

346th TROOP CARRIER SQUADRON

MISSION

LINEAGE

346th Troop Carrier Squadron
Activated, 8 Oct 1956

STATIONS

Sewart AFB, TN
Pope AFB, NC, 14 Jul 1958-1 Apr 1963
Dyess AFB, TX, 1 Apr 1963-15 Mar 1969

ASSIGNMENTS

WEAPON SYSTEMS

COMMANDERS

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

The Mule Train deployment order followed by two days McNamara's final decision to relocate the C-123. By Operation Order 19-6, December 6, 1961, TAG directed the 464th Wing to send a

C-123 squadron of sixteen aircraft with its support personnel for 120 days temporary duty in the Far East. Airmen and officers at Pope had already learned of the impending move at a general meeting addressed by Col. William T. Daly and by Lt. Col. Floyd K. Shofner, commanders respectively of the 464th Wing and the 346th Troop Carrier Squadron. The operation was labeled "a classified training exercise to Clark Air Base," but most individuals surmised that Southeast Asia was to be their ultimate destination. The 346th Squadron, probably the wing's most competent squadron, was chosen for the venture along with sufficient support personnel to operate "as a tactical airlift force." Squadron personnel who were not eligible or not qualified for the operation were replaced by individuals from other wing units. In addition, aircrew loadmasters, previously assigned to aerial port squadrons, were shifted to the 346th. In all, 243 persons were to be sent.

Preparations were hasty, since the first eight aircraft were scheduled to depart on December 10. During their final days at Pope, the aircrews planned the overseas flights and attended lectures on survival, long-range cruise control, and the operation of the newly installed auxiliary fuel and oil tanks. Each aircraft was flown on a seven-hour long-range test mission. And each crew underwent a proficiency check flight. Crewmen felt this was unnecessary, since all of them had been previously judged "combat ready." Finally, fifty-six tons of equipment were prepared for Military Air Transport Service airlift to the Far East.

Final briefing for the movement was held on Saturday, December 9. After a twenty-four-hour delay caused by poor weather, the first eight aircraft led by Colonel Shofner left Pope. The second group, although scheduled to take off a day later, remained at Pope over the Christmas holidays and departed on January 2. This flight was led by the squadron operations officer, Maj. Wayne J. Witherington. The first eight planes arrived at Clark a week later. The Pacific crossing was fatiguing but uneventful, with landings at Hickam, Wake, and Guam. The aircraft flew in loose formations of three, minimizing the chance for error by navigators more accustomed to a different kind of flying. Newly installed loran sets provided regular lines of position which, when combined with sun observations, gave accurate fixes. Overall the ferry operations were safe, if slow, and set the pattern for future C-123 transoceanic flights.

The first group of C-123s remained at Clark for two weeks. The aircrews recuperated from the long Pacific flight and attended intelligence and theater operations briefings given by the Thirteenth Air Force staff. On December 30, four ships were ordered to Vietnam and their crews made final preparations. Three days later, led by Colonel Shofner, the planes were flown to Tan Son Nhut. The crews arrived without ceremony and, finding no arrangement for billeting, made their ways to downtown Saigon hotels. The C-123s began airlift operations on January 3, 1962."

Defining how the Mule Train force was to be used, American officials emphasized tactical applications over logistical. Mule Train's primary mission, according to an early Pacific Air Forces concept, and reflected thereafter in Air Staff memoranda, was to provide "tactical airlift support of South Vietnamese armed forces." A secondary mission was to perform airlift logistical support for 2d Air Division advanced echelon activities in Southeast Asia. Specific tasks

designated by Pacific Air Forces included troop drops, assault landings, supply drops, aeromedical evacuation, and air resupply, in that order. Adm. Harry D. Felt, USN, Commander in Chief, Pacific Command, told Secretary McNamara during a mid-December 1961 conference in Hawaii that the C-123s would be used in combat support roles, as opposed to routine transportation services; McNamara explicitly approved these roles. Army Chief of Staff General Decker, in Senate hearings on January 26, 1962, stated that American airlift forces were in Vietnam to provide tactical mobility for Vietnamese ground forces.

Proposals for operating the C 123s from Clark or for apportioning the aircraft among the regional senior advisors in Vietnam quickly led to the development of a concept of centralized countrywide control. On December 28, 1961, a team of 315th Air Division officers arrived at Tan Son Nhut, for the purpose of developing a plan for introducing the Mule Train force. Col. Lopez J. Mantoux, deputy commander of the division, soon joined the group to provide overall guidance. As airlift specialists, the officers of the 315th understood the need for aerial port and mission control systems for any sustained operation, but this need was overshadowed by the emphasis on tactical employment and by the immediate question of how to handle the C-123 entry. The team recommended introduction of twelve aircraft during January and a daily commitment of six, each to be utilized for four flying hours. A route structure and an all-weather capability would be gradually developed as the aircrews gained familiarity with operating conditions. Consistent with AFM 1 9, the team recommended creation of a joint agency to allocate airlift priorities, anticipating that tactical missions would in all cases receive the highest priority. Personnel from the 315th Air Division, on January 2, 1962, formed the airlift branch of the Vietnamese Air Force/2d ADVON joint operations center at Tan Son Nhut and thereafter undertook to manage C-123 daily mission activity.

Early missions were almost entirely logistical. Cargo usually consisted of foodstuffs and relatively small items. Wheeled loads, such as jeeps and power generators, were commonly carried; helicopter rotor blades and other materiel were frequently hauled between Saigon and Qui Nhon in support of the U.S. Army helicopter company at the latter location. Personnel lifts supported the installation of Air Force radar and communications equipment for the tactical air control system (TAGS). No training or advisory role existed, and there was no rule requiring Vietnamese personnel on board. The C-123s were marked with American insignia, and the

and wasteful delays. It therefore seemed equally safe and far more convenient to fly under visual flight rules, whereby the crew was responsible for its own traffic clearance. When cloud penetration was unavoidable, the recently installed TACS radars at Saigon, Da Nang, and Pleiku provided informal traffic advisory assistance. The C-123 crews quickly became accustomed to visual flying techniques long practiced by the Vietnamese the spiraling climb or descent through a break in an overcast, the cruise either just above or just below a cloud layer, the visual approach and landing in conditions of marginal visibility. All crew members joined in looking out for other aircraft. These methods, strange to airmen accustomed to rigid instrument procedures, continued to characterize troop carrier operations in Vietnam throughout the next decade.

Vietnamese controllers, using VHP and UHF radio communications regulated takeoffs and landings at the major fields. Most of the controllers spoke English, although their transmissions often had to be repeated, either by a tower operator or by a C 123 copilot. The system was generally satisfactory, except when traffic became particularly heavy, then American controllers joined the Vietnamese, especially at the often saturated Tan Son Nhut tower. Navigation facilities gradually improved with the installation of omnidirectional radio stations at Da Nang and Nha Trang, and tactical air navigation stations at Tan Son Nhut, Pleiku, and Da Nang. Precision ground controlled approach equipment for instrument landing approaches was placed in operation at Tan Son Nhut, and later at Soc Trang, Vung Tau, and Da Nang.

A dozen hard-surface airfields became the nucleus for the Mule Train route structure. These were generally located about main population centers and military bases, and had been used by the C 47s of Air Vietnam and the Vietnamese Air Force. C-123 scheduled passenger runs and military logistics missions linked Da Nang, Tan Son Nhut, Nha Trang, Bien Hoa, Pleiku, Ban Me Thuot, Hue, Da Lat, Soc Trang, Qui Nhon, and Vung Tau, and virtually every Mule Train sortie took off or landed at one of these airfields. These air stations made up a chain of primary fields, affording an adequate skeleton for a countrywide airlift system. Coverage was least satisfactory in the Mekong Delta country in the south, where soft ground made construction difficult.

Aircrews generally flew about three of every four days. Their itineraries allowed the aircraft to return to Tan Son Nhut by nightfall. Aircrews made every effort to return to Saigon each evening, since sleeping and messing facilities elsewhere were rare. Mechanical breakdowns away from Tan Son Nhut were infrequent; a stranded crew needing maintenance assistance usually got word back to Mule Train operations through another aircraft or by land telephone. A crew flew the prescribed itinerary, checking in with the control towers where these existed, but flight following and close mission control from Tan Son Nhut were nearly impossible.

Communications problems became vexing when a crew could find no cargo for pickup after landing at the specified airfield. To retrace the situation by land telephone through the joint operations center consumed many hours of valuable crew and aircraft time.¹⁰ Another concern was the underuse of cargo space. The Mule Train squadron hauled 1,996 tons of passengers and cargo during 921 sorties in February and March, an average of a little better than two tons per sortie, compared with the aircraft capacity of five or six tons. Several factors explained the low usage figures, including the difficulty of making available large cargo loads for the smaller locations and the lack of backhaul cargo at many points. Nevertheless, in order to raise the allowable maximum payload of the C-123s, some two thousand pounds of unnecessary gear, including heaters and anti-icing accumulators, were removed from the aircraft in April. Restrictions were temporarily imposed reducing takeoff margins for the sake of heavier payloads. Colonel Shofner warned against this trend, judging that "eventually equipment would falter and an accident would result."

Another measure to increase the overall airlift capacity followed the February crash of a Ranch Hand spray C-123 and the consequent decision to halt defoliation operations. Two Ranch Hand aircraft and their crews returned to the United States and were replaced by airlift C-123s and

crews, thus increasing the size of the Mule Train force to eighteen. Spray equipment was removed from the several remaining Ranch Hand planes, allowing their use for airlift work.¹⁸ The use of the aerial spray crews in airlift work, was not successful. The original Mule Train squadron (the 346th) was a highly skilled group and had received a Tactical Air Command flying safety award for accident-free flying during 1961.

aircrews wore military clothing. The four aircraft and their crews at Tan Son Nhut were joined on January 2 by two additional ships and aircrews weekly until the desired strength of twelve was reached late in the month. During January, Mule Train aircraft flew a total of 548 hours, without accident or hazardous incident. No mission was canceled for lack of ready aircraft. During February, operations settled into a routine whereby seven ships flew daily missions of approximately four flying hours in length. Two aircraft and crews (with maintenance personnel) were positioned at Da Nang for operations in the northern region. Four were rotated to Clark for major maintenance. Briefing the Chief of Staff in March, the Air Staff reported that the early performance of the Mule Train unit had "exceeded expectations."

The Mule Train squadron encountered essentially the same operating problems faced by the Vietnamese and American C-47 crews. There was no lavish apparatus of ground radar, navigation aids, communications, and instrument approach facilities such as the airmen in the United States were used to. A dozen low frequency radio beacons located at the major airfields gave some navigational assistance, but the Americans considered the signals too unreliable for instrument landing approaches. Attempts to obtain instrument clearances usually led to communications troubles

aircraft had been so much as scratched in Vietnam. By contrast, although many of the Ranch Hand people originally came from the 464th Wing, the skills demanded for spray tasks were different from those needed for tactical airlift. On April 20, 1962, a Ranch Hand aircraft and crew took off from Da Nang on a cargo-haul sortie to Dong Ha, near the demilitarized zone. Thirty miles from their destination, with good ceiling and visibility, the crew spotted an 1,100-foot north-south airstrip northwest of Hue and misidentified it as the Dong Ha 3,900-foot east-west runway. No navigator was aboard and available maps of the area were poor, but the mistake was unjustifiable. The pilot managed to land successfully, but quickly became apprehensive as a crowd began to congregate about the aircraft. He then attempted a downwind takeoff, but the ship failed to get off the ground. Although the crew escaped from the crash with no serious injuries, the plane was demolished.

Air Force Order of Battle
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Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.