

OPERATION TIGHT REIGN

The Story of the Strategic Loran C Chain In Southeast Asia 1965 – 1966



Publication Notes:

This unofficial publication is the product of (then) Captain Tom Sargent, LCDR Ron Stenzel and LT Don Aites. The documents and images are from the files and memories of the above officers.

VADM Sargent recently updated and edited his written synopsis and Captain Don Aites provided the incentive to supply all the information to the USCG Aviation History Repository in response to a solicitation in the recent Pterogram published by the Ancient Order of the Pterodactyl.

I have simply formatted the information into a historical scenario for your edification and enjoyment.

This story is really a study in "getting things done" if you don't worry about all of the latent possibilities of failure and just say "Sorry About That" and get on with it!

The AOP USCG Aviation History Committee hopes that you enjoy this short publication about a special event in Coast Guard Aviation.

Gib Brown
Commander, USCG (Ret)
Web Master
<http://uscgaviationhistory.aoptero.org>

Since publishing this Tight Reign publication, I have been contacted by Chuck Zanti, a former Coast Guard Electronics Technician, who had been stationed at Con Son Loran station. He created the document and supplied the photographs contained therein. I have opted to add his document to the story so that you, the reader, may better understand the conditions of the time in the 1965-1966 time frame.

Gib Brown
Commander, USCG (Ret)
Web Master
<http://uscgaviationhistory.aoptero.org>

OPERATION TIGHT REIGN

BY

Vice Admiral Tom Sargent

LORAN-C VIET NAM

A Model of Cooperation, Dedication and Teamwork

It was March 1965 and I was Chief, Civil Engineering Division, Coast Guard Headquarters, anticipating being transferred within the year. I had been wearing two hats – Chief, Civil Engineering Division and Civil Engineering Liaison for Loran-C. RADM John Oren, Chief, Office of Engineering, called a meeting in his office, closed the door and emphatically stated that this meeting was top secret. It seems that, at a meeting in the Pentagon, the Air Force had asked the Coast Guard whether Loran-C could be used over land and, if so, what accuracy could be attained. The electronic engineers had investigated and had informed the Air Force that a short based Loran-C system could be installed in Southeast Asia for use in bombing and search and rescue sorties. As usual, the engineers had done such a great job in describing the capabilities of the system that the Air Force enthusiastically requested the system be installed. The only problems were the funding, the availability of the personnel to do the job and the timetable for on-air operation. The Air Force had no funds and the operational on-air time was August 1966! When I asked who the lucky officer would be to lead such a project, RADM Oren just said, "Guess who – you!!".

Back in my office, I called a strategy meeting with Captain James Moreau (my deputy) and with my counterpart in Electronics Engineering Division and we set up a preliminary site survey group consisting of CDR William Fearn (Ops) and CDR Carl S. Mathews, electronics, to be on call with passports and shots completed. We also selected CDR Harold Brock, civil engineer, and CDR Maynard Fontaine, electronics engineer, to be the designers and on-site developers of the stations. Due to the importance and short time frame, both of these engineers spent all of their spare time (including weekends) on the project. To assure success, pick the best people!

At an April meeting at the Pentagon, I requested the status of funding and I was told that the Air Force had no funds. It was then that I suggested that the Navy be approached on transferring funds (already be appropriated for a European Loran chain which was now not required) to the Tight Reign Project. The Air Force jumped at the prospect and started the necessary paperwork.

However, the wheels of fund management turn very slowly and summer passed with no action. We again asked the Air Force at another meeting about the funding and we were told that they were close to agreement and the Loran installation was essential ... but the on-air time could not be changed. I took a deep breath and stated that the Coast Guard had available some unused Loran administrative funds for a preliminary site survey to obtain sites if the Coast Guard Commandant concurred. Our Comptroller agreed as long as it was being used for a Loran project. Therefore, I gathered our preliminary survey group (which was augmented by an Air Force liaison officer by the name of LCOL Harper) and we departed the USA the week after Thanksgiving. We stopped in Honolulu to brief RADM Theodore Fabik and a selected few officers on the project and then proceeded to Bangkok, Thailand, since two of the stations would be in that country.

Commander, Military Assistance Command, Thailand, (COMUSMACTHAI) did a masterful job of arranging for our arrival – we had transportation and hotel accommodations. Having arrived on Sunday, we cased the city of Bangkok, lined up possible transportation systems and checked the availability of other means

of transportation. On Monday we went to the offices of COMUSMACTHAI where I met with BrigGen Richard Stillwell, we outlined our project and requested assistance which was quickly given. I split the group with Fern and Mathews to find sites in Thailand and Col Harper and I went to Saigon, called on the resident Naval Civil Engineer and the Army Engineers and then got a flight to Con Son Island where we found a site near the airstrip. We called on the island commander who stated that he could provide interpreters and laborers at a minimum wage. We accepted his offer. I released Col Harper in Saigon and traveled to Bangkok. Upon arrival, I had a message that the funds for construction were just about cleared – I replied that we were leaving for the USA on 13 December and to start assembling personnel for possible departure in early January. Thus the stage was set for the execution of the project and it was evident, from what had transpired up to this time, that the Coast Guard would have to be innovative, inventive and have maximum cooperation to get this project done on time!

Just a word about people – as Commander, TIGHT REIGN Project, I required a good finance officer. The first to apply was CWO Baker Herbert who came to my office in Headquarters for interview. From the outset, he was impressive and when I stated that people were known to be hurt in Vietnam and he was a father and a husband, he stated "If you go, I go." I told him to get an appointment as a contracting officer and certifying officer and to get \$25,000 in five thousand dollar checks and report back. Within two hours he was back in my office with a brief case handcuffed to his wrist saying "When do we depart"! Commanders Harold Brock and Ned Fontaine were the spark plugs and were always fired up and ready. They did design work on their own time, they were determined and inspired all those associated with the project to do the same.

The organization was set up as follows:

Commander, TIGHT REIGN Project - Captain Thomas R. Sargent, III
Commander, Coast Guard Construction Detachment – CDR. Harold R. Brock
Executive Officer (Electronics) – LCDR Maynard J. Fontaine
Contracting Officer (Officer Manager) CHSPCK Baker W. Herbert

On Site Civil Engineers:

LCDR Arthur E. Gerken
LCDR Daniel E. Olson
LCDR Raymond E. Womack
LCDR Gilbert L. Aumon
LT Everett L. Cromwell
LT William M. Devereau
Lt(jg) Algie Pulley

Enlisted Personnel:

Irving Goldstein
George Purdy
D. G. Fentzlaff
M. R. Niles
R. T. Truex
F. P. Jones

I departed USA on 11 January with Baker Herbert and all the civil engineers for Bangkok. Upon arrival, we reported to COMUSMACTHAI to obtain office space but we were told that none would be available for one year. I looked at Baker Herbert with his briefcase full of American checks and said –"Baker, get us a couple of offices with, for starters, two desks, three chairs and a telephone." The real estate officer, LCOL Whitten actually laughed and said "Impossible"!!! Baker departed and three hours later called on the telephone stating – "I'm using our telephone at our offices at the Bangkok Bank Building – fifth floor – the desks and chairs will be in tomorrow. From then on, we had the Army's total support.

Later we opened a checking account at the bank (paid our lease from that account) and awaited the arrival of Harold Brock, Ned Fontaine and our enlisted personnel. In the interim, we established liaison with the Embassy (they had a Navy C-47 with a Navy pilot who was a gungho type and ready to fly anywhere). All the Armed Forces were very supportive. I discovered that BrigGen Stillwell graduated from West Point the same year I graduated from the Coast Guard Academy and, in addition, he had an airplane which he generously let me use from time to time.

We obtained land in Sattahip and in Lampang and everyone worked seven days per week on surveys and site development. At one time, Baker Herbert made a trip to Lampang on 27 February but had not returned by 1600. Lt(jg) Algie Pulley and I went to JUSMAG and discovered that the plane was overdue. It finally landed at 2000 having been lost, landed at an unauthorized field for fuel which Baker purchased with a Coast Guard credit card, and finally found their way back to Bangkok.

On 13 March, I left Thailand to push the transportation of construction and electronics material from the USA. We leased a ship (S.S. MAYO LYKES) for the transportation of our material just to be sure that there would be no delays on the way to SE Asia. I requested of the Master that he use Amvers to report his position each day so we could coordinate his arrival with our lease of the railroad from

Bangkok to Sattahip and Lampang. I also discovered that our checking account was illegal and could only be authorized by Secretary of the Treasury – we obtained that authority. CDR Brock could see a great transportation problem occurring. In country suitable aircraft were not available at an “on call” basis.



As material started to arrive and the site developments progressed, the transportation of civilian workers became a great problem and of great concern. Any delays could jeopardize the completion date and the Air Force was still insistent that the on air date remain firm. As always, the best people to call are other Coast Guard personnel. Consequently, we asked for Coast Guard assistance from our ever-reliable aviation organization. Through the magnificent performance of LCDR Ronald D. Stenzel and outstanding crew and the “flying rock”, known as a C-123B, the stations were on the air on time!! Without the assistance of this intrepid group, the “on-air” time would not have been possible. Their performance was crucial to the success of the project!!!!

Crew: L to R Back—AD2 D. D. Martin, AO1 R. A. Murphy, AT3 O. O'Neil, LCDR Ron Stenzel, LT Don Aites Front—AM1 R. L. Powers, Mr. Chom, AE2 J. R. Ryan, AD1 R. M. Adams

In July 1965, I was transferred to 11th Coast Guard District in Long Beach, California. I was happy to leave Headquarters but I was disappointed in not being able to finish the Tight Reign job. However, prior to leaving Washington, I was required to give Jim Moreau my itinerary. At my niece's home in Alabama, Jim called me with the news that, upon arrival in Long Beach, I was to immediately depart for Bangkok. I departed Long Beach about 3 August and, after arrival in Bangkok, discovered that a few transfer difficulties had occurred between the Construction Detachment and Commander, SE Asia Section which was about to be formed. Those difficulties were resolved and I departed on about 30 August after visiting all the stations. Prior to my departure, RADM George Synon, Commander 14th Coast Guard District visited and I briefed him on all facets of the project.

All stations went on-air on time!!

This dissertation is a part of the outstanding review of the C-123 support given to the Tight Reign Project by CDR Ronald D. Stenzel. All those involved in this project should be justly proud – it demonstrated what can be done by dedicated, enthusiastic, cooperative people. The Loran-C system saved many lives and facilitated navigation over wild and dangerous country.

PROJECT TIGHT REIGN C-123 FLIGHT SUPPORT

BY

CDR RON STENZEL

This is my memory of what happened during the early stages of the Vietnam police action when I was stationed at USCG Air Station Guam for a two year tour. In June of 1966, I was selected to lead an absolutely great crew to take C-123, Coast Guard number 4705, on Temporary Additional Duty to Bangkok, Thailand to assist in the construction of LORAN stations in Thailand and Vietnam. The project was called Tight Reign.

This writing will reflect not only the normal facts of the trip as I remember them, but also the things that happened outside the ups and downs of flying. My keen observations are not helped by age, but are helped by a diary I kept of our first few days. There are points where the diary is far more descriptive than what I will insert into this narrative.



For those of you not familiar with the C-123B, it started life as a heavy assault glider designed by Chase Aircraft Company. Later they added engines. Nice big R2800-99W engines that consumed lots of gasoline. The only problem was that the aircraft was designed as a glider, and gliders do not need fuel tanks. Thus, when they added the engines they had to add fuel tanks – and they were all added externally. To my knowledge, this is the only twin engine aircraft in military service where you can drop all of its fuel tanks on purpose. No fuel tanks in the wings. There are only the main tanks located directly behind the engines and the outboard drop tanks, any or all of which can depart the aircraft with the flip of a cockpit switch.

Before I start the stories I want to thank the wonderful crew we had with this plane. Without their untiring dedication to keep this one plane flying almost every day we could not have accomplished our missions. Hats off to you. Thank you!

Initial flight crew was LCDR. Ronald Stenzel, LT. Donald Aites, LT. Jim Webb, AMC Bob Powers, AD1 Robert "Ace" Adams,

AE2 Jim Ryan, ASM1 Richard "Pat" Murphy, AD2 Denzil Martin, and AT3 Owen "Skip" O'Neill.

Don Aites and I were aircraft commanders and Jim Webb was assigned from Barbers Point to be our third pilot. After Jim arrived at Guam he was trained for three days including a trip to the tiny atoll of Ulithi. He was good, didn't crash and didn't ask to go back to Barbers Point, so Jim was officially designated as a copilot for the C-123B.

Upon receiving orders to proceed to Bangkok to be a part of the Tight Reign operation we were wondering how best to take our powered glider into an area I don't believe had been flown by a USCG crew. Thus began our systematic search for something different.



CDR (then LT)
Jim Webb (Deceased)

You have to remember this was in June of 1966. There were still marching, fighting and drinking songs around from WWII, and one of those songs had the lyrics "the monkeys have no tails in Zamboanga". Don and I had been to the Philippines on a couple occasions to have our trusty C-123's hand washed and hand Simonized – but those are other stories. Anyway, we knew Zamboanga was on the western tip of the island of Mindanao so that is where we planned to fly. We wanted to check out those monkeys.

Good try, but the calmer heads in the Philippines decided our orange nosed glider with engines should go the normal route through Manila. Thus our planning continued, and we were rewarded with clearance to begin our trip.

A couple days later, June 6, 1966, our merry band departed Guam, by way of Yap Island, for Coast Guard Air Station Sangley Point, located on the Naval Air Station just outside Manila, Philippines. My diary indicates we had a liberal intake of fluids to stave off the heat of the evening while in the Philippines. Next morning we departed for the airport at Labuan which is located off the northern coast of Borneo near the Sultanate of Brunei. There we were greeted warmly by the Royal Air Force. Being on a rather isolated island with little else to do they appeared to have this ritual about visiting aircraft. Especially aircraft with an American star in a big white circle on the port side, which they believed needed enhancing. When we exited the plane from the front hatch there was a pleasant RAF officer to greet us. Glancing to our left we noticed an RAF aircraft tug was already parked along the port side of our plane with a gentleman(?) on the hood (bonnet) quickly placing a very large, fluorescent orange "shiter hawk" slightly off center, but close to the middle of the white star. I must say the white star certainly did look different. I'll let you think of the American name for the hawk. However, we all laughed, refueled, decided the blokes needed to get off the island, and let the RAF hawk stay with us.

From Labuan we proceeded to Singapore where we landed at Changi airport. Jim Webb had been having trouble with his ear since leaving Manila, and by the time we reached Singapore it was obvious he needed medical assistance. My diary states we went to the RAF hospital, which was spotless, where Jim was treated well and released.

Changi was another RAF airfield, which was nearby the infamous Changi prison. Ten years later I moved to Singapore while working for an American company, and lived there for nine years. I heard many tales and reports about Changi prison both during the war and afterward. The book "King Rat" was based on a story at Changi during WWII. Singapore in 1966 was exactly as you might picture such a place at that era. You expected a Humphrey Bogart character to stroll out of the bar. The hotel where we stayed was brand new. As I recall it really wasn't quite finished, but we only stayed for the night, and the shower was wonderful after a long sweaty day coming from Manila. As an aside, I watched that same new hotel be demolished 15 years later to make way for a newer hotel.



June 8 we arrived in Bangkok, and checked in at the Victory Hotel. To us, Bangkok was hot, smelly, noisy and a long ride from the airport to downtown. Having been to Bangkok countless times a decade later the city didn't change much, except the traffic became worse, I rather enjoyed the smells, and I could stay at a much nicer hotel.

The next day we reported to the U. S. Coast Guard Construction Detachment for a briefing. Commander Harold Brock had been involved with the project from inception, and was responsible while we were in Bangkok. He and his staff were

wonderful to us. (We later learned that the overall officer-in-charge of the project was Captain Tom Sargent. We never met him because he was off in the States attending to important details. His account

of the project leads the story so you can have a better appreciation for the mission urgency that was involved.)

The day after our briefing, June 10, was our first flight. We had a bunch of the Construction Detachment engineers and staff on board for their first trip in our C-123. Our crew was ready to show their stuff, and so were we. The propellers were lined up, the inside clean and the seats ready.

Something a little weird had happened at each stage of the trip just getting to Bangkok so there was no reason to change now. With the local staff firmly belted in our trusty steed we were leaving the military side of the Bangkok airport heading for Nakon Phenom (NKP) which is still in Thailand, but at the border of Laos.

The weird happening this time was that the controls locked on take off. Because of the huge elevator and tail on the C-123 the designers built in a control lock that locks the elevator and rudder when you put the throttles into reverse. I swear I did not put the engines in reverse during take off. Without going into details about how the elevator and rudder being locked affects the flying capabilities of an aircraft, let's just say we took off and returned safely to the airport. Our hard working crew spent six hours on the controls before we could once again start on our first planned flight. But there was more to come.

Arriving at NKP we were cleared to land. I looked at the runway and thought, boy this is going to be fun. The regular civil engineers hadn't quite made it this far. Our destination runway was PSP – Pierced Steel Planking. Which means it was just pieces of metal with multiple holes in each piece for weight reduction. The pieces were loosely hooked together, and when you landed on them they rattled and banged like an automobile engine when the timing chain breaks – only a thousand times louder. There was never any doubt when the wheels touched down on PSP. No matter how you greased that sucker on the runway the loose pieces of metal jumping around like a bunch of rap artists let you know you had arrived. Unfortunately our first time guest engineers and staff from the Construction Detachment had no idea what was about to happen. Then again there was nothing they could do but stay belted into their seats. The landing was gentle, but very noisy.

The USAF personnel were great to us. This was the home of the FAC (Forward Air Controllers) as well as the Air Commando unit. The FAC's were flying some little plane spotting for the big guys hitting the Ho Chi Min trail. As for Air Commando lads, they were flying H3's painted black with this tiny American bar and star logo on the side. Our "Shiter Hawk" was as big as their entire insignia.

Our arrival orientation to NKP was brief. "The BOQ is over there and the O'Club bar is over here. And by the way, here are the bomb shelters (big holes in the ground surrounded and topped by sand bags), but if we get raided don't go in there. That's where the cobras sleep." I was convinced the bar would be safer than the bomb shelter. Not sure that turned out to be true. The rousing briefing called for a round of drinks at the club. We started about 1700 that night. Sometime later the lights went out, but no one went to the cobra pit for protection. I'll leave out the details as to how the following happened, but you might be able to fill them in yourself.

Here we were flying around Southeast Asia in a big orange and white C-123 wearing the standard Navy issue bright orange flight suits which made us look rather like the local monks. The orange flight suit theory being that if we crashed we would be easy to spot. The USAF pilots, on the other hand, were all flying in black airplanes and helicopters wearing dark green flight suits so they would not be seen if they crashed. In the midst of our camaraderie at the bar with fellow pilots (okay, we were aviators and they were pilots), I became acquainted with Air Force Captain Fred E. Blum. Fred decided he wanted my orange flight suit, and I must have thought it would be fun to have a green one. So we swapped flight suits right at the bar. I know this happened because I woke up the next morning with a green flight suit, and somehow had the ability to even insert the event into my diary. Don and Jim confirmed the flight suit swapping, and I knew they wouldn't lie to me. So it must have really occurred.

Lt. Colonel Howarth was number two in command of the Air Commando folks. Somehow, no one seems to remember exactly how, I also became acquainted with him during the evening, and he promised me an Air Commando patch. Next morning as we were trying to walk straight and level to our plane I spotted LtCol. Howarth, and asked him about the patch. He had someone take it from his flight suit, and I put it on my green one. You will note the Air Commando patch on my green flight suit in the picture of our crew.

That was a long evening, but well remembered.

After that trip we started the routine flights carrying the engineers, etc. to various places. Never did ask what they wanted at all the USAF places, and they never said. It was simply a "You call, we haul" arrangement, which was fine with us.

Udorn, Udang, Lampang, Sattahip, Nakon Phenom in Thailand and Con Son in Vietnam. We had been directed by CCGD14 (Commander, Coast Guard District 14 to the non-Coasties) not to land at any other airport in Vietnam. They were concerned that the USAF would confiscate our C-123 for their use. Not sure why the USAF would want another C-123. Especially one painted bright colors with a glorious orange hawk in the center of the star. We obeyed orders, and didn't land anywhere in Vietnam except the island with the political prison known as the Tiger Caves, at Con Son.

Rather early on in our deployment the crew somehow decided they wanted to add an extra touch to the plane. The Shiter Hawk wasn't enough. Thus they came up with the idea of painting something on the drop tanks. During this period of time there was a saying by the troops in Vietnam. If an artillery shell hit somewhere other than the target, or a bomb missed by a mile or so the troops said "Sorry about that." It was the tag line of the era. (See the previous photo.)



This is what they wanted to put on the drop tanks, but written in Thai. None of us spoke Thai, so we had to rely on the truthfulness of local beverage hawkers, ramp sweepers, curious kids and the guy painting the tanks. I finally gave permission, and the saying was painted on the tanks rather quickly. From that day forward we were noticed even more

than normal. We parked at the commercial airport in Bangkok, but not on the commercial side. Our orange and white beauty, complete with a hawk and Thai writing, was on the military side which was on the opposite side of the runway from the commercial terminal. Many times after we landed we had to taxi by the commercial terminal where a balcony allowed the waiting civilian travelers to look at the airfield. Every time we taxied by the terminal you could see the people on the balcony pointing and laughing in our direction. I always hoped the sign painter told us correctly what the drop tanks had written on them. Later I, and others, confirmed the writing was what they said. "Sorry about that" lack of confidence.

One side note about our residence. The pilots moved from the Victory Hotel into an apartment building where other CG officers and their wives lived. We were told the apartment building is where the internationally infamous murderer, the Jackal, had lived while in Bangkok.

For the most part the trips were routine. We would fly the engineers someplace, and then sit around by the plane until they returned. In the meantime we watched the fighters from various bases in Thailand take off and return from their missions. I have pictures of F104's, F4's etc. taking to the air.



Some of the bases had Air America flights. Those were interesting to watch. It was just like the movie "Air America", except this was real. I remember watching the crew go to their plane which was often parked near us. A man would emerge from a truck with a big canvas bag. Each crew member would put all of their valuables and identification into the bag, and then board the plane.

In one instance they were flying a DC3. The crew put their items into the bag and boarded the plane. While taxiing out to the runway the crewman in the rear was just standing up and leaning against the large opened cargo door on the side. A few minutes later the plane took off, and that guy was still there leaning against the rear side of the cargo door as though he were at home looking over the south forty from his porch.

When the flight crews returned less than an hour later the man with the bag would be there to greet them so they could grab their belongings and return to their regular identity.



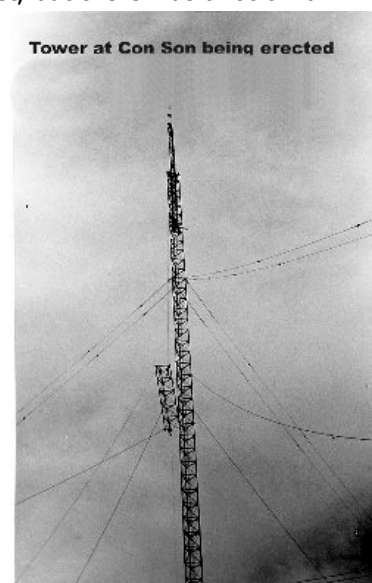
Our first trip to Con Son was on June 12. We couldn't contact any USA folks while transiting southern Vietnam, but we made it fine. Although the weather was predicted to be good at Con Son when we arrived the wind was blowing over the big hill and around two smaller hills that surrounded the miniature runway on the island. Again we had our load of engineers and supplies for building the LORAN station. I must confess I used a little more flaps than was necessary, even for the short runway, but this was our first landing and that runway looked very small. According to my diary I was using 2600 RPM and 46" of MAP (that's manifold pressure to you jet jockeys) for the

approach. The landing was, naturally, a wonderfully smooth operation that was hardly felt. I had another landing at Con Son that was slightly less smooth. More about that later.

Don Aites was flying on the return trip when we ran into a lot of rainy weather. The C-123 is not a water tight aircraft. Indeed it leaked especially bad around the large air intake for the heater mounted atop the fuselage. Unfortunately for our passengers, they sat directly beneath that intake. Not only were we bouncing around in the midst of the usual cumulus clouds at about 7000 feet, but there was a lot of rain in those clouds. The rain saw a place to rest, which happened to be the heater air intake of our plane. However, there was nothing to prevent the rain from entering the cargo space. Basically the rain just ran through the intake and heater. I looked back one time and our crew had put the passengers under a tarp with the water pouring down inside the plane and on the tarp. They looked scared and unsettled, but once again there wasn't a thing they could do but sit and trust us. We needed sump pumps, but the plane had so many regular holes in it the water eventually flowed away.

Things were mainly routine with the plane flying nearly every day, and the enlisted crew performing magnificently. All of the crew would be at the airport for every departure and arrival, and things in general hummed right along. That crew was superb.

I need to step back for a minute so you will understand we were supporting the construction of LORAN (long range aids to navigation) stations from scratch, and, generally, in the middle of nowhere. The most notable part of most stations was a 1056 feet tall antennae. All the bits





Accommodations at Con Son

and pieces were prepackaged in the USA, and placed on ships bound for Thailand or Vietnam. Kudos to Harold Brock and his team for their great attention to detail in the packaging.

Not quite the same kudos to the people manning an LST that was bringing the pieces to Con Son Island, Vietnam. There was no dock at Con Son for the ship to use. However, with the big bow doors she could just shove herself on the beach and off load the items. They forgot just one little thing – a forklift. Yup! There was no way for them to move things around the inside of the ship so they could be offloaded.

Cdr. Brock asked us if we could take a forklift from Sattahip to Con Son. Heck, we could do anything. "Sure boss. We can do that". Where they found the forklift, and how we were allowed to take it out of the country was not for me to ask. I think it belong to the Thai Navy.

So now a little bit about the airport at Sattahip. It really wasn't an airport. Just a runway that was supposed to be 2,300 feet in length, and situated on a semi-used Thai naval station. The first time we landed it was a full flap, let's stop this thing event. A couple trips later it was a 15 degree flap landing with plenty of runway to spare on roll out.

When we arrived at Sattahip to load the fork lift it was apparent we needed to check the weight of this piece of solid steel on wheels. The weight was plainly marked. That's good. At least we didn't have to guess. Then we added up the weight of the plane and the weight of the fork lift. Combined, they weighed a lot.



Way point navigation – no VORs
Just a temple or two.

Don't forget, we were under orders not to land in Vietnam for fuel or anything short of a dead stick, both engines out arrival. Thus we had to take enough fuel from Bangkok to see us through three take offs (Bangkok, Sattahip and Con Son) plus the round trip flight time. After looking at the numbers we all decided we were definitely heavy.

Back to the books. As I recall our normal maximum gross weight was 60,000 pounds or something like that. (my research on the Internet has it up to 70,000 pounds) I remember there was also an alternate max gross weight of something like 65,000 pounds. Whatever the numbers at that time, we calculated that Coast Guard C123B #4705 weighed right at the alternate max gross weight, and we would land on the short runway at Con Son just at the normal max gross weight.

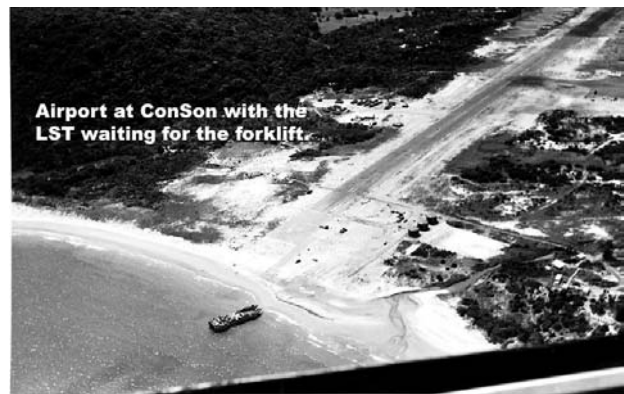
All of this was providing the 2,300 feet of runway at Sattahip was long enough for us to get airborne. Into the books again. Based on the temperature, weight, a blessing from one of the local monks, and if the books were correct we only needed 2,100 feet. Piece of cake – we had 200 feet too much runway. It would take us less than two seconds to cover that distance by the time we were trying to get airborne.

Deciding we could make it I had one of the crewmen guide me as I backed the C-123 so the wheels were right at the touchdown edge of the runway, and the tail sticking over the grass. We had the full 2,300 feet ahead of us. Flaps set to takeoff position. Full brakes. Max power of 2800 RPM and 63" MAP with water injection on. Everything looks good. Release the brakes and away we go – rather like a lively, multi-hued turtle.

We were at 60 knots about the first thousand feet. Great we're going to make this easy! Then the end of the runway kept coming closer, but the airspeed wasn't climbing as rapidly as before. That's okay. Trust the books, and trust our crew that the engines won't belch. Now I'm looking at the point on the runway where we were normally off the ground, except we were still highballing it with the wheels firmly on the runway. Much too late to try and stop. Just keep trusting what we have done.

You know what? The books were right. That trusty 4705 broke ground at 2,100 feet of runway. Those extra two seconds let us leap to an altitude where we almost easily cleared the low bushes at the end of the runway. It was a long slow climb out, but we were safely enroute to Con Son.

While we were struggling to cruise altitude we were deciding how to get rid of the fork lift if we lost one engine. We sure couldn't fly with the fork lift on board. Again, fortune smiled on us and we made it to Con Son just as we reduced our weight to only the normal max gross. I have to confess the landing was sort of an arrival. My biggest concern was getting the thing stopped, but everything worked out fine. The LST got their fork lift and we helped save the day. Hooray for the crew!!!



It's possible you are wondering why we didn't use the 7,500 feet of brand new, concrete runway that was only a few miles from Sattahip. This was a new base in Thailand called U Tapao. Another edict from on high was the reason. Word came to us from the top U. S Army commander that we were not to land on that runway even if we crashed somewhere else. We were told that for political and other reasons, a Thai military plane was to be the first plane to land there. Thus we kept using the 2,300 feet at Sattahip.

I understand, though, that the runway at U Tapao was landed on prior to the official opening, but it wasn't our crew.

There was one trip to Lampang where we took the American workers who would construct the 1,056 feet tall antenna. These were generally big guys who liked to work on towers higher than I liked to fly. I knew the trip to Lampang was going to be interesting when we stopped at their hotel to take them to the airport. We had a couple vehicles for them, but they weren't in any hurry to leave the night life of Bangkok, even though it was early morning. Nice guys, but a little loud and raucous. I don't think they were aviators – they just acted like it. They were eventually herded into the vehicles and then on our plane, and away we went.

However, the ones that were awake needed to roam around. The C-123 does not take kindly to several hundred pound men wandering around from nose to tail. The autopilot is the pilot. So there I was pushing the big elevator trim tab wheel forward then backward as the guys grazed around the plane. Not only were the passengers walking around, but they apparently had to empty their bladders, and not everyone hit the relief tube conveniently positioned near the rear ramp.

Enough was enough. If I couldn't make them sit down we would just have to have turbulence. Find a cloud. Not a cloud in the sky. Okay, next plan. Create our own turbulence. So for the remainder of the

trip we would encounter turbulence every five minutes or so such that the passengers should stay seated and belted.

How wonderful that with rather rapid movements of the yoke we can create a situation where grown men will actually sit down and be quiet – sort of. Our self induced, yoke created turbulence lasted until we landed.

One day Don Aites and Jim Webb arrived at the plane and marveled at its sleek lines. It seemed rather lower slung than normal. Being the intrepid aviator that he is, Don looked in the cargo compartment and noticed a huge piece of metal with a large reel full of steel cable. Someone delivered a big winch for the trip, and the crew, somehow, loaded the thing and had it neatly secured.

There was one small matter. No one had any idea of the weight. There was some indication by the fact the aluminum rollers on which the winch sat were bent and squashed. Other than that the weight was a mystery. After a bit of searching, scratching of heads and astute calculations it was decided no one knew what the plane weighed. The most important thing was that the winch had to be in Con Son or else the tower couldn't be constructed.

Again, the "Can Do" spirit prevailed with all the crew and away they went. The takeoff roll was a bit long, but there was plenty of runway. After arriving at Con Son the weather was reasonable, and Don greased it right on the runway. Mission accomplished – again.

One day Commander Brock asked us if we would do the U. S. Army a favor. "Sure thing boss." The Army wanted us to take some cargo to the British forces in southern Thailand. So on July 14 the crew loaded the cargo, whatever it was, and we headed for Songkhla, Thailand. Over some hills and through the jungle, but we found the place and offloaded the supplies at the airport. The Brits told us not to stay long – and we didn't.

It so happens that as of July, 2004 my eldest daughter is living in Songkhla with her husband who works for Halliburton. The world is small.

Relief pilots, Art Foster and Ron Shays, along with some new crew arrived. Don Aites and Jim Webb went back to Guam. I gave six days of route checks to the new crew, and then I headed back to Guam on July 23.

For the efforts of the crew of CG 4705 we were awarded the Coast Guard Unit Commendation ribbon. I am confident that I speak for all the crew when I say we were extremely proud to have been part of such a close knit, hard working, get the job done, team that helped the USCG be even more successful in Southeast Asia operations.



The Crew of C-123B 4705 after receiving their CG Unit Commendation

Some statistics as per the Coast Guard Unit Commendation citation

C-123B aircraft CG-54705 from 8 June through 20 July 1966 did the following:

34 missions

229.5 flight hours

119,192 passenger miles

15,238 ton miles

Fuel, beer and oil consumption was not calculated.



C-123B 4705 In All Her Glory

Flights performed.

May 1966: Coast Guard Activities Guam received orders to deploy one C-123 aircraft to Bangkok, Thailand in support of Operation Tight Reign.

LT. James Webb, CGAS Barbers Point, HI received orders to proceed to CG Activities Guam to transition as a pilot in the C-123 aircraft.

Initial flight crew was LCDR. Ronald Stenzel, LT. Donald Aites, LT. Jim Webb, AMC Bob Powers, AD1 Robert "Ace" Adams, AE2 Jim Ryan, ASM1 Richard "Pat" Murphy, AD2 Denzil Martin, and AT3 Owen "Skip" O'Neill.

June 1966:

6th C-123B 4705 departed Guam with three pilots and six aircrewmembers for CGAS Sangley Point, P.I. by way of Yap Island. (9.8 flight hours.)*3

7th To Singapore via refueling stop at Labuan, Malaysia. (9.3 flight hours.)*3

8th To Bangkok. (5.6 flight hours.) [CHOP to SEASEC/USCG Construction Detachment?]*3

9th No Fly, Crew Rest and Mission Briefings

10th Monitor Station site survey flight with SEASEC Engineers. RON Nakhon Phenom. (2.4 flight hours.)*3

11th Monitor Site Survey flight to Udorn thence Bangkok.. (3.3 flight hours.)*3

12th Logistics flight to Con Son, RVN. (7.1 flight hours.)*SA

14th Logistics flight to Lampang thence Site Survey flight to Nakhon Phenom. (9.2 flight hours.)*3

15th Logistics flight to Con Son, RVN. (7.3. flight hours.)*AW

17th Logistics flight to Con Son, RVN (7.1 flight hours.) *SW

18th Logistics flight to Lampang. (4.3 flight hours.)*SA

18th Logistics flight to Sattahip. (1.5 hours.)*SA

21st Logistics flight to Con Son, RVN. (7.0 flight hours.)*AW

22nd Logistics flight to Con Son, RVN. (7.0 flight hours.)*SW

23rd Logistics flight to Con Son, RVN. (7.1 flight hours.)*SA

24th Logistics flight to Sattahip. (1.4 flight hours.)*SA

25th Logistics flight to Con Son, RVN. (6.8 flight hours.)*3

26th Logistics flight to Sattahip. (1.4 flight hours.)*AW

27th Logistics flight to Lampang and Monitor Site Survey at Udorn. (5.6 flight hours.)*3

28th Logistics flight to Con Son, RVN. (7.1 flight hours.)*3

29th Logistics flight to Sattahip and Con Son, RVN. (7.6 flight hours.)*3

July 1966:

2nd Post maintenance test flight. (0.7 flight hours.)*SA

3rd Logistics flight to Con Son, RVN (7.2 flight hours)*SW

4th Logistics flight to Lampang. (4.4 flight hours.)*AW

5th Logistics flight to Con Son, RVN. (6.5 flight hours.)*3

6th Logistics flight to Lampang and Sattahip (6.1 flight hours)*SW

7th Logistics flight to Con Son, RVN. (6.9 flight hours.)*AW

8th Logistics flight to Con Son, RVN. (7.0 flight hours.)*SA

9th Logistics flight to Lampang (4.3 flight hours)*SW

10th Logistics flight to Sattahip. (2.5 flight hours.)*AW

11th Logistics flight to Con Son, RVN. (6.7 flight hours.)*SA

12th Logistics flight to Con Son, RVN. (7.3 flight hours.)*SA

13th Logistics flight to Sattahip. (1.4 flight hours.)*SA

14th Assistance to other agencies. At request of JUSMAG (through SEASEC) transported planeload of rice to Thai troops in Songkhla, Thailand. (5.9 flight hours.)*SA

Relief Flight Crew arrived Bangkok. Most of original crew departed for Guam via military space available aircraft.

15th Logistics flight to Lampang. (4.2 flight hours)*SF

16th Logistics flight to Sattahip and Con Son, RVN (7.3 flight hours)*SF

17th Logistics flight to Lampang. (4.0 flight hours)*SF

19th Logistics flight to Con Son, RVN and Sattahip. (7.1 flight hours)*SF

21st Logistics flight to Lampang. (4.1 flight hours)*SF

22nd Logistics flight to Udorn and Sattahip. (4.9 flight hours)*SF

Stenzel departed for Guam.

24th Logistics flight to Sattahip, Con Son, Sattahip (7.1 flight hours)*FSh

28th Logistics flight to U Tapao, Con Son (7.2 flight hours)*FSh

August 1966

2nd Logistics flight to U Tapao, Con Son (7.1 flight hours)*FSh

8nd Logistics flight to U Tapao, Con Son (7.4 flight hours)*FSh

10th Logistics flight to U Tapao, Con Son (3.3 flight hours)*FSh

11th Return flight from Con Son via U Tapao (3.5 flight hours)*FSh

Return of plane to Guam. About 25 flight hours.

Note:

*3 means all three initial pilots aboard

*SA means Stenzel and Aites piloted

*AW means Aites and Webb piloted

*SW means Stenzel and Webb piloted

*SF means Stenzel and Foster piloted

*FSh means Foster and Shays piloted

Con Son Loran

A Story about Tight Reign and the Coast Guard during the Vietnam War

By

Chuck Zanti
(Former ET2, USCG)



I first heard the term "Tight Reign" on a sunny afternoon in Florida. I was stationed at the Coast Guard Radio Station in Miami as an Electronic Technician Third Class. I had just gotten orders to report to the Loran C school in Groton and attached to my orders were the words "Tight Reign". After graduating from Loran C and only after going through weapons and survival school in California (Seer), our group agreed with the rumors that we were off to Vietnam.

June of 1966: Upon arrival in SE Asia, we were treated to a week in Bangkok, the headquarters for the Loran project. There were three stations ... the master in Sattihip, a slave in Udorn and Con Son, a slave in Vietnam. Even though the guys stationed in Thailand were considered then to be so lucky, now I am really glad I was chosen for Con Son. Some experiences are priceless. And during the year I was overseas, I had three great visits to Bangkok.

Anybody reading this who was around during the war and spent some R&R in Bangkok I'm sure will have the same fond memories. We all left for Con Son uncertain of what was ahead but grateful to the Coast guard for giving us a full week of fun.



While my first flight to Con Son was on the Coast Guard C123, I didn't personally meet the crew. I now know since reading about them, I admire all they had done. Con Son is part of the Con Dau Archipelago southeast of Saigon and about 200 miles offshore. It is now an hour's flight from Tan Son Nhut Airport. Air Vietnam flies there daily. The air strip is essentially the same and only small planes can land. It is now surrounded by fences and guarded. The easy access to the beach is forever gone.

After landing we immediately headed for the beach at the runway edge. The beach would be the main gathering place of service personnel during my year there. It was about a half mile wide, really tropical and beautiful. A few yards offshore, the half sunk hull of a Viet Cong arms runner shot full of holes, was the only reminder of the war. During the year on weekends many flights from the mainland would arrive with GI's to spend day at beach. It was an unknown "China Beach"



At the new airport

There were about 20 of us in all at the station. An ET warrant officer was in charge. Really great guy (sorry I forgot his name), a couple of Chiefs and First Class Petty Officers. All great guys, We were introduced to the camp soon and began our long building project.

RMK/BRJ (Vietnam Builders their Logo) was the company contracted to do the actual building of the base. They had all the government projects in Vietnam. Kind of reminds you of today in Iraq, huh?

The major construction contract was given to the largest construction entity ever, the RMK-BRJ (Raymond International, Morrison-Knudsen, Brown & Root, and J.A. Jones Construction). Calling itself "The Vietnam Builders" and receiving highly lucrative "no bid" contracts. This consortium of private corporations was to turn southern Vietnam into a modern, integrated military installation that would enable the United States to properly defend its client. The Vietnam Builders entered into a contract with the federal government, via the U.S. Navy, as the exclusive contractor for the huge military buildup that was to come; there would be no open bidding or otherwise competitive process".

Anyway they had a tent city set up in this flat area which was to be the Loran station. All the workers were Filipinos and were treated hard and paid so little. I am sure the Coast Guard paid RMK plenty though. We lived in the tents with them for months. Food was good, plenty of time off for the beach. I remember we had fashioned wooden boxes with a light bulb inside to keep our clothes from rotting in the heat and humidity. Clothing was at a minimum but we had to keep our uniforms safe. The shower was a gasoline motor water pump and fire hose set up in a pond by the runway. Of course water buffalo shared that pond and sometimes brown stuff came down with the water. I saw the pond on my return visit there but the motor and hose are gone now.

One day the LST with all our Loran equipment and supplies showed up on the beach. Took a long time to unload and stow. The guys who thought up what we would need were pretty good for the most part. But a few things still stand out in my mind.



We were issued old WWII M1 rifles. Even the Viet cong had better stuff than us. We were trained with the M16 and all in Vietnam were issued them except us. Guess it was a budget thing. We had a lot of 40 oz bottles of good liquor avail we could buy cheap. We would trade with army helicopter pilots the booze for captured VC rifles so we eventually armed ourselves with our own weapons. I had brought my M2 carbine back with me stuffed inside my sea-bag.

Beach at the end of the old runway – then and now



Also we were sent diving stuff like masks fins and snorkels. After getting them we were amazed at the gigantic reefs just a few feet offshore our beach. I learned to dive there and still do here in Florida. We really wanted a small boat and motor but the bosses in Bangkok refused. We built surfboards out of plywood and managed anyway.



But now we had to work setting all the equipment up. We had a goal to be online and we worked hard for it. Afterward we were awarded the unit commendation medal for our efforts. Also we soon had real buildings with air conditioning, running water and beds. Living conditions improved daily during that period.

One day we were introduced to CDR Judd who was to be the commanding officer of the base. Now everybody in the Coast Guard knows that a Loran station doesn't need a LCDR to manage it. Our guess was that the ARVN had a major in charge and they wanted equal rank. If anybody knows a different reason I would like to know. He was very Military and came from a fine Military family and I think he had the best of intentions. Living as we were, however, there was a lot of tension between him and the rest of us. I remember on day I was driving one of the trucks (I actually had a Government License from Florida) and I had to pull to side of a rice paddy because a water buffalo was on the path. We were instructed to never ever injure a buffalo but the truck slid into the mud and I had to get the army to pull me out with a bulldozer. Judd suspended my license for a month. (Imagine requiring a government driver license in a war zone) He also liked to have his meals with Major Ve, the Vietnamese Army commander of the island prison. We always laughed at them.

Major Ve's House – then & now (a Museum)



Sorry to say his relationship with us grew worse. Since he came when everything was built and done he didn't share the relationship we had. I wish I could meet him again just to apologize for the crew. One day he just disappeared. Rumors were that he was in a Bangkok hospital. Again would like to know what had happened.

Another story I remember was the day we were told that the almighty, General Westmoreland was to visit the island. It was very, very hot and CDR Judd made us stand on the runway in dress uniform. We waited for hours. He never showed up.

Con Son was a prison island. Now it is a national wildlife park and war museum. You know all the time we were there we were never told nor did we know what was going on in the prison. We mingled with the Viet

army but I understand little Vietnamese. It was off limits to us and we didn't really think much about it. Little did we know of the infamous "Tiger Cages" and the horrible things done to the people there. When I went back and saw all these things I was so shocked and embarrassed for my ignorance. .



Inside the prison – now.



Prisoners were all over though. Some were free from being locked up. They all had a badge which described their "crime" and situation. They lived off the land and at the time I thought they didn't have a bad time. We had to pay the Commandant and they did our laundry, cleaned the base and all labor work. I got along great with them. I remember once a week I would take a movie projector and film to the city and play for the kids there. They didn't understand English but they loved the movies. I really got along well with the Vietnamese.

I met a young Viet girl whose father worked for the army and we became good friends. One day she too was gone.

Today the prisons are all still there. They are all just like they were then. New roads, schools, hospitals and new building is going on all over, but the old prison is there to remind all of us of what happened. A new 5 star hotel is under construction. I know that in the near future Con Son will be a great tourist destination.





New hotel under construction

U.S. Coast Guard Loran Station Con Son – then and now.





The old Coast Guard base is now just some old ruins. I found it in the woods all overgrown with trees and vegetation. From my old pictures I was able to place the buildings, just the concrete foundations are there. Nothing else is left.

I found this on the web:

"The Coast Guard's involvement in Vietnam ended in 1975. The day before Saigon fell the Loran Station on Con Son Island was evacuated. The final radio messages were:

To: Con Son
From COMSEASEC.

Destroy equipment. Evacuate aboard Air America chopper. When safely evacuated, advise COMSEASEC your location and names of personnel. Also equipment salvaged, if any."

"This is Con Son. Roger. We will be going off air in five minutes and will destroy equipment. Will try to keep comms until the end."

Con Son Loran Station went off air at 1246 on April 29, 1975, closing the book on Coast Guard missions during the Vietnam War."

