

Mission

Resurrect A C-123K from Airplane Heaven,

Davis Monthan AFB, Tucson, AZ

ERA ENDING -- Retired C-123 Provider aircraft are taped, sealed and stored at the Military Aircraft Storage and Disposition Center at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz. (U.S. Air Force Photo by TSgt. John Spencer)



Thanks to Danny Howser

First let me say thanks to Danny Howser, for his story “She Flies like a Kangaroo”. His adventure took place in Venezuela, and was also about a C-123K. If it had not been for his story, mine would never have come to life ! My story I am about to share was buried too deep in the back of my memory bank.

I was going through many of my documents from my flying days. I was in the process of finding material I needed for my book that I am writing, which I hope to have published by the time of our Reunion in May. In the process of doing this, I came across a lot of papers from a Mission we flew to El Salvador.



Mission History

My story begins in March of 1984, but years before this, our government gave the El Salvadoran Government three C-123K's as they were going to be retiring them soon from our Air Force inventory. The only ones that were actively flying at this time were the UC-123K aircraft assigned to the 355th Aerial Spray Unit at Rickenbacker ANGB, Ohio. This also meant that the only personnel currently qualified to crew these aircraft were our Aerial Spray crews. This was a rather small but highly trained C-123K aircrew.

In 1984 the Salvadoran Government was about to embark upon Presidential Elections in their country and were trying to figure out how to insure all the people in their country would have an opportunity to fairly vote. One way they thought this could be accomplished was to somehow take the voting polls to the people. They planned to do this by transporting the Voting Boxes, via their C-123K aircraft, to the various airports around the country. The reason behind this new method of voting was to prevent the leftist guerrillas from controlling who could vote and for whom. In theory, this plan sounds good but the guerrillas had a counter to this plan. They mined the runway at Orajuelo and a C-123K, carrying 400 voting boxes rolled over it on landing and was blown up.



The Salvadoran Government contacted the US Government and requested a replacement C-123K aircraft. Our government was happy to grant the request, but it would require bringing a retired aircraft back to operational status, from one that had been stored in the desert Boneyard at Davis Monthan AFB, in Tucson, AZ.

Boneyard Maintenance Team

The maintenance personnel who work at the Boneyard, are some of the best in the country. Many of them had years of experience, with many different types of airplanes. Once they are given the order to get a plane ready, they have a very systematic and expeditious way of getting a plane ready to fly again.

The detachment there at Davis Monthan got one ready to be test flown and if all went well on the test, it would be ready to be flown to El Salvador. I believe the airplane they got ready was tail number 585, not exactly sure of the number. Then the call came to the Air Force Reserve Headquarters, requesting a qualified C-123K aircrew be called to active duty for the purpose of performing a test flight on the aircraft, and once this was done and everything was in fine working order, this crew would deliver it to El Salvador.



Mission Notification

This is when the call came to the 355th Aerial Spray Unit for assistance with this international project. This was not going to be a “Cakewalk Mission”, the Leftist Guerilla faction in El Salvador was very strong and active. This would present a moderate challenge to our aircrew, very different from spraying mosquitoes!

The crew would have to be on Active Duty Orders, for many reason, and the orders would be a lot different than any we had previously. They read, We were authorized to perform functional check flights, and carry excessive baggage. The airplane we would eventually be taking to El Salvador would not have any parachutes or survival equipment on it when we picked it up at Davis Monthan. We would be flying over open oceans and jungle terrain. Oh YES, we would be carrying weapons. We were authorized to travel in civilian clothes and only wear Nomex Flight Suits during flight. We traveled in a Priority 2 status and were authorized to travel on MAC, Military Airlift Command aircraft if we need to at any time. We were traveling in accordance with paragraph 5 (a) of Article XVII of the Agreement in Implementation of Article IV of the Panama Canal Treaty of 1977 and that we were EXEMPT from Customs Inspections, both departing and entering the United States.

Wow ! I don't think my orders to Vietnam had all this stuff!

Flight Crew

We had a highly skilled crew consisting of the following members, Pilot, Major Mike Deckman, Pilot, Capt. James Smith, Navigator Major David Spindle, Flight Mechanic Master Sergeant Marvin Lawrence, and Loadmaster, Technical Sergeant Robert Bien



The Names: L-R Front Row: Bob Bien, Paul Dabrowski, Pauls Grubbs, Mike Deckman

Middle Row L-R: Marv Lawrence, Chuck Evey, Maintenance Guy don't know, Jeff Price, Jay Smith, Larry Bender

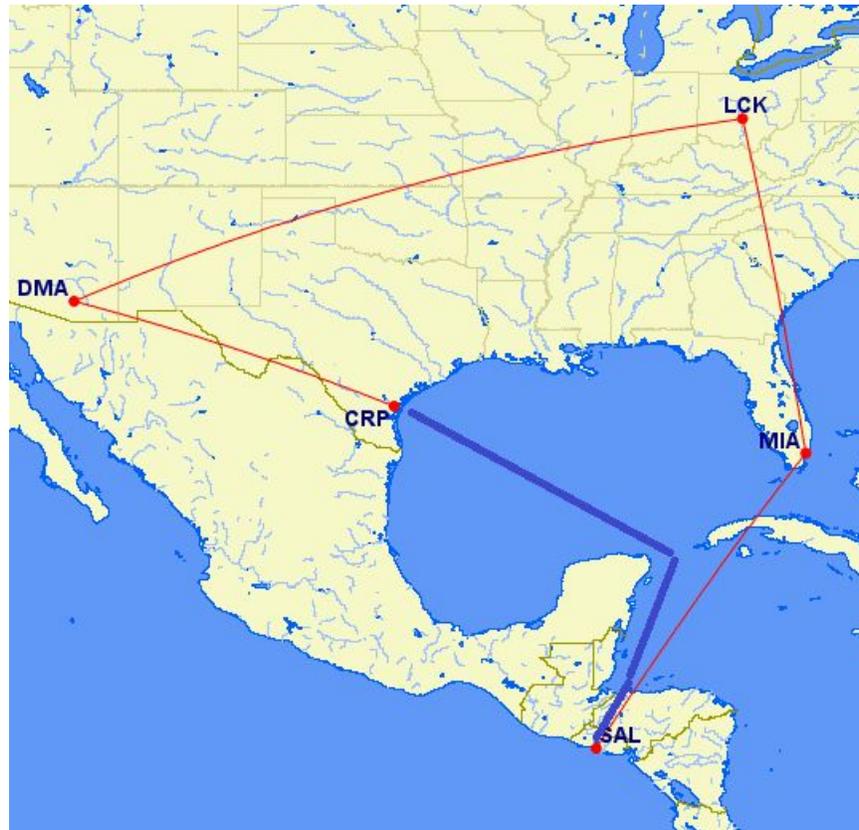
Back Row L-R: Terry Biery, Neal Snyder, Big John Philson, Ernie Connet, Jack Romero

Only member of El Salvador crew missing is

Major David Spindle

Mission Itinerary

Our planned itinerary was: Port Columbus, OH, Tucson, AZ, Davis Monthan AFB, AZ, Corpus Christi NAS, TX, San Salvador, El Salvador, Howard AFB, Panama, Miami, FL, Port Columbus, OH and return to home of record.

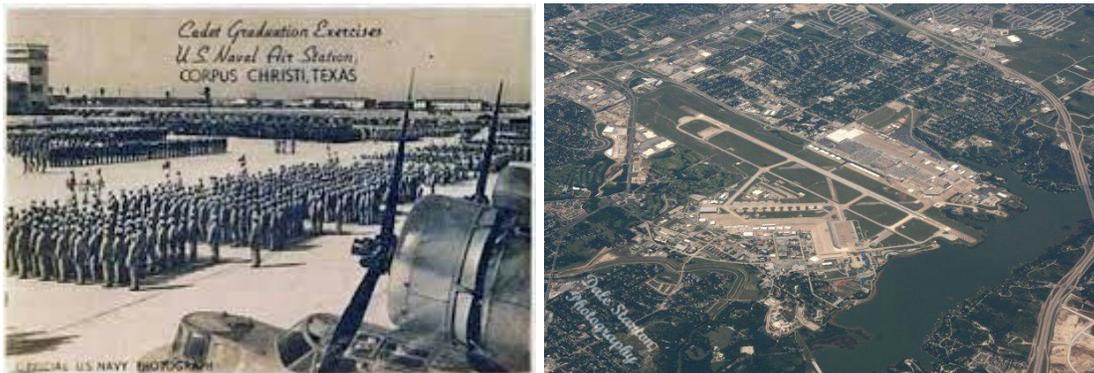


Test Flight

We preflighted the aircraft, then started the engine and we were amazed how problem free this aircraft was after sitting for a while, cocooned in the desert. Major Deckman performed all the required test flight functions, i.e. stalls, turns, instruments, especially navigation, which would be critical for this mission. Everything checked out perfect. We were all comfortable with taking her for a long, overwater journey to her new home. We decided to start fresh the next morning.

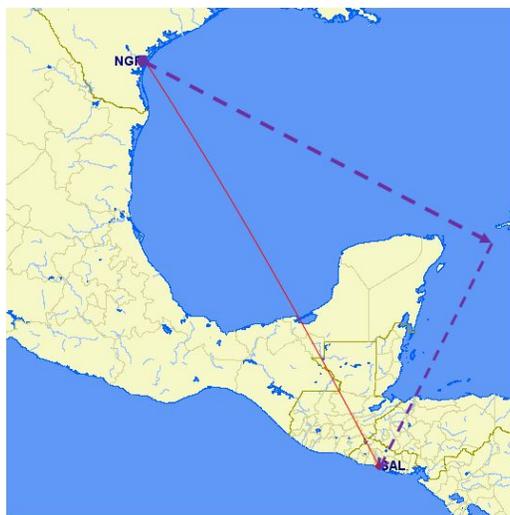
Flight to Corpus Christi, Texas

We took off early the next morning and headed to Corpus Christi, TX. The airplane flew great, The engines were excellent and burned normal oil consumption. This would also be important on an overwater mission. We landed and put the airplane to bed for the night



Flight to San Salvador, El Salvador

Bright and early the next day we arrived back at our Re-Born airplane. Our pilots and Navigator did all their required flight planning and studied our route of flight. They were cautioned that we would be traveling very close to the Mexican Controlled Air Space and Cuba. It was very important not to cross into either air space or they might launch a few fighter aircraft to intercept us, and either escort us out or possibly force us to land somewhere.



While the Red line would be the most Direct, We had to fly the Dashed Purple Line, staying in International Waters, and out of Mexico & Cuba Air Space.

Once we were all aboard, engines were started and we took off for blue skies and water. Our next stop was El Salvador. The airplane was performing excellent ! I was wondering if it ever performed so well in the past. The flight was long, can't remember exactly how long but we used most of our fuel getting there. During the flight, our Navigator got a little distracted reading his paperback novel and before too long we got a radio call that we were encroaching on Mexico Air Space. Major Deckman called to the Navigator to check our location and within a few minutes we were back on track.

We arrived in San Salvador, El Salvador in the late afternoon. We taxied in and shut down engines in the Salvadoran Military Compound. We were amazed at how well this aircraft performed throughout the entire trip. Before we could exit the aircraft, we had to change into civilian clothes. The American Embassy personnel met us at the airplane and help to act as an interpreter during the turnover of the aircraft, along with maintenance logs.

Trip to the Hotel in San Salvador

The Embassy personnel would be taking us to our hotel. We would be traveling in style, Bullet Proof Chevy Suburban. The vehicles has 2 or 3 inch thick glass and the windows did not roll down. The entire vehicle was armor plated and this was a little intimidating. We would be staying at **Hotel Presidente**, a very luxurious hotel. We had military guards with us but they were in civilian clothes and somewhat hard to recognize them as "Our Guys". Our entire crew was on the 4th floor, close to each other and we had guards in our hallways. We were instructed not to wander outside the hotel due to all the unrest in the area. We were able to eat in the hotel restaurant and all of us retired early. We could hear gunfire and even cannon fire, it did seem off in the distance.



Trip back to the USA

Early the next morning we met for breakfast and afterwards the Embassy personnel picked us up and took us to the civilian airport. They also had our airline tickets, which we were flying direct to Miami, FL.

I was trying to remember the airlines we were flying on, but I do remember it was a US carrier. We had about an hour before the plane actually departed and our crew stayed close together until boarding. There were a lot of guys with machine guns, both inside and out. There was some kind of disturbance inside the terminal, near our gate but I can't remember exactly what was causing it! I was very relieved when we actually boarded and got airborne. I think it was a couple hours of flying time back to Miami. I also remember a couple of CNN reporters sitting directly behind me and they were discussing some of the chaos they recorded. This type of talk made me much happier we were on a civilian airplane heading to the good ole USA.

We had to wait until the next day to get a flight back to Columbus. This was a very interesting mission and one that was a little unnerving at times, but it was a good experience and made all of us appreciate the fact that we grew up and lived in America.