big airplane, nearly a hundred feet long. It can carry 16 tons of cargo. And even though its wingspan is 132 feet, it can still operate from about 81 airstrips and runways in South Vietnam.

The C-130s and crews in Vietnam are under the operational control of

the 834th Air Division, but belong to the 315th Air Division. They come to Vietnam from 315th units throughout the western Pacific. Each C-130 and crew normally flies missions in Vietnam for two weeks, then returns to its home base for four or five days for maintenance.

A middle-aged airlift bird that recently got a rejuvenation treatment is the C-123 *Provider*. Auxiliary jet engines were hung under its wings, giving it a short-field takeoff capability and increasing its cargo-carrying capability. The *Provider* can haul five tons. There are three C-123 squadrons at Phan Rang and one at Tan Son Nhut. All are assigned to the 315th Air Commando Wing.

Newcomer to the US Air Force airlift fleet in Vietnam is DeHavilland's C-7 *Caribou*, received from the Army on January 1, 1967, as the result of a fixed-wing/rotary-wing agreement.

There are about 90 *Caribous* in Vietnam, assigned to the 483d Tactical Airlift Wing at Cam Ranh Bay AB. Six squadrons have the *Caribous*, two each at Cam Ranh Bay, Phu Cat and Vung Tau.

Caribou missions differ from those flown by the C-130s and C-123s because much of the work of the 483d is under the category of dedicated aircraft. That means the aircraft is allocated to fill the airlift needs of a specified organization, such as the Army's 1st Air Cavalry or 101st Air Cavalry Division. The *Caribous* also support Special Forces throughout the country. The C-130s and C-123s, on the other hand, operate on a "common user" basis.

Caribou A Busy Bird

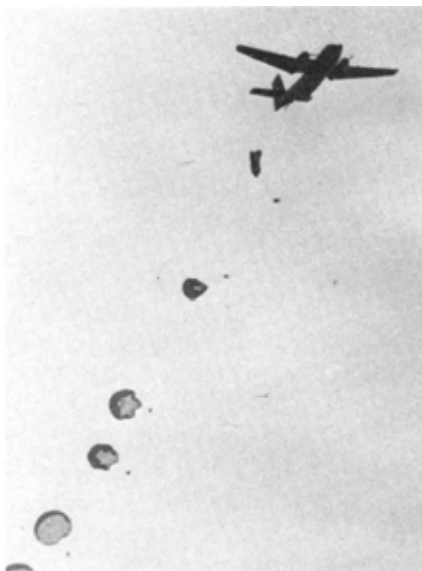
Col. William H. Mason is commander of the 483d Tactical Airlift Wing. He puts his mission in the simplest terms: "The continuing

goal of this wing is to maintain customer satisfaction by providing safe, reliable and effective airlift."

Performing the mission is a group of people the composition of which is, in itself, something of an oddity. First off, it includes more than 50 lieutenant colonels ("granddaddies of the *Caribou* fleet"). Then there are a half dozen Ph.Ds., in fields ranging from sociology to geophys-

were up about 20 percent. As if to remind the *Caribou* pilots that their new records were being set under combat conditions, 23 *Caribous* took hits from enemy ground fire in the first 60 days of 1968 alone.

The *Caribou* can take off and land on an 800-foot strip. That means it can operate from about 160 runways or airstrips in Vietnam —far more than can either the C-130



Chute of next-to-last man failed to open properly. Veteran **US paratrooper** behind him managed to grab the streaming canopy and pop it open.



There are many techniques for getting cargo out of the *Caribou*. At Dak Seang, a remote Special Forces camp, the crew demonstrated the **Ground High Speed** Offload method. As the *Caribou* lurches forward, pallets fly out the rear door. Pallets held fiber bags for **sandbagging the fort**.

ics. There's an ex-Thunderbird pilot and a former NASA pilot. One of the lieutenant colonels was a double ace in World War 11; another a single ace. Still another was pilot of an ultraspeedy B-58 *Hustler* before "moving up" to the *Caribou*. Aircraft commanders run the grade ladder from first lieutenant to colonel.

During 1967, these people and their *Caribous* racked up more flying hours (100,159) and more sorties (157,576) than either of the other airlift aircraft in Vietnam. For the first half of 1968, both figures

or C-123. It is, therefore, the only fixed-wing aircraft that can fly troops and supplies to many of the allied outposts dotting the Vietnamese countryside.

Like the forts of the early American West, these Special Forces outposts are islands of relative safety in the heart of enemy territory. For airplanes to operate from their air-strips, pilots must make dangerous approaches and climbouts over enemy territory. And every day's missions include stops at these Special Forces camps.

A Caribou Day

Caribou crews go to work early. A 5 a.m. crew briefing is routine. Let's follow as the airplane moves down the runway at Cam Ranh Bay AB and lifts easily into the early morning sky. First stop will be Nha Trang, just a few miles up the Vietnam coast.

By 6 o'clock, the *Caribou* is on the ground at Nha Trang. A sister ship is nearby, taking on cargo for the Special Forces camp at Ban Me Thuot, some 70 miles to the west. The cargo consists of a small amount of ammunition, a large amount of fresh vegetables and three live calves. That's a fairly typical load for a *Caribou*. The flight engineer/loadmaster is accustomed to handling live animals and quickly spreads heavy plastic sheets across the airplane floor. Calves, after all, are not house-broken. The odor in-side the cargo compartment is—well—pungent. The crew delays the closing of the rear cargo door to the last possible moment. Finally it is closed and the sister *Caribou* is off for Ban Me Thuot.

By now our *Caribou* has offloaded passengers and taken on others. This morning's mission will not involve hauling cargo. Instead, the plane will fly to Pleiku AB to pick up Vietnamese paratroopers for a practice jump.

That's another feature of the *Caribou*. It can quickly be converted from cargo to passenger configuration. The large cargo door at the rear is an excellent jumping position for paratroopers. When opened in flight it adds not a whit of control problem for the pilot.

Touchdown at Pleiku is under a hot midmorning sun. Within minutes the paratroopers are on board and the *Caribou* is headed for the drop zone. The jump is routine. The *Caribou* returns twice to Pleiku for additional loads.



Dak Seang resembles a fort of the early American West. The surrounding territory is not secure. *Caribous* frequently draw fire on takeoff and landing, but pilots call it routine.

When the paratroops are finished the *Caribou* returns to Pleiku. Crews change and the bird is made ready for its afternoon mission, a resupply of the Special Forces camp at Dak Seang, not far from the Laos border.

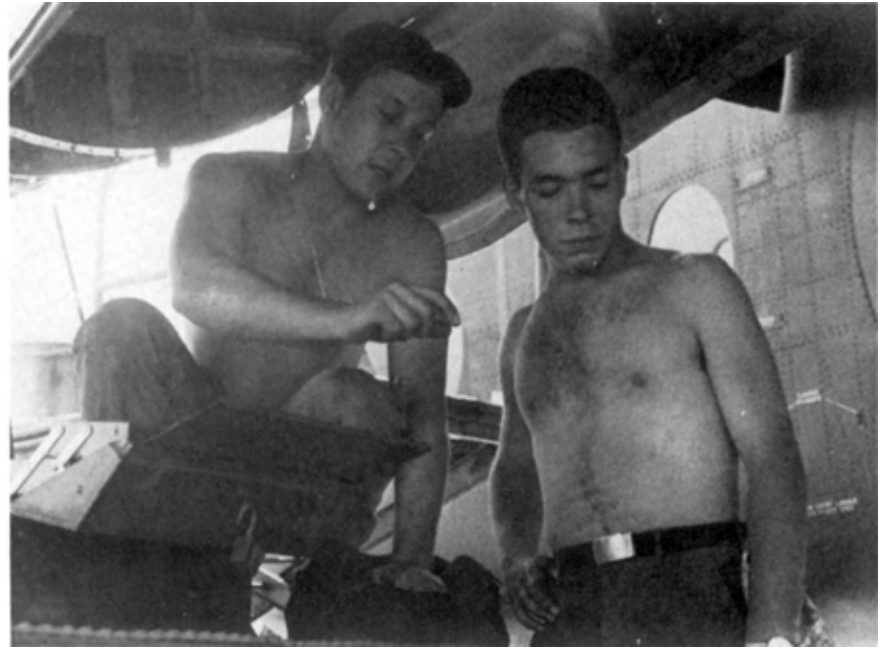
Caribou pilots land routinely on the several hundred feet of dust and gravel at Dak Seang. But putting a fully loaded airplane on that short, narrow airstrip is hairy, any way you cut it. The plane barely touches ground before the props are reversed. A cloud of dust engulfs it. The rough, hilly airstrip at one point becomes so narrow that the wheels of the *Caribou* barely clear the ditch on the side of the runway. The pilots call it a routine landing.

Nowhere in Vietnam can you see more vividly the effect of airlift on *people* than in the resupply of these isolated Special Forces camps. Before the plane touches down, all the camp's vehicles—two trucks and a jeep—are moving to meet it. A US

Special Forces sergeant jumps from the back of a truck onto the platform of the *Caribou*. He spots a long-awaited package and shouts, "The hot water heater is here!"

The heater and a pallet of rice are unloaded. But in unloading the remaining two pallets of fiber sandbags, the crew demonstrates one of the *Caribou's* special extraction techniques—Ground High Speed Off-load. The chains securing the two pallets are removed and the engines are revved up. Then the pilot releases the brakes and the *Caribou* lurches forward. The two pallets fly out the rear cargo door, remaining in an upright position, and slam down on the ground. It's a technique the *Caribou* pilots can use when they're under fire and have to get out of a place in a hurry, or to expedite offloading when a forklift is not available.

Taking the empty airplane off from the Dak Seang airstrip somehow lacks the drama of the landing.



The maintenance man is the most important guy in the life of a Caribou. Professionals all, they make possible the records the airplane has set.

The *Caribou* heads for the next camp. The pilots refer to it as an international airport; it has a 2,000-foot paved runway. Compared to Dak Seang, the description is apt.

Pleiku is again a pickup point for the last mission of the day; a supply paradrop at Dak Pek, scene of in-tense fighting between South Vietnamese forces and North Vietnamese regulars. No landing will be attempted at Dak Pek, but a couple of tons of supplies and equipment will be airdropped.

The area around Dak Pek has been an enemy stronghold and contains several suspected 37mm anti-aircraft gun emplacements. Flying around it is especially hazardous. But today the drop is made without encountering enemy fire. The slow-moving *Caribou* comes in at about 300 feet over the drop zone and makes a gravity air drop. It's an efficient, accurate means of putting supplies on target.

By now the sun has set and it's time for the long flight back to Cam Ranh Bay. One day has seen the air-plane carry paratroops on a practice drop, bring needed supplies to Special Forces camps and drop ammunition and food to allied troops on an active battlefield.

Other days bring other challenges; moving an entire orphanage from war-torn Ban Me Thuot to a safe area, making the first landing at a new or recaptured airstrip in the A Shau Valley, picking up 13 hits on takeoff from Hue-Phu Bai, or maybe setting a new record by hauling more than 50 tons of cargo in a single airplane in a single day.

It's all in a day's work for the C-7 *Caribou*. And in Vietnam, where the *Caribou* and its big brothers, the C-130 and C-123, are flying in history's greatest airlift, setting new records every day, it reminds you that airlift is, after all, a human thing.

