

GREEN LIGHT-GREEN LIGHT-GREEN LIGHT

By Lt. Col Harry Jones

1975

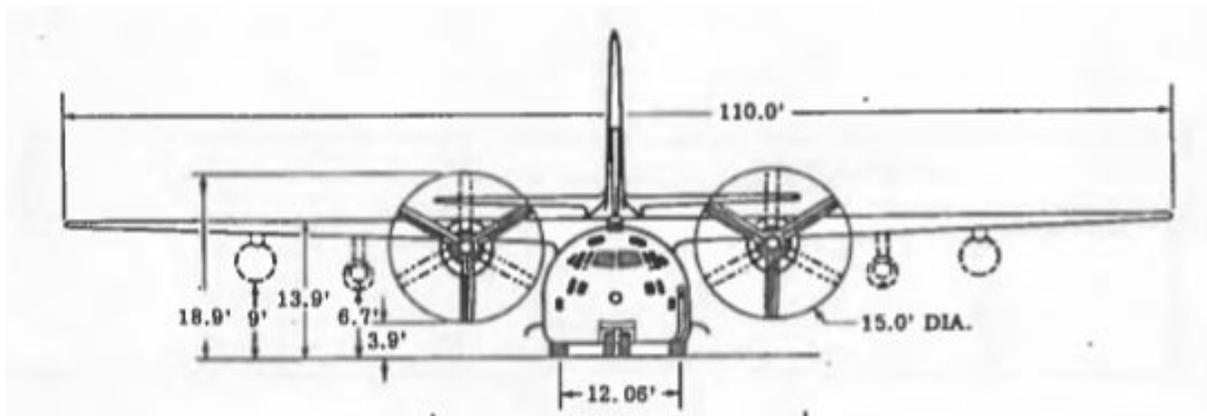
It was a beautiful summer afternoon as we climbed southeast toward out transition flying training area. The thin ciris was about flight level two zero zero and the flight visibility of ten miles plus was out-standing for central Ohio.



Captain Keith Randall was in the left seat of the twenty year old Fairchild C-123K. This was the second ride of his Phase I checkout. Neither he nor I had any notion of the ominous and unusual circumstances we would soon encounter.

"Let's level at seventy-five hundred feet and do a few steep turns," I said. I had been instructing in the "Provider" for only three years, but had already built up over 1000 hours in the bird.

Since they had equipped the old girl with auxiliary J85 jets back during the Vietnam War, we had more power to spare than any machine I had flown in the past twenty-five years. We had forty-eight more just like her in our Air Force Reserve Wing.



"Pilot from IP, those were pretty good turns. Let's set up for a stall series, OK? slow it down a little and I'll give you full flaps and gear." As captain Randall reduced the recip power to around 20 inches manifold pressure, I extended the wing flaps and looked up the stall speed for zero thrust. "Pilot, if you set up a slow rate of climb with the jets and recipis at idle, it should stall at 83 knots," I said.

As the 53,000 pound transport shuddered and the nose fell rapidly thru the horizon, I saw it. A green light on the copilot's instrument panel winked on. At the same instant someone on interphone yelled, "Green Light--Green Light--Green Light" normally green lights are good, right? Normally green Light means troops or cargo away, right? Not in this case.



As the right propeller went into reverse, our green light was informing us of this. It looked like all engine instruments were unwinding at once. Fortunately we lost only three of our four engines.

Without the 20/20 hindsight tools of modern air technology, i.e. cock-pit voice tapes and onboard instrument recorders, the next few moments can never be completely reconstructed. None of these devices were installed in the venerable "old lady".

As the aircraft yawed to the right and continued in its stall, my first thought was how the devil will we get out of a spin in a C-123. There is a spin recovery printed in the Dash One but we were lucky and did not have to try it that day. If the right recip had not been at idle RPM, and stalled as the prop reversed, we might not have been so lucky.

"I've got the aircraft" I said. I pushed the nose down to get some airspeed back and advanced the recip throttle on my good engine. As the shuddering subsided and the speed built up, I was able to get my initial fears under control.

We were still at six thousand feet. The weather was excellent and we were only about twenty miles from home base. Could we make it? Fairfield County, a civilian field near Lancaster, Ohio, had a 5000 foot runway. I could see it just four miles away.



If we couldn't get any of the other three dead engines back online, what would be our sink rate? I knew the emergency absolute ceiling must be well below sea level at our weight. If we jettisoned the 5200 pounds of fuel in our tip tanks would this do the trick? Could a successful dead stick landing be made if the other recip went into reverse?

I was brought back to the real world as the interphone came alive again.

SSgt Ron Conn, our flight mechanic, had raced to the cargo compartment. "The right engine is barely turning," he said, "almost stopped."

"Keep an eye on it Ron, I'm going to ease this right throttle up and see if it will go into forward thrust," I said.

When the unwanted electrical signal had gone to the right prop, sending it into reverse, it also shut down both jet engines. This shutting down of the J85s, and closing of their pod inlet doors, was designed into the conversion kits to prevent FODing when the recips were brought in reverse on landing roll. I now had lost not only my right R2800 but both jets as well.

RETURN TO BASE

"Pilot fly the bird while I clean up the garbage and try and get some engines back online," I said.

"FM from IP. Come on up front and let's try and start the jets while we get this bird headed back for Rickenbacker."

While Captain Randall headed us back toward home base, the flight mechanic repositioned the jet start switches for restart.



When the right recip throttle had been advanced, the green light indicating reverse thrust went out. I looked out the window now and the prop seemed to be turning at normal idle speed.

"Both jets started fine" SSgt Conn reported. All instruments were now showing we had all four engines back running.

What had happened? We had no idea at the time and were more afraid that it might happen again before we could land. We discussed feathering the gremlin plagued recip but decided to leave well enough alone.

Aircraft Write-Up

Only after we were back on the ground at Rick did anyone think of pulling the prop reverse circuit breaker. This certainly should have prevented any additional unwanted reverse prop signals.

When the 781 write-up was completed, "#2 recip went into reverse in flight. Green light came on and both jets shut down," it seemed so little to say about so much.

Only several days later did I find out that a propeller reverse box control arm had been the culprit. The T.O. 1C-123B-2-1 now has a new caution. "It is possible to connect linkage in the opposite 180 degree arc, which would cause propeller reversal at an incorrect throttle position."

The old "if it can be done, it will be done" rule had almost unmade our day.

Postscript: This story was written by the instructor pilot, Lt Col Harry Jones, in 1975 and submitted to the MAC Flying Safety magazine.



