



The Airlifter

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Col. Don Strobaugh

Although he has been a member since right after the Association was formed, our newest Life Member is Colonel Don Strobaugh, USAF (Ret), who is also one of our most interesting and experienced members. As far as I know, I have never met him – if I did, it was most likely during Operation NICKEL GRASS, the airlift to Israel during the Yom Kipper War when he was in charge of the MAC mobility team at Lod Airport, but we have been acquainted through letter and Email for many years.



Don's career in airlift goes back to the 1950s when he became a Combat Control officer after switching from the Army, where he had been an enlisted radio operator. He was assigned to the 2nd Aerial Port Squadron, then transferred to Evreux, France and the 5th Aerial Port Squadron. While he was at Sewart, he and some other CCT members started experimenting with high altitude free-fall parachuting and he took the experience with him to France.

Left; CAPT. DONALD STROBAUGHT WITH 5TH APS

By November 1964, Captain Strobaugh was commander of Detachment one, 5th Aerial Port Squadron at Wiesbaden, Germany. He was nearing the end of a four-year tour that had started out at Evreux. He was attending the German airborne school at Schnogau when he got a phone call telling him to return to Wiesbaden immediately. He flew to Evreux where he was briefed on a Top Secret mission to the Belgian Congo to rescue hostages being held by rebels in Stanleyville. His role was to brief Belgian commandos on the use of the PRC-47 radio. He selected SSgt Robert J. Diaz, a radio repairman from the Evreux CCT, to go with him.

At Ascension Island, he and Diaz conducted radio training and also taught the Belgians how to exit from the C-130, from which few had jumped before. The two Combat Controllers were told that they would not jump with the Belgians due to possible political ramifications.

Captain Strobaugh was assigned to accompany Chalk 9 as the jump master. He was still under orders not to jump. Chalk 9 was one of three airplanes that were to either drop their troops as reinforcements if necessary, or land them if not. The assault force secured the airfield so the three airplanes landed. Once they got on the ground, the Belgian commander asked him to handle the radios due to the language difficulties, which was made worse because the C-130 crews were taking fire and the pilots were talking fast. The two Combat Controllers were instructed to remain in Stanleyville when the rescue force carried out another rescue at the town of Paulis. Don kept a log of his activities, including how he felt about the carnage inflicted by the Congolese soldiers on the rebels. In his opinion, one was as bad as the other.

When he left Germany in January 1965, Don went to Norton AFB, California where Military Airlift Command was setting up a C-141 wing. Three years later, now a major, he received an assignment to the 2nd Aerial Port Group at Tan Son Nhut as commander of the Combat Control section, which put him in command of all Combat Controllers in South Vietnam. His tour was cut short due to the death of his wife, but he nevertheless participated in the dramatic airlift operations of the Tet Offensive. He went to Khe Sanh to supervise the installation of the GPES equipment across the runway. He recorded in his log that not an egg was broken in a crate that aerial port had placed on the pallet for the aerial port team!

On April 26, Major Strobaugh flew into A Loi, an airfield in the A Shau Valley, with two Combat Controllers and Lt. Col. Richard F. Button, a C-130 pilot who was mission commander, to control airdrops. Although the weather in the valley was dismal, the Army bumped the GCA equipment that would have allowed blind drops. Without it, the crews had to drop below the clouds to find the drop zone.

By afternoon, the ceiling had lifted slightly and the C-130s started breaking out of the clouds further down the valley. The crew commanded by Major Lilburn Stowe of the 772nd Tactical



Airlift Squadron encountered heavy ground fire, that severely damaged the airplane. (The pilots were from the 772nd but the rest of the crew was from the 29th. Their pilots had gone DNIF that morning.) Major Stowe attempted to crash land the airplane – the photograph above is an actual photograph of the stricken airplane. According to Army personnel who witnessed the crash, Maj. Stowe pulled up to avoid troops who were in the field gathering airdrop bundles and struck a treeline. Maj. Strobaugh drove to the crash site where an Army lieutenant "ordered" him to stay away, but he ignored the junior officer and proceeded to search the area for survivors. He was awarded the Airman's Medal for his heroic actions.



Above; C-130B ATTEMPTING EMERGENCY LANDING AT A LOI

Major Strobaugh's assignment with 2nd Aerial Port Group was cut short due to the death of his wife, and he returned to Norton so he could care for his family. He was soon promoted again, which meant that his days with Combat Control were over.

Air Force policy did not allow any slots for officers in Combat Control above the rank of major. Combat Control was an aerial port function and CCT officers carried air transportation officer AFSCs. Even though he was out of Combat Control, he continued his love for parachuting with sports parachute teams. By October 1973, he was a full colonel on the staff of 21st Air Force at McGuire. When President Richard Nixon ordered an airlift of ammunition to Israel during the Yom Kipper War, Col. Strobaugh went to Lod Airport at Tel Aviv to command the ALCE operation. While he was there, he made friends with Israeli paratroopers and added their wings to his collection of military parachutist's wings. When he retired from the Air Force, he retired to Mesa, Arizona where he lives today. We in the TC/TAA are honored to have him as a Life Member.