

3. The Last Mission of Combat Talon's S-01 Crew

I wrote this story for the families of the S-01 crewmembers who attended dedication of the memorial to the lost crew at Hurlburt Field Memorial Air Park on 12 July 1998. It was included in Colonel Jerry Thigpen's book "The Praetorian STARShip – The Untold Story of the Combat Talon" and then widely distributed by various military organizations on the Internet. This is the story's latest edition that I included in Appendix A of my book "Combat Talons in Vietnam – Recovering a Covert Special Ops Crew".

This is the story of one Combat Talon MC-130E that was lost with its eleven crew members on December 29, 1967, while conducting a TOP SECRET mission over North Vietnam. After many years of silence, Maj. John Plaster authored a book, *SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam*, in which he described the exploits of commandos who lost their lives on missions that had not been brought to public attention for numerous security reasons. The loss of this aircraft fits into that mold. It was, according to Major Plaster, our largest single aircraft loss over North Vietnam. I hope this story honors the eleven lost crew members and acknowledges the role of all men who served in the Combat Talon unit, which was first named Detachment 1 of the 314th Tactical Airlift Wing, then the 15th Air Commando Squadron and finally the 90th Special Operations Squadron.

At the time of this incident, Det. 1, 314 TAW was based at Nha Trang Air Base, Republic of Vietnam (RVN), with six eleven-member crews and four MC-130E Combat Talon I aircraft. I was a member on one of these crews. These aircraft were equipped with terrain following radar, Fulton Recovery System, and an array of passive electronic countermeasures. The planes were painted with special dark green paint that significantly reduced their reflected radar energy, and, because of their overall appearance, they were affectionately called the "Blackbirds." They provided Military Assistance Command, Vietnam—Studies and Observations Group (MACV-SOG) with dedicated airlift during daytime and conducted highly classified, clandestine missions at night. These night missions were called "combat missions" even though it was never the intent to engage in what would certainly be a one-sided battle with the enemy. The only arms we carried were the survival .38 caliber pistols. We relied on our low level terrain following capability, the element of surprise, and experienced airmanship to fly wherever tasked over North Vietnam.

The "combat missions" were generated at MACV-SOG headquarters in Saigon. They ranged from quite ordinary to some bizarre airdrop operations. We would drop teams of infiltrators behind enemy lines and then resupply them periodically. At times we would drop specially rigged personnel parachutes without infiltrators and imaginatively assembled resupply loads to convince the enemy that we had teams operating in this or that area. Sometimes the air-dropped loads were rigged to fall apart in the air or were booby trapped for the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers on the ground. And, of course, there were psychological operations consisting of high altitude leaflet drops and low altitude drops of pre-tuned radios or gift packages to fishermen in the Gulf of Tonkin. This was interesting and rewarding work. It made us feel that we were making a significant contribution to the overall war effort by creating considerable confusion inside the enemy's own territory.

To be effective in these clandestine air operations, we had to maintain a low profile and avoid shoptalk with airmen of other units. The geographical separation from SOG headquarters in Saigon helped us in not being visibly tied to their operations. Only a few of us, key command officials and mission planners, were able to visit SOG headquarters. There, our points of contact

told us only that operational data which we needed to know. We understood the need for this arrangement and loyally carried out our role as dedicated airlifters.

As we acquired more experience in performing our assigned tasks, we became aware that there were problems with some of the teams we supported in the North. We had to make some peculiar drops with very specific instructions and, at times, execute them under the supervision of tight-lipped SOG jumpmasters who were assigned to fly with us on some missions. This led us to believe that we were dealing with probable double agents and some questionable characters. As mission planners, we did not share these concerns with our crews, but some details had to be disclosed when astonished loadmasters reported to the cockpit that our SOG jumpmasters halted the paratroop after the first man went out and that they made the rest of the team sit down without offering any explanations. Then after landing, just as the aircraft came to a halt in its parking area, a van would appear and the remaining jumpers would smartly pile into it without any comments to the crew. Events like that and cargo loads that were purposely rigged to foul up or break up upon hitting the air stream had to be explained to the crew involved.

Because the success of the missions depended on secrecy, we were naturally apprehensive about dealing with complete strangers who would not speak to us. In time, we learned that some of the teams were compromised and feared that our aircraft may become an easy target to be brought down over a drop zone. In mission planning, we dreaded the possibility that one day we could be directed to recover a questionable agent or a package from North Vietnam using the Fulton Recovery System. We were known to the enemy for delivering booby-trapped resupply bundles. A recovery of an agent, or a package, would be an opportune time for them to return the favor and bring down a Blackbird.

There was also considerable internal secrecy in our work. Crews were not allowed to discuss their combat missions with other crews. Locations of drop zones and types of delivery payloads could not be shared with others. One could not be exposed to too many details of the clandestine operations. There was always a possibility of being forced down and captured behind enemy lines. For this reason, Major Thompson, a C-130 navigator, who was not a Combat Talon qualified crew member, was assigned to our unit as a mission planner. As such, he knew about the locations of infiltrated teams and about the type of airdrops we were conducting. He did not have a crew position and was not allowed to fly "combat missions." This arrangement lasted only for the duration of his one-year tour. It also gave me, Major John Gargus, navigator, and 1st Lt. John Lewis, electronic warfare officer (EWO), both from the S-05 crew, the opportunity to succeed him when he rotated to his next duty station. By that time, it no longer mattered that two crew members from the same crew would become his replacements and that they continued to fly combat missions. We began our on-the-job training by helping Thompson to plan this fateful mission. Roy Thompson, who retired as a colonel, agreed to collaborate on putting this story together. Unfortunately, his contribution was lost forever. He passed away on July 25, 1997, before he could join me and John Lewis in sharing his memories of almost thirty years ago.

The fragmentary order for this fateful mission came from SOG on Christmas Day. Our whole detachment celebrated Christmas in the courtyard of Nha Trang's Roman Catholic Cathedral with Christian Boy and Girl Scouts and their parents. When we returned to the hotel after the festivities, Roy Thompson came by to tell me that First Flight Operations had a classified message tasking us with our next combat mission. He wanted to know if I was interested in going with him to review it. I was eager to see what it was all about, so we hopped into our jeep and drove to the Vietnamese side of the base where we shared secure mission planning and communications facilities with our sister unit, which was designated First Flight. The First Flight

was another SOG air asset flying C-123s with some very interesting crew members. First Flight cargo specialists assembled all our airdrop packages, rigged all our parachutes, and even loaded the cargo for our combat missions. We were to trust their methods and procedures no matter how weird or foreign the resulting drop configurations looked to our loadmasters.

The frag order called for an unusual combat mission. It directed us to execute two airdrops deep inside North Vietnam. The first one was to be a high altitude leaflet drop on a north-northeast heading just west of the Red River and the second one a low level resupply drop on a southerly heading just west of the Black River. We positioned ourselves in front of a large-scale classified wall chart with numerous circles of various diameters and colors that depicted locations of known enemy defenses. We traced a probable inbound and outbound route with our fingers and concluded that the mission was a feasible one. The only possible threat to our aircraft would come during the "short look," the leaflet drop, when the Blackbird would be in close proximity to the Yen Bai Air Base and its MIG interceptors, or from any other Hanoi area base that had MIGs on night alert. Otherwise, everything else looked good. We would be able to lay out a flight path that would be clear of lethal ranges of all known surface to air missiles (SAMs) and anti-aircraft artillery (AAA).

With this accomplished, we returned to the Ahn Hoa Hotel to brief the detachment commander, Lt. Col. Dow Rogers, and the operations officer, Lt. Col. Tom Hines, on the forthcoming combat mission. The mission was scheduled for the night of 28 and early morning of 29 December 1967.

At Ahn Hoa, things were in a festive mood. Maj. Charlie Claxton, who had performed the role of Santa Claus, was now busy in the kitchen making sure that everything was on schedule for the big evening meal. We were hosting the American officers of First Flight and borrowed their gourmet cook to assist our own very capable Chinese kitchen staff. Capt. Gerald Van Buren, the officers open mess steward, had already done his job. He made sure that all needed kitchen supplies were either procured in the Saigon commissary, or that they were obtained from his various contacts at Special Forces operating locations. We would trade with the Special Forces outposts on almost every visit to their remote sites. We would trade San Miguel beer, obtained on our visits to Taiwan or to the Philippines, for crates of fresh vegetables grown in their neighboring Montagnard villages. Charlie Claxton was aspiring to replace Gerald Van Buren as the mess steward when Gerry completed his one-year tour in Vietnam.

That evening we had what must have been the best feast of our Vietnam tour. We all complimented our kitchen staff as well as Charlie Claxton and Gerald Van Buren for their superb performance. The rooftop bar activity that night was somewhat subdued; most of us retreated to our rooms early to make audiotapes for our families. We all owed special thanks to our wives for making the Vietnamese Christmas as good as it could have been. All the sweets, toys, and clothing for the cathedral party and gift dispensing visits to several local orphanages were sent to us by our well-organized wives. They enlisted support of their local chambers of commerce for donations of clothing, candy, and gifts and arranged with the USAF for shipment of assembled goods by opportune C-130 airlift. We were proud of them for their contribution to this civic action effort. Sorting of donated clothing became a major undertaking that took us several days to complete. We sized and sorted the clothing in the hot unventilated upstairs storage rooms of the operations building. Sgt. Jim Williams spent countless hours helping me in my capacity as the unit's civic action officer. He took charge of keeping the effort going when some other volunteers gave up because of uncomfortable heat and troublesome clothing lint and dust in the improvised Santa's workshop. It was he who recruited SSgt. Ed Darcy to help us until the clothing was finally sorted, boxed, and labeled for distribution. During the festivities in the cathedral courtyard, both of these

young men displayed great enthusiasm in playing games with the scouts. We all had a great time. Christmas spirit and joy overcame all language and age barriers.

Early next morning, Roy Thompson, John Lewis, and I settled down in the secure planning room where we drew out the route and prepared master charts for the crew that was going to fly the mission. Our master charts would be used the next day by the mission crew members who would study them and customize them for their own personal use.

The entire flight would take about eight hours. It would follow the often-repeated high-level route from Nha Trang to the Skyline TACAN in Laos. There the Blackbird would descend to a terrain following altitude and fly a short zigzagging route toward the first leaflet drop area. Then, after a “short look” (rapid climb to high altitude, quick drop, and rapid descent), the aircraft would resume terrain following through the low level resupply drop and return to the Skyline TACAN. From that point the aircraft would continue back home at normal cruising altitude.

In planning the terrain following routes, we always tried to stay away from populated areas and selected prominent geographical features as radar return targets for turning points and navigational instrument updates. A unique feature of the terrain following flights was that we flew at controlled ground speeds rather than constant airspeeds. Our aircraft was equipped with the APQ-115 terrain following radar that used the aircraft’s speed over the ground in its computations for maintaining desired altitude above the ground. Typically, we flew at 500 feet above the ground during daytime and at 1,000 feet at night. Flights over uneven terrain required continuous throttle adjustments to maintain the standard 230-knot ground speed (265 miles per hour). The pilots had a Doppler ground speed indicator that they monitored continuously. The pilot (left seat) had an APQ-115 screen, which in one display mode traced the terrain directly ahead of the aircraft and in another, cross scan mode, painted the terrain 20 degrees left and right of the projected ground track. The radar navigator had a third mode option for terrain mapping. This one gave him a 45-degree left and right view of the aircraft’s projected track, but when the radar was in this mode, the terrain following input used by the pilot was disabled. Flying in the left seat was very strenuous. For all practical purposes it was like flying the sustained instrument landing systems (ILS). Blackbird pilots had to fly the attitude direction indicator’s (ADI’s) pitch bar, which received commands based on radar terrain returns and Doppler ground speed. They had to monitor their radar scope for visual terrain signals and manipulate engine throttles to maintain the desired ground speed. During daytime, well-placed cockpit windows allowed the pilot to verify approaching terrain, but on a dark night, this was impossible. One could not fix his eyes to the outside through the ever-present glare of the cockpit’s amber lights and not lose focus on the instruments by which he had to fly. For that reason, it became standard practice to have the first pilot fly in the left seat and have the aircraft commander sit on the right. This was the only way he could command his eleven-member crew. He could not take time away from the instruments to focus on even a routine in-flight problem.

Terrain following combined with special navigational and flying techniques would get us to where we needed to go, but our ultimate survivability over North Vietnam depended on the skills of the electronic warfare officers (EWOs). At that time, North Vietnam had the most formidable air defense system in the history of air warfare. It is true that their radars were not state of the art, but they were effectively used by operators who had gained considerable skills with them. The same could be said about the AAA and SAM crews. Their tours of duty were not limited to one year like ours. They were at home defending their families against the most advanced American war machines for as long as the war lasted. So these Soviet-made radars, which were first introduced in Eastern Europe, were now being combat tested. The US intelligence had

appropriate nicknames for all of them. Thus we confronted Bar Locks and Spoon Rests for long-range early warning, Fan Song for SA2 surface to air missiles (SAMs) and Fire Cans for a variety of anti-aircraft artillery (AAA).

Our knowledge of the locations of these radars, combined with our low-level tactics, would get us into most target areas without detection. Once detected, however, it became the EWO's job to analyze the threats these radars posed. If all radars were in the locations we had plotted on our charts, we would be able to fly through their scanning ranges and stay away from the effective ranges of missiles or artillery they controlled. During mission planning, the EWO would prepare a scenario that would tell him at which point of flight and from which direction each radar's scan would illuminate our aircraft. If he detected radars not plotted on his chart and the received signal strength was stronger, indicating a closer proximity to our flight track, he would have to direct the pilots to get us out of there. By monitoring his state-of-the-art instruments, he could tell whether the enemy radars were in routine mode or were focused on our aircraft in sector scans with added height finders that would help them to acquire the aircraft's track, speed, and altitude. The missile and AAA crews needed all this information before they could zero in on our aircraft's position and fire. In addition, with SAM's Fan Song radar, he could tell when the radar pulse recurrence frequency changed to forecast an imminent missile launch. All that required good eyes to monitor several visual displays and good hearing to discern distinct chirping audio signals each radar propagated. In a concentrated radar signal area, such as our aircraft would enter upon its climb to drop altitude, the EWO would receive welcomed assistance from the crew radio operator who shared his instrument console and sat on his left. All the radio operators became adept EWO assistants.

Blackbird's EWOs also had the capability to detect and disrupt an attack by a MIG interceptor. Using passive electronic techniques, they could confuse a MIG long enough to enable their aircraft to escape into hilly terrain where the interceptor's radar became ineffective and the pursuing pilot risked flying into the ground. First, by monitoring aural and visual signals, they could tell that ground control intercept (GCI) radar was tracking their Blackbird and most likely vectoring a MIG for an attack from the rear. Once the EWO picked up the interceptor's radar, he could play with the target a pursuing pilot would see on his radarscope. By manipulating the radar echoes reflected from the Blackbird to the interceptor's radar they could offset the pursuing pilot's target to the left or right. Then just as the MIG was ready to fire, they would call for a sharp break away from the established aircraft heading, causing the interceptor to miss his radar target. After the first missed pass the GCI site and the interceptor pilot would get smarter and come around for another pass. In the meantime, the Blackbird would make a rapid descent to the treetop level and get lost in the ground clutter where the airborne radar could not find it. The interceptor would have to abort the chase or risk flying into the ground.

In addition, Blackbird's EWOs could dispense highly reflective chaff, which would instantly paint a brighter and larger target than the aircraft. With all that equipment and our special training, we had what we needed to conduct gutsy, but safe operations in the hostile skies of North Vietnam. No one expected a large, slow, and unarmed transport aircraft to operate in the same North Vietnamese air space that proved to be so challenging to the most advanced high performance fighter aircraft in the US inventory.

Our success rate over the enemy territory was commendable. Many of our low-level missions through the North Vietnamese air space went undetected. Some were tracked during portions of the flight, but always succeeded in avoiding AAA fire. A few had to abort high altitude leaflet drops when a missile control radar locked on to them and the EWO detected a frequency

shift, which signaled an imminent SA2 missile launch. They always managed to break the radar lock on during a rapid roller coaster dive down to the minimum safe altitude. Fewer still experienced a MIG chase with an airborne radar lock on. The EWOs always saved the night for us. Consequently, it didn't take long for the Blackbird crews to develop a due respect for their skills.

Two months before, in mid-October, the S-05 crew's EWO, John Lewis, defeated three passes of an interceptor that jumped upon us just off the coast near Haiphong Harbor. We were dropping pre-tuned radios to the local fishermen. Pursued, we flew as low and as fast as we could, shaking and bouncing on the air currents that our aircraft stirred off the otherwise calm seawater. When John called "Break Left," we had to pop up a few feet in order to avoid dipping the left wing into the water. The operations officer, Tom Hines, flew with us that night. It was daylight when we landed at Nha Trang. The wings and the fuselage of the Blackbird were white with salt. John Lewis may still hold the Combat Talon record for besting a pursuing fighter pilot three times on a single "combat mission."

Our first problem on the 29 December mission would be the early warning radar at Na San. We had to stay as low and as far south of its range as possible in order to avoid detection while crossing into North Vietnam. Once inside of North Vietnam, we had to get to the east side of the central mountains and stay out of range of well-placed AAA and SAM sites along the Red River valley. We tried to avoid getting picked up and tracked by the multitude of radars associated with those anti-aircraft weapons. These radars by themselves could not hurt us, but they would alert AAA and SAM crews for possible action if we came within range of their weapons. Our best scenario was to have no radar track us until we began our rapid climb to 30,000+ feet for the leaflet drop. We knew that once the aircraft reached 9,000–10,000 feet, all available radars would come up and keep the EWO extremely busy. If the enemy did not respond with a launch of interceptors, the leaflet drop would be completed and the aircraft would resume low-level terrain following proceeding westward just south of the China border along the 22nd parallel until reaching the Black River valley. At that point they would turn southbound and staying in the mountains along the western side of the river to execute the second airdrop northwest of the Na San early warning radar.

Detection by the Na San radar was not our concern at this point in the mission. By this time a warning would have been issued from the Hanoi side of the mountains that a leaflet dropping intruder was moving westward toward Dien Bien Phu. Consequently, this early warning radar would be scanning in a northwest direction, expecting the emergence of the Blackbird. Na San's detection of our flight at this time could actually assist in the accomplishment of the second portion of the mission. Our resupply drop was what we called a "notional" drop, or a diversionary drop. There was no friendly team to receive the two resupply bundles. These bundles were carefully planned by imaginative minds at SOG to confuse the North Vietnamese and to have them expend considerable resources searching for infiltrators that did not exist. So the resupply bundles were meant to be captured by the enemy. Na San's detection of our aircraft's slow-down could assist them in locating this bogus cargo.

By the time we finished with the planning, we learned that augmented S-01 crew would fly the mission. It was S-01's turn to take the next mission, but there were some questions about the possibility of having them skip their turn. Aircraft commander Maj. Dick Day and one of the crew's loadmasters were on duty not involving flying (DNIF). Their senior navigator, Lt. Col. Don Fisher, was not yet back from his R&R (rest and recuperation) in Hawaii. His earliest expected return was on that day, 26 December. Earlier on this day, the other crew loadmaster departed with

the S-03 crew to the parent 314th Wing in Taiwan. He had made arrangements with Staff Sergeant Darcy from the S-03 crew to switch places. Ed Darcy, a quiet, conscientious young man, planned to save some money by staying in Nha Trang. He did not want to spend it on a three- to five-day stay in Taiwan while the ferried Blackbird went through its scheduled inspection and repair as necessary (IRAN) in a maintenance facility that was equipped to handle C130s. All crews looked forward to their turn to ferry a Blackbird for an IRAN in Taiwan. It was the most welcomed vacation break from the wartime conditions in Vietnam. So, Ed Darcy became a volunteer replacement for one S-01 loadmaster. Sgt. James Williams agreed to take the place of the loadmaster who was DNIF.

This mission provided an opportunity for Capt. Edwin Osborne to take command of the S-01 crew and for Capt. Gerald Van Buren to move up to the first pilot's position. The second pilot's slot was filled by Maj. Charlie Claxton from my S-05 crew. He had missed an earlier combat mission when he was DNIF, so this would become a make-up mission for him. I made up my mind that I would take Don Fisher's place if he did not return in time from Hawaii. I would have been the logical replacement in any case because I already knew the route and mission details and could be used to step in to replace him up to the last minute.

Later on that evening I heard that Don Fisher was back. I went to see him and found him in a most jovial mood. He had just returned from a memorable R&R in Hawaii with his whole family. He had just had the greatest of Christmases and repeated to me and to others that he was "in love with the whole world." He was ready to fly his own combat mission.

Edwin Osborne was also ready to fly as an aircraft commander of a combat mission. All our first pilots were highly experienced as C-130 airlift aircraft commanders before becoming qualified in the Combat Talon Blackbirds. Many felt that to become a highly qualified copilot in the Combat Talon program was somewhat of a career regression even though they understood the need for such demanding pilot qualifications. As experienced pilots, they were simply outranked by others with more impressive pilot credentials who became Combat Talon aircraft commanders. Edwin Osborne was clearly a pilot who should not be taking a back seat to anyone. He was an excellent pilot qualified as an instructor pilot in the Blackbirds.

The next day John Lewis and I rode with the S-01 officer crew to the mission planning room. Van Buren drove the crew van. He normally drove whenever his crew went places. I was told that as our commissary officer he even drove through Saigon on his crew's periodic commissary runs. His crew always got some extra ground time at Tan Son Nhut to accommodate his grocery shopping. Since Charlie Claxton was destined to inherit that duty from him, it meant that my S-05 crew would get the long ground time on some future transits through Saigon.

On the way to our secure mission planning room, I sat across from Capt. Frank Parker, a tall, blond young man who was the crew's EWO. He was telling several of us how fortunate we were in having missions where we could sneak in and sneak out without stirring up a hornet's nest. He had recently returned from Thailand where he ran into several of his EWO classmates who were flying in RB-66s. Their mission was to deliberately challenge the enemy's electronic detection systems and face deadly retaliation in their efforts to pinpoint locations of enemy radars. He used the term we sometimes applied to those situations when one would prefer to be on the ground rather than in the air. He said that his friends were "eating their livers" on their RB-66 missions.

Roy Thompson had everything ready for us when we arrived. All the charts we prepared the day before were either posted on easels or laid out on worktables. Fresh, unmarked charts, flight plan logs, and other necessary mission forms were placed on tables where the crew members

would use them. Roy gave a brief overview of what the mission entailed. About the only unusual thing that he noted was that times on targets (TOTs), were not prescribed because neither drop zone had a reception team. The psyops (leaflet) drop had a fixed drop leg at altitude of 30,000 or more feet, depending on the wind velocity and direction. Weaker winds would require a higher altitude. The heart of Hanoi would be from 65 to 70 miles away, and it was hoped that some of the leaflets would make it that far before the sunrise. Lack of TOTs also explained why their flight plan was not completed with time of arrival at turning points. They were to calculate these by themselves, planning on a 260–265 true air speed at high altitudes and a standard 230 ground speed at terrain following levels.

Once Roy Thompson was finished with his mission introduction, I joined Don Fisher and Gordie Wenaas, the two crew navigators, to work on the flight planned route. John Lewis and Frank Parker got together to work on the enemy's defenses. Roy joined the three pilots. Our enlisted crew members: two flight engineers, two loadmasters, and one radio operator, normally did not participate in mission planning.

Gordie Wenaas thought the mission would be a "piece of cake." He quickly noted that there were practically no threat circles anywhere near our track. Then he started crunching out flight plan times between turning points. Don and I went over each low-level turning point, examining the terrain in its vicinity. Practically all were river bends or rivers that would show up well on radar. Some turning points had been used on previous missions and were reported to be good ones. The selected drop zone for the second drop was a location with good radar targets everywhere. He was satisfied with everything and began to prepare his own navigational chart. In this task, Gordie was way ahead of him.

Gordie was a man who undertook every single task seriously. I remember him going around our hotel taking care of chores whenever his S-01 crew was scheduled to be the hotel's duty crew. Each crew was regularly scheduled for hotel crew duty by the operations scheduling as if it were a flight assignment. These duties consisted of servicing the two electrical generators, bringing in fresh potable water from the air base, taking care of mail, stocking the rooftop bar, and performing whatever maintenance chores were needed at the hotel. Gordie Wenaas was conspicuous in keeping himself occupied with these chores. He showed me how to start up and switch on the two noisy generators.

I was then drawn into a conversation with the pilots. Osborne liked the route and had only one concern. It was the time interval between the end of the first drop and the start of the second one. Would his two loadmasters have enough time to move the cargo to the ramp for this drop? How many bundles would there be? How much would they weigh? And, of course, "What is this notional stuff?" The answer to the last question could only be provided by the cargo rigger, a warrant officer from the First Flight. Van Buren was dispatched to go next door to get him. He returned alone, but he brought the information we needed. He also succeeded in making arrangements for the loadmasters and the flight engineers to be at the aircraft next morning to witness the cargo loading. He commented that the warrant officer told him that no one was to mess with the cargo and question its rigging. Everything would be set up by the First Flight crew just the way it should be dropped. Anything nonstandard or out of place should be ignored. Our job was to fly it there and drop it just as it was configured.

Ed Osborne showed much interest in the terrain following portion of the flight. So the pilots gathered around Don Fisher, who had already drawn his chart. He walked through every leg of the flight and explained each turning point. Charlie Claxton had the weight of the aircraft calculated at the point of acceleration and climb to high altitude. There were questions about how much of

the area west of Hanoi the crew would be able to see. The aircraft's track was over the eastern slopes of the central highlands. Numerous peaks with elevations of up to 9,000 feet were immediately to the left and the sprawling Red River valley with level terrain west of Hanoi was to the right. It was to be a dark night with a new moon beginning on 30 December. There would be total darkness. Some lights from Hanoi would no doubt be on. Our prior flights noted that North Vietnam did not have a complete nighttime blackout. The night would be perfect for Gordie Wenaas and Charlie Claxton, the two designated map readers, to use the somewhat cumbersome starlight scope to monitor the terrain below. The scope was of little use at terrain following levels because it had excessive tunnel vision. This made the terrain whiz by so fast that it caused the images to blur. But at the high drop altitude, where the Blackbird would seem to be at a standstill in relation to the ground below, the scope would give its user a fascinating view of terrain otherwise hidden in total darkness. Very little cloud coverage was predicted for that night.

We pointed out the location of Yen Bai Air Base that would be at the aircraft's one to two o'clock position during the drop. If there were any MIGs on night alert, that base would pose their greatest threat. This would also be Frank Parker's greatest challenge that night. He would have to defend against a possible interceptor activity.

Ed Osborne examined the terrain into which the aircraft would descend after the leaflet drop. He was concerned about the rapidly approaching ground during their maximum rate of descent when the radar stabilization was habitually, but only temporarily, lost and the Doppler limits were also exceeded. Here I pointed out that a rapid descent should not be executed unless the aircraft was in jeopardy due to SAM or interceptor attack. All crews seemed to have the same Pope Air Force Base training mind-set. During our training there, each short look was followed by a maximum rate descent, a maneuver that put a lot of stress on the aircraft. This needed to be practiced at every opportunity at Pope. Now in real life, if a threat to our aircraft did not materialize, there was no need to put it through such a stressful maneuver where the crew experienced weightlessness and everything not tied down started floating about. Then at the point of level off, the tremendous g load would force the standing crew members down to their knees. On this mission there would be additional cargo just behind the EWO and the radio operator compartment. We did not want any of it to break loose during such a stressful maneuver.

Ed was concerned with the time remaining before the second drop. His loadmasters and the second flight engineer would have to move the cargo to the back of the aircraft and get it set for the drop. Normally, the cargo would be all set from the point of takeoff. But not this time. The back of the aircraft would have to be cleared of any remaining restraining straps from the leaflet drop. Then the resupply bundles would have to be moved into place toward the ramp. Normally this would not be that difficult because the palletized bundles were on rollers. But being on rollers in a straight and level flight is one thing, being on rollers in an up and down terrain following flight is another. Great care was needed to avoid an injury or have the cargo slip off the rollers at an angle where its pallet would jam. This would no doubt be a new experience for these loadmasters. Ed noted with some satisfaction that the terrain following leg going westbound along the 22nd parallel was relatively level because we were taking advantage of the break between 10,000-foot-high peaks on the right and 9,000-foot peaks on the left.

At a prominent turning point over the Black River the mission would turn south. The Blackbird would fly almost due south hiding behind the high terrain west of the river. This would keep it west of the valley's populated areas. Ahead at the aircraft's ten to eleven o'clock position would be the Na San early warning radar. This radar would be looking for the reappearance of the intruder that was sure to excite the radars on the Hanoi side of the mountains in the Red River

valley. This radar was not capable of directing MIG interceptors, and none were expected to come west out of the Red River valley.

The second drop zone was in an isolated area in the vicinity of Highway 6. It was a logical place for a drop zone. Its location would no doubt add credibility to the nonexistent team's presence. Roy Thompson explained the deceptive nature of this drop. There would be no ground markings or signals. The drop would occur on Don Fisher's green light command when his Doppler distance to go ran out. After this drop the crew would continue terrain following into Laos where the high altitude route home would resume at the Skyline TACAN.

At some point during this low-level route review we were joined by Frank Parker and John Lewis, who had concluded their study of the enemy's electronic air order of battle. They pointed out correctly that once the aircraft crossed into the Black River region the enemy defenses were such that a return home at any altitude would be safe. That was a good thought in case of any in-flight problems, such as navigational, mechanical, or outside visibility degradation due to weather.

Then the group gathered around Frank Parker's chart. His chart differed from those of Don Fisher and the map readers Charlie Claxton and Gordie Wenaas. They had smaller threat circles along the flight-planned track that represented lethal ranges of SAMs and AAA. Frank's chart had the mission flying through much larger circles that outlined scan ranges of various radars. His chart showed that the aircraft would be exposed to many types of radar throughout its northbound portion of flight along the Red River. He estimated that even before the aircraft would reach its drop altitude of 30,000+ feet, all available radars would be alerted to their presence and that he would be saturated with a tremendous amount of visual and aural signals. He acknowledged that he would have to rely on able assistance from Gean Clapper, the crew radio operator, who would be sharing his console behind the cargo compartment curtain.

Gean Clapper was a true professional in his field. He had many years of experience as a HAM radio operator. As such he had contacts with colleagues throughout the world. On flights over international waters, where it was permissible, he would raise his contacts and relay personal greetings and messages to families back home. He was also very good at electronic warfare. He could positively recognize the chirping sounds of various radars. This should be a great asset on a flight such as this one where sound-wise things would get extremely noisy for Frank.

Frank concluded that with Gean's help he should be able to detect anything out of the ordinary and call for evasive action before any harm could come to the Blackbird. It would be Don Fisher's task to find a safe evasive flight path through the mountains on the left.

After that each crew member went on his own, putting finishing touches on all paperwork. We three mission planners assisted them with anything they needed and insured that all mission documents they produced were properly stamped TOP SECRET. None of the documents could leave with the crew. We collected everything and locked it in the First Flight's safe. Documents would not be released to the crew until the next night before the predeparture mission briefing.

The next day's mission briefing was a whole crew affair attended by the commander and operations officer. This would be the first time the enlisted crew members learned about the target area. All five: the two engineers, two loadmasters, and the radio operator, were present when the First Flight's cargo handlers loaded the aircraft. Flight engineer TSgt. Jack McCrary gave us thumbs up on the condition of the aircraft. He was a meticulous crew member, well regarded, not just by Ed Osborne, but also by his flight engineer peers. I wondered how much sleep he had gotten during the day. His eyes looked red as if he had not slept at all. But we all knew that his nickname was "Red Eye." He had an eye condition that made them look red and bloodshot all the time. His

second, SSgt. Wayne Eckley, was an engineer of lesser experience, but not short on enthusiasm. His nickname was “Bones.” The jungle fatigue uniforms (designed as one size fits all) exaggerated his lean, bony body. There was so much more space left for him inside his fatigues.

The mission briefing started with Roy Thompson, who stood in front of several chart-filled easels placed in the front of the briefing room. He briefed the weather. It was going to be favorable for this flight with very few clouds on the east side of the mountains in North Vietnam and strong favorable WNW winds at drop altitude. A low-level pressure was moving southeast from China, bringing some cloudiness into the target area in the Black River valley late in the morning.

Then the mission briefing was turned over to Don Fisher, who briefed the route and the drop sequences. He was followed by Frank Parker, who covered the enemy order of battle. He presented the latest SOG intelligence that included known numbers of different MIG interceptors available to North Vietnamese defenses. As always, he mentioned the standard radio silence precautions. Minimum chatter on the intercom! He was going to run every one of his sophisticated tape recorders that registered all electronic signals generated by enemy radars and also captured crew’s intercom transmissions. This was going to be a special night for him to gather electronic intelligence signals for future use. We should end up with a sizable amount of signals from all types of radars. These tapes would then be used by other crew EWOs interested in sharpening their listening and signal interpretation skills.

Frank’s briefing was followed by the aircraft commander, Osborne. He briefed the crew assignments that had been previously reviewed with the operations officer, Tom Hines. He would fly the entire mission in the right seat. Van Buren would be in the left seat from the takeoff through the low-level terrain following part of the flight. Charlie Claxton would map read from behind Van Buren during terrain following and then take the left seat at high altitude on the way home. Don Fisher would ride the radar navigator’s seat with the curtain drawn during terrain following and the leaflet drop. Gordie Wenaas would stand behind Osborne’s right seat and map read from there. Jack McCrary would fly in the engineer’s seat during terrain following. Wayne Eckley would spend his time in the back playing the safety observer role and provide assistance to the loadmasters. Frank Parker and Gean Clapper were to man their console behind the bulkhead curtain, and the two substitute loadmasters, Jim Williams and Ed Darcy, were to make sure they kept their restraining harnesses on during the drops. All crew members were to go on demand regulator oxygen upon entering North Vietnam and then on 100 percent oxygen during the leaflet drop.

There were a few standard questions from Lieutenant Colonels Rogers and Hines about everyone’s fitness and emphasis on safety. Finally, they wished the crew good luck.

After this we sanitized the crew. We collected all personal effects: identification cards, family photographs, and even jewelry. We placed everything into individual plastic bags and saved them for their return. Each crew member was left only with his dog tags and Geneva Convention card as identifying documents. That was the standard procedure for all combat missions.

Because we had to secure all the classified mission documents and personal effects, the crew members were already in their assigned positions running their pre departure checklists when we rejoined them at the aircraft. We witnessed an orderly engine start and watched the Blackbird taxi out to the end of the runway. From our vantage point we saw them take off and disappear into the darkness over the South China Sea.

About three hours later, I returned with Roy Thompson to the operations office to monitor the North Vietnamese portion of the mission. One of the radio operators monitored a special HF radio frequency over which Gean Clapper transmitted coded mission progress reports every thirty

to forty minutes when the aircraft reached a significant flight planned turning point. A radio station in an unknown location would broadcast continuous one-letter Morse code at regular intervals. The airborne operator would monitor the same frequency and at proper moments would insert a two-letter Morse code signal, which would let us know which point of the route was reached and gave us the status of the mission's progress. This was such a short burst of transmitted energy that our enemy, who was sure to monitor the same frequency, would not have enough time to zero in his direction finders to locate the position of the aircraft. These transmissions were the only breaks in radio silence allowed during combat missions.

Upon checking with the radio operator, we learned that the flight was already over North Vietnam and right on time. We did not have any mission documents with us other than the radio operator's log with numbered points and corresponding estimated times of arrival over them, but we had a good mental picture of what must have been happening in the cockpit. So as we sat there, sipping strong coffee that the radio operator prepared, we made occasional comments on what the crew must have been going through.

For the leaflet drop, all the lights were at their dimmest and the radar navigator and EWO/radio operator compartment curtains were drawn to prevent any outside light to affect the night vision of the rest of the crew. All were on oxygen and their intercom voices were muffled by the oxygen mask microphones that registered and exaggerated the sound of every breath they took. The aircraft began its acceleration prior to the rapid climb. Maximum aircraft acceleration to 932-degree turbine inlet temperature was attained in relatively short level flight with aircraft shaking as if its four turbojets were ready to tear loose and leave the bulky aircraft carcass behind.

Then as the aircraft began its rapid climb, Frank Parker's console surely began to light up. At first he would pick up a number of AAA and SAM radars, which would routinely scan their assigned areas. As they detected the Blackbird, they would focus their scans on the just-discovered target and activate their height finders to establish the aircraft's altitude. They would pass this acquired target data through their established notification channels. Then even more radars would come up and focus on this rapidly rising, but now slow-moving target. The crew would hear Frank reporting the inevitable. Two or three AAA radars were tracking them, but from a safe distance. Of greater concern would be the SAM radars. These had longer reach, but were expected to be out of range. He would certainly be calling these to Osborne's attention. Then would come the level off and the start of drop. Each man could tell when each cardboard box exited the aircraft. There was a whoosh sound to each exit as the departing load created an added vacuum in the rare atmosphere of the cargo compartment. The aircraft would seem to stand still, just hanging on in the thin air, being as high as it could climb on the thin cushion of available air. And as Frank watched for the emergence of a GCI radar and its tracking pattern in order to determine if there was an intent to launch a MIG, Gordie Wenaas must have struggled with the night vision scope looking for Yen Bai Air Base some 30 miles away. This was the place from which the nearest MIGs could come. His night vision scope would certainly pick up the heat of an interceptor at takeoff. He would have to be pointed in the right direction. Others in the cockpit were getting the answer to whether they could see the lights of distant Hanoi now at their three o'clock position. Don Fisher must have had his face buried in the hood of his radar as he carefully traced every mile of ground covered by the aircraft. He had to know exactly where he was in case Frank reported radar or interceptor lock on, which would demand an immediate descent to a safe terrain between the mountain peaks on the left.

We did not hear any interruptions to the monotonous "V" sound on the radio, so we assumed that all was okay. All the leaflets were delivered. The aircraft was on its way down and

proceeding westward to its turning point over the Black River. The next report came just as expected. All was still okay. The aircraft was now southbound running its checklist for the bundle drop by Highway 6.

Roy and I planned to return to the hotel right after the next report and get a couple of hours of sleep before coming back to greet the returning crew. But as we waited, nothing happened. There were no further reports from the aircraft. Our first assumption was that something went wrong with Clapper's radio. We would surely hear something once the aircraft emerged from its radio silence over the Skyline TACAN. That is where the aircraft would report a small problem like that to our radar sites in Thailand. Once again, there was nothing. With that we returned to the hotel and reported our concerns to Dow Rogers and Tom Hines.

There were anxious moments as the aircraft's return time approached. Calls were made to find out if any landings were made in Thailand or at Da Nang. Then we notified the command at SOG. They took over all search and rescue efforts. Several F-4 Phantoms were launched to survey the area south of the last known reported position. The weather turned bad. The front moved in as expected and the F-4s could not see a thing on the ground. They monitored radios for signals from the aircraft's crash position indicator and from crew member survival radios. They heard nothing. After several attempts, the search was given up. The crew of eleven was declared as missing in action (MIA).

There were many guesses and opinions as to what might have happened. A loss to enemy action was discounted. The aircraft was proceeding normally on its assigned mission after the leaflet drop, which was the most hazardous part of the flight. Enemy attack on the aircraft would have been reported. The enemy had a chance to detect our aircraft by Na San radar, which must have been alerted about our aircraft's escape toward Dien Bien Phu. Had this happened, there might have been some forces in the vicinity of the drop zone capable of bringing down a low-flying aircraft with small arms fire. But such an act would have been heralded as a great victory by North Vietnam. The enemy would have learned of our aircraft's fate almost immediately. Even with a low profile, the failure of the aircraft to return to Nha Trang could not be concealed for very long. The enemy should have concluded that it was the aircraft that had dropped several million leaflets west of Hanoi. They did not take credit for its disappearance during this mission. But some thought of a more sinister scenario. The enemy had the aircraft and perhaps some members of the crew and they would use them for propaganda purposes. However, as time went on this probability dissipated. It became clearer and clearer that the aircraft must have impacted a mountain in an isolated area sometime after making its last position report. The return of our POWs in 1973 confirmed that. The names of the S-01 crew members were not known to any of the returning POWs.

The location of Blackbird 64-0547 continued to be a mystery for twenty-five years. In 1991, when the villagers of Phu Nhung heard that the United States was searching for remains of American airmen, various individuals reported that they knew of a crash site in their vicinity. In November 1992 a joint US-Vietnam team was led to an isolated location at coordinates 21-39-80N 103-31-20E (Grid 48QUJ 4744596161) where they found a few remaining parts of an aircraft that turned out to be the Blackbird.

The crash site is located in a rugged mountainous terrain of Lai Chau province some 32 miles northeast of Dien Bien Phu. It lies just a few miles east of the route that many of our crews flew in the opposite direction toward the same prominent bend in the river over which the last aircraft position report was made. This river bend was a distinct radar return, and we used it on those missions that required our undetected entry into areas between Hanoi and the China border.

Since we are unable to retrieve the flight plan for this mission, we do not have the exact location of the initial point for the drop or for the drop zone. I must rely only on my memory and conclude that the aircraft was either on its planned route to the initial point or making a course correction to it. Distance wise, the crash occurred seven and a half minutes from the reporting point at the river bend. Description of the aircraft's impact point reveals that it was heading directly toward the Na San radar site that was about 45 nautical miles away.

The US recovery team pinpointed the crash location on the best available 1 to 50,000-scale chart. This chart shows it to be at 4,780 feet on a steep 60-degree slope of a north-northwest-facing crescent-shaped mountain. The crest of this mountain goes only up to 4,870 feet. The main peak of this karst-studded mountain, known as Nam Bo, rises to 5,174 feet and is 1 mile due west of the crash site. The crash site is very small. Its measurements established by the recovery team are given as 105 by 72 feet. This is a very small area for an aircraft as large as a C-130. Since all the crew remains were recovered from this small location, it can be safely concluded that the aircraft did not bounce and break up along its track before coming to a stop. Its crash heading must have been perpendicular to the face of the mountain. With that, the destruction of the aircraft must have been instantaneous.

At the time of the crash the crew was getting ready for the second drop. Eckley, Darcy, and Williams were in the cargo compartment making sure that the load was properly positioned for the drop. They were moving about and did not yet have their restraining harnesses hooked on. Claxton and Wenaas were the other two crew members who were not fastened to any seats. Their map-reading duties called for them to stand behind the pilots and peer outside through the side windows.

The first person on the scene of the crash was a twelve-year-old boy. He reported that the aircraft was in many pieces and that it was still burning. He saw several bodies, many of them burned. He did not find any survivors.

The team found very little at the crash scene. The villagers had pilfered the site within days after the crash and over the years carted away all aircraft parts they could use. In 1991 when they learned about the US search for the remains of airmen, they returned to the site and dug up all the human remains they could find. They turned them over to the proper authorities who concluded that they accounted for eight crew members. When the team returned to the site one year later, they found only a few fragments of human remains, and the team leader recommended that any further attempts at recovery should be abandoned. All recovered remains were sent to Hawaii for proper identification.

There is a question why the site went so long without being reported. The team's investigation revealed that the crash site was reported to the village authorities immediately. It may be that the village leaders were so isolated from the governmental authorities that they didn't know what to do. Or, on the other hand, they were astute enough to realize what kind of fate would descend upon them for pilfering the crash site and keeping the crew weapons as well as those that must have been packaged in the airdrop cargo. Consequently, keeping the news of the crash a village secret had some benefits for the isolated indigenous population. Then, once the American rewards for locating aircraft crash sites became known and profitable, the villagers revealed their secret.

Our own information channels were also flawed. Personnel associated with Combat Talon were never officially informed about the crash site discovery. In mid-1997, plans were put in motion at Hurlburt to erect a memorial for the eleven lost crew members whose status had been changed from MIA to KIA in 1978. As an individual who was closely tied to this unfortunate mission, I agreed to write this story so that the families of the lost airmen would learn about the

work their loved ones did in Vietnam and so that those who flew the Blackbirds in that war would recall and share their mission recollections with others. I finished the first draft of this story in July, hoping that John Lewis's and my recollections of the route and events of thirty years ago would help someone to locate the missing aircraft. The title of this first draft was "Missing Combat Talon C-130E." The word of my writing went out and in August I received a surprise phone call from a man who had been looking for information about his friend who flew on that mission. It was Gene Kremin, a radio operator buddy of Gean Clapper. He informed me that the aircraft had been located almost five years before and that his information about the crash site came from the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.



Flight path of the S-01's mission.