

The First C-123 Into LS-36 - Moseley
12/10/2002 9:00 AM

By Charley Moseley

Being old as dirt and VP of the Mississippi chapter of CRS, this story is written with some tongue in cheek, and some continuing respect and applause for the incredibly gifted pilots us kickers flew with. Amen!

LS-36, was located some 40-50 miles North of the PDJ (Plaine de Jarres) and across a beautiful little river from the main village of Na Khang. In standing on the finely engineered foot bridge over that stream; one was reminded of fly fishing on the lovely Elk River of southwestern Oregon.

Na Khang was the hub of our war efforts north of the PDJ, and a real "melting pot" in brining together our various partners such as Vang Pao with his Meo, Kong Le with his neutralists and the USAF with their big and bigger SAR choppers to hopefully retrieve some of our lost "whistling T-28" pilots.

Simply by chance, LS-36 provided many of my "first times" in Laos. My first Caribou landing, first time to see a Jolly Green chopper and Puff (C-47 with gatlin gun). The bad guys shot Puff down. Those dudes sure knew a lot about shooting back.

My first view of a river full of naked and/or semi-naked women. The first meeting of Pop Buell, Vang Pao, and Tony Poe. Full bore people with a job to do. "Help me do it son, or get the hell out of my way." "IO-4."

And then the bad firsts: Watching my first Laotian die. An excited young woman ran right into the almost invisible prop of a Pilatus Porter. And then the hauling out of the dead and wounded after a battle. The dead went back to 20A (Long Tieng, aka Luang Chiang) to be stacked like cordwood, and the wounded to the hospital at Sam Thong (LS-20).

On one of those flights of wounded, a Laotian woman tied down on a stretcher began to struggle hard against the bindings on her hands and feet. She was gurgling behind the bloody bandages around her head, and those incredible dark pleading eyes reached out for my soul. "Please help me." Too much for me. Decision time! I had to do something--even if it was wrong.

Pop's medics tried to stop me, but I'm a pretty big boy--especially with a big knife in my hand. I cut the bandages off her face and almost gagged at the bloody bubbling mess where her nose and mouth used to be. Rifle butt? She was drowning in her own blood.

I quickly cut away the bindings on her hands and feet, sat her upright and began cleaning out her throat until relieved by a medic. Maybe my best deed in SEA. She thought so; and insisted on holding my hand as we unloaded at Sam Thong. "Thank You darling. We were there--together--and I still love you--wherever you are."

Thirty years later my friend and father drowned in his own vomit--in a hospital--with his hands and feet tied. The bastards! Us Bastards! He needed a good AAM kicker with him--and one was not there. "I'm sorry--so sorry dad."

The landing strip at 36 was a little short, but fine for our Caribous; if you could successfully ease over the top of that last limestone karst mountain; flutter down the steep slope with full flaps and the stall

warning horn screaming--give a little jolt of power to get over that last 51 deep irrigation ditch--then slap both props into full reverse a couple feet off the ground--and hope no people or water buffalo had wandered out onto the runway since your over flight five minutes ago. No sweat! Heck; Joe Hazen, Ray Salucci, Jack Houston, Rick Byrne, et al did it nearly every day and there were no old Caribou carcasses lying around like we had at LS-15. That little Tiger was a real creepy aircraft graveyard with a two tiered runway and a sheer 1000'+ cliff at the approach end. We learned all about updrafts, first hand. An incredible landing there one day with Bob Gains.

During the dry season of 65-66, Tony Poe and associates decided they needed C-123 flights into LS-36. They proceeded to elongate the strip, fill in the ditches and use C-4 to cut down most of the trees up to the top of the mountain which blocked any decent approach. The finished product looked real cute from 8,000' up, but ugly as sin face on.

Bob Hunt, from Mobile, Alabama, was given the high honor(?) making the first landing and yours truly was assigned as the typical DA kicker. "Do what you are told son--professionally -and keep your DA mouth shut." "10-4."

Us kickers were and are, by necessity and much scarred experience, perhaps the best judges of all you pilots. Your ability, expertise and character under the gun! We flew with most of you, and flew twice as many hours. It was and is an honor--most times.

There were only three losers in my career. One who slept thru the first flight--everyday. One, "the navigator", who took us on a scenic trip via the mig base at Vinh, then Dien Bien Phu and the entire PDJ on just one C-47 rice drop to LS-1 near the Mu Ghia pass. Lost--always lost--but, "in charge". He should have been fired before he tried to fly through a mountain coming out of Saigon. No luck!

And then that most charming "AAM poster child" with unprofessional disregard for the boring check list. A noisy wheels up landing on corrugated metal at NKP was an attention getter, but that pin wheeling evasion of a road grader at 20 Alternate, with all the blood and gore, convinced us kickers. Bad seed; or just too much bad luck!

We made the long flight up to LS-36 empty and there was more than a little apprehension in our ship. Can't remember the copilot's name, but his attitude and confidence level headed south as our fellow pilots came over the radio with plenty of sarcasm--masked as good luck--you suckers!?

Bob was normally a talker, maybe our champion talker--but not today. None of that, he was dead serious. He was also, one of our very best C-123 jockeys, and could drop rice or bundles of lumber into a small lake with anyone. Good people--and a true professional.

We arrived over the strip, made the normal fly over to check for water buffalo, road graders, etc., lowered the gear, pins in, full flaps, throttle back to almost stall, pucker vents closed tight; and wallowed over and down that last karst mountain. The tree stumps were close to our tad pole fat belly and the adjacent live trees were eye level and whizzing by. Living on the edge! Thank you Buddha!

There are no seats or seat belts for us kickers; so I'm standing right behind Bob to enjoy the event. In any crash, us dispensable DAs were either dead or wished we were--so why not savor every moment--even and especially if it was the last one.

The adrenaline rush and brassy taste in my mouth reminded me of the AAU high hurdles finals at Madison Square Garden in 63. "How did this uncommonly lucky piney woods child

ever get here?"

C-123s don't land slow and solid like Helios, Porters, and Caribous. They require a lot of speed and the blood colored red clay strip is rushing towards us. We hurtle over the leading edge and flair out. Waiting-waiting-waiting-for our wheels to touch dirt. No luck! Full Power! Go around!

The two big engines immediately respond with an ear damaging roar and our too fat, dirty and ancient old lady wobbles and struggles to save our scared butts one more time. Like Cheyenne Ghost Dancers, the hills at the northwest end of the strip are beckoning, "come home son-come home".

Not today! Our so sweet darling gains a few knots of speed and almost jumps out of the valley. "Good plane! Good plane! Let's go home!"

But no! Bob Hunt is a pilot's pilot, and accepting defeat grates deeply into his ego and standing among his peers. We do it again--and then another time before all our nerves are shot and he declares sincerely and defiantly: "Nobody can land a 123 on that !?!?! strip. Let's go home." "10-4."

The long flight back to VTE was depressing and seemed to take forever. Nobody talking. Failure of mission was an insult to all us AAM people.

Chief pilot Fred Walker was waiting on the ramp. Irritated and P'oed. "Refuel her--we're going back." He had the courtesy to take Bob for a walk away from us while they heatedly discussed the aborted landings.

Now, I didn't know Fred at all, had never flown with him, and didn't cotton to the idea of trying that landing again with an angry pilot.

Rots of ruck! We headed back with full tanks. Make a great fireworks show for the troops at Na Khang. It was close to the Chinese New Year anyhow.

Fred took the left seat and Bob the right. Our copilot was most relieved to grab his gear and sit this dance out. And me!? Heck; as a smokejumper, I had jumped from five bases to some pretty hairy jump spots--or substitutes therefor. This was just another jump and it was really beginning to get interesting --very interesting. Who wants to get bored to death?

Our flight back to 36 seems to go much faster. Ritaville Ridge 20, 20A, the big new runway at L-108 (Muong Soui), bend around the PDJ and start descending.

Beautiful beautiful country. A good day to be alive. Fred and Bob don't talk at all. Individual worlds--and thoughts. I'm standing right behind them--interested--very interested. We come straight in and low over 36, take a mandatory look at the runway, and-go right by the book. Flaps down, gear down, pins in--SOP.

Fred cuts most of the -power as we come in over the mountain and begins our controlled fall out of the sky--with one big difference. No plan or thought of a go around! He knew the exact length of the runway (2,265' x 130') and the full capability and requirements of the 123--and trusted the numbers. No sweat!

He greased the touchdown in the first couple hundred feet, reversed props, and when the dust settled, we still had plenty of runway left. Impressive! No gloating--nothing said out of line to Bob. One super fine pilot, teacher and supervisor. The complete package. Message delivered and received--professionally!

The take off was anticlimatic, and the trip home as boring as usual. Another ten hour day in SEA.