

The airplanes were slow and ugly and they leaked, but they were a lifeline for the Vietnamese ground forces.

Mule Train

By Walter J. Boyne

THE most satisfying flying jobs aren't always glamorous. Sometimes, a routine or even lowly task, offering no glory, turns out to be highly rewarding. Such was the case with Project Mule Train, a Vietnam-era operation that began on Dec. 11, 1961, and technically ended on Dec. 8, 1962.

The operative words here are "technically ended." Even though Mule Train officially came to a close after only one year, its innovative spirit influenced Vietnam War air cargo operations for the rest of the war. The name "Mule Train," now virtually forgotten, was always mentioned with respect.

USAF's Mule Train detachment was a C-123 airlift unit sent to provide tactical airlift support for South Vietnam's hard-pressed ground troops. Its primary purpose was to give the ground forces an assault capability via airdrop or insertion. Yet the unit also saw a great need for logistic support entailing daily delivery of supplies to remote sites in Vietnam.

While hauling troops into battle or supplies to the troops, the Mule Train crews often had to go into

harm's way, operate independently with little air traffic control and under marginal weather conditions, flying in and out of small fields located in steep mountainous areas. And they did all this with an aircraft that was thought to be washed up. In reality, it proved to be perfect for the task.

"If ever an aircraft was in its element, it was the C-123B in SEA [Southeast Asia]," said Carl Wyrick, who as a captain flew the aircraft in Vietnam. "It was slow, ugly, leaked, and was hot when it was hot and cold when it was cold, but it was fun to fly—just like a big Super Cub."

The C-123, though never a candidate for best-looking-aircraft honors, was a solid performer, capable of carrying 60 fully armed troops, or up to 16,000 pounds of cargo. It could carry a variety of equipment, including jeeps, small artillery pieces, and ground support equipment. It had a hydraulically operated rear ramp, and the floor was both strongly built and well-fitted with strong tie-down points.

In pre-Vietnam days, Pope AFB, N.C., was home to five squadrons of C-123Bs. The aircraft had been de-





Project Mule Train, which used C-123 aircraft, like the one above, to provide tactical airlift support for ground troops in South Vietnam, began in December 1961. At left, a C-123 lifts off from the runway at A Shau.

clared obsolete and was slated to enter retirement in 1961.

Kennedy's Decision

However, on Nov. 13, 1961, President Kennedy approved a recommendation by retired Army Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, who was serving as military representative to the President and was recalled to active duty in 1962 to serve as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Walt W. Rostow, a top national security advisor, to increase the mobility of South Vietnam's hard-pressed military. The White House authorized the Air Force to deploy one of Pope's C-123 squadrons and 40 Army H-21 helicopters to assist South Vietnam's forces.

On Dec. 6, the Defense Department ordered the 346th Troop Carrier Squadron (Assault) to the Far East for 120 days TDY "to participate in a classified training mission" in the official jargon of the day. The 346th was generally considered to be the best squadron in the wing and was manned by young pilots with an average 1,800 hours flying time—of which 1,500 were in the C-123. Crews were augmented with loadmasters (normally assigned to the Aerial Port Squadron) and additional ground personnel so that it could function as a unit upon arrival in Vietnam. (A second Mule Train squadron, the 777th TCS (A), arrived in South Vietnam on June 15, 1962. Eventually, both squadrons were placed under the 315th Air Commando Wing.)



Photo by Frederick P. Horky

Mule Train's command and control was casual, with most missions flown under Visual Flight Rules. Crews slept in tents, and as one veteran described it, "Maintenance was mostly alfresco."

On Dec. 11, Lt. Col. Floyd K. Shofner led the first eight aircraft from Pope. A second contingent took off on Jan. 2, 1962, led this time by the unit operations officer, Maj. Wayne J. Witherington. The aircraft had to be specially modified in order to traverse the vast Pacific region.

Upon arrival at Clark AB in the Philippines, the first crew spent two weeks recuperating from the long flight; later crews were often shipped out to Vietnam the same day. Two instructor pilots, Wyrick and Al Brezinsky, were pulled off to check out CIA's Air America pilots in the

C-123. Later, Air America offered jobs to both, but they declined.

Original plans called for aircrews to be assigned temporary duty for four-month tours. Soon, however, experienced crews had become so valuable that tours were lengthened to 179 days. Soon, the Air Force was giving permanent assignments for units, with individual tours extending for a year or more.

The First Group Arrives

Most sources fix Jan. 2, 1962, as the date that the initial group of aircraft arrived at Tan Son Nhut AB in South Vietnam. The unit had been preceded on Dec. 28 by a team of officers from the 315th Air Division, led by Col. Lopez J. Mantoux. On Jan. 2, the unit became the airlift branch of the Vietnamese Air Force/2nd Advanced Echelon joint operations center, with responsibility for managing C-123 mission activity.

Ground crews immediately began working on the airplanes, knowing they were going to sleep under mosquito netting in tents and eat at a field kitchen. There was no billeting for the officers, who happily went downtown to a still generally quiet Saigon, where their \$16 per diem would pay for decent quarters at local places such as the Majestic Hotel.

Later, when some crews were transferred to equally primitive conditions at Da Nang, the officers also had to live under canvas on base and dine at the DOOM—Da Nang Offi-

Photo by Al Brezinsky



The targets for the airdrops were sometimes small. One of them was described as being no bigger than a soccer field, allowing for only two bundles to be dropped per pass.

cers' Open Mess—a three-barrel dip-and-wash facility.

Mule Train's C-123s commenced operations on Jan. 3. Initial plans called for six airplanes to fly four hours per day for the foreseeable future. The detachment's task was not easy. While there were three major radar sites—at Da Nang, Tan Son Nhut, and Pleiku—command and control was casual in the extreme. There were no first-rate instrument approach systems, no navigation aids, and no true communications facilities. Communications depended primarily on the shaky Vietnamese telephone system.

Perhaps a dozen of the major local airfields had low-frequency radio beacons, but these were considered too unreliable for instrument approaches. Consequently almost 100 percent of the flying was done under "Mark One Eyeball" Visual Flight Rules—often when the actual weather was below VFR minimums.

Mule Train crews soon adopted new operational techniques. Climbs and descents would be made in a spiral through a break in the overcast—the infamous "sucker hole"—and cruise would be just on top of the generally low-lying cloud layer.

All landing approaches had to be visual, but landings were sometimes made under highly marginal conditions. Whenever possible, flights were made at 2,500 feet along the coastline, away from heavy clouds and the ever-present Viet Cong marksmen.

All of the initial Mule Train missions were dedicated to carrying cargo. One-hundred-kilo sacks of rice were a major item, and at least one pilot over-grossed his aircraft by figuring them in at 100 pounds. The most typical commodities were live ducks, chickens, pigs, and cows, packed in locally made pens of wood and, when necessary, parachuted into the outlying camps. Mule Train aircraft also transported many Vietnamese natives. On more than one occasion, a Mule Train crew would smell smoke in the aircraft and find a traveler cooking food in the aircraft's cargo compartment.

There was no pretense that this was a South Vietnamese cargo operation, nor was there any training of Vietnamese for the task. Vietnamese were employed as "kickers" to move the cargo out the rear on resupply drops.



Photo by Al Brezinsky

Camps out in the jungle didn't always have refrigeration, so sometimes supplies transported by the C-123s included "on the hoof rations"—pigs, ducks, and chickens in baskets and crates.

The Mule Train detachment, in its first month of operations, put in 548 hours of flying. In the next month, the daily flight hour total was bumped from four to seven, and the flying hour total would grow steadily for the next year.

Young Commanders

In Mule Train, the Air Force placed great confidence in young aircraft commanders, many of them first lieutenants. They were given authority to conduct operations with little oversight. In fact, many former Strategic Air Command crew members assigned to C-123 duty were awed at first by the freedom from having to call the command post when a decision had to be made.

Flying hours continued to grow, thanks to the dedication of the ground crews, who worked all night, in all weather, to get the aircraft ready. Flight mechanics were also invaluable, flying a mission, interpreting the problems, and then working with the ground crew to solve them.

Fortunately, the C-123 was a relatively simple and rugged aircraft. Its systems could take the heat and humidity better than more sophisticated aircraft. Tough landing gear and glider-strong fuselage could take the rough landings on short airfields, where stopping depended upon a slow approach, touching down on the edge of the airstrip, then full reverse and a steady, heavy foot on the anti-skid brakes.

Soon, the Mule Train route structure became linked to the hard-surface runways at Da Nang, Tan Son Nhut, Nha Trang, Bien Hoa, Pleiku, Ban Me Thuot, Hue, Da Lat, Soc Trang, Qui Nhon, and Vung Tau. Virtually every Mule Train sortie began or ended at one of these airfields, but intermediate stops could be anywhere.

Two C-123 aircraft were maintained at Da Nang to support northern outposts. Dropping supplies was handicapped by the lack of air-drop equipment, and for a time reliance was placed on 4-by-8 plywood sheets and leftover French parachutes. On one occasion, pilot Roger D. Haneline, then a captain, was dropping equipment when the plywood sheet twisted sideways on the interior aircraft ramp after the chute had deployed. The open chute kept dragging the C-123 down, and Haneline had to go to full takeoff power just to stay out of the treetops. He could not turn for fear of stalling, and the airplane was heading straight into "Indian Country"—Laos. At the last minute the loadmaster managed to cut the shrouds and the struggling C-123 could gain some altitude.

Frederick P. Horky recalls taking off from Da Nang to fly to Kontum, one of the main resupply points for the Special Forces camps. From there he flew air-drop sorties to a camp in the mountains near the Laotian border. The drop site was so small that Horky had to use five passes, drop-



Capt. Frederick Horky (left) and his C-123 crew line up at Kham Duc during an off load. Horky says in the early days, aircrew carried an incredible assortment of weapons—including a Thompson machine gun the loadmaster holds here.

ping two bundles on each pass, to deliver the cargo. The technique was to slide down the mountain, rotate to drop the bundles, claw up the hill on the other side of the camp, do a 180-degree turn, and then repeat the process, with the engines operating at maximum except takeoff power much of the time.

When he had delivered the cargo, Horky flew back to Kontum for the next load, making 10 sorties that day. During the entire period, the airlift control center had no contact with the aircraft nor had any idea of where they were or what mission they were flying. Control assumed correctly that necessary jobs were being done, satisfying the customer's needs on the spot.

Pressure for More

The Mule Train logistic operation was paying dividends. However, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Curtis LeMay soon applied pressure for the Mule Train group to become more involved in the assault role. LeMay and other Air Force leaders were concerned that the Army might pre-empt the assault role if the Air Force didn't get moving.

The Mule Train crews were experienced in assault work, but they had to improvise for conditions in Vietnam. It was difficult to decide exactly where to drop paratroops over the rough terrain, and much depended upon the map-reading ability of the crew.

The die was cast on June 28, 1962, when 16 C-123s and 12 South Vietnamese C-47s dropped paratroops under adverse weather conditions about 35 miles north of Saigon. The operation went off well despite a 500-foot ceiling.

On other occasions, the C-123s would load up troops from the South Vietnamese airborne brigade in Saigon to fly to the relief of a village that had come under attack. Over the village, the C-123 pilot would reduce power, drop flaps, and spiral down to the drop altitude and give the paratroopers a green light to jump.

At times, C-123 crews were uncomfortable with the assault role. South Vietnamese Special Forces were sometimes capricious about when and where they would fight. Straight cargo operations were hazardous enough, especially during the monsoon season when South Vietnamese troops were socked in in the mountainous valleys. To execute the mission, the C-123s would line up in a proper direction, let down in the undercast, and if they did not break out by a given altitude, would climb back up. There were usually 800-foot ceilings in the valleys, and most of the time they broke out.

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Mule Train missions during 1962 became extremely diverse, with the C-123s serving in roles ranging from duck delivery to napalm bombing. In the latter role, the Provider carried nine wooden pallets, each holding three 55-gallon drums of napalm mixed with gasoline. With a good kicker, the load could go out the back ramp in less than five seconds and leave a pattern of flame 1,200 feet long.

The ground crews and the enlisted aircrews shared the dangers of the war with their officers, and it was an enlisted man, A1C Howard W. Wright, who would become the first C-123 crew member to be wounded by VC ground fire. He was hit in the right thigh while the aircraft was descending to Tan Son Nhut on July 10. The crews began using flak vests as interim armor plate.

The rapid influx of aircraft and ad hoc nature of the requests for airlift had resulted in some Army dissatisfaction with Mule Train operations. The problem lay in the lack of aerial port facilities and inadequate communications. There was little that could be done to rectify the situation.

In October 1962, there began what became known as the Southeast Asia Airlift System. Requirements were forecast out to 25 days, and these requirements were matched against available resources. The 315th Troop Carrier Group and 8th Aerial Port Squadron came into being and set the stage for tighter control of airlift operations. Secure field phones and a radio network became available, and the carrying of cargo became much more conventional, if perhaps a little less fun.

Flying became more stable and bureaucratic. The era of the Mule Train operation was over. It left behind a record of success and a collection of procedures and techniques for cargo work in Southeast Asia. Many of the men of Mule Train returned for second and third tours, some in the C-130 that replaced the C-123. For all of them, however, there was nothing that could replace the spirit and success of the original Mule Train. ■