

PREFACE

To all past, present, and future Spectres: We're all aware of the significance of a particular C-103A, tail # 3129. Being the first C-130 delivered by Lockheed, she has been lovingly dubbed "The First Lady". There's no need to go into her history here as we all know it. But, unfortunately, there are a lot of stories about the night she was hit by AAA over the notorious Ho Chi Minh trails. A lot of these stories, especially on the Internet, (Wikipedia for example) have been badly embellished or stated incorrectly to the point of being absurd. This War Story is intended to set the record straight by someone who was on that aircraft the night in question. As an aside, I would very much like to thank the following folks for their input and photos: Dale Compton, who was a fellow gunner on that crew, Ed Wakeman, our BC operator, and PJ Cook for supporting and encouraging me in this effort. I apologize to anyone who may consider the story a bit long-winded but I feel it should be told in the "first person" as I experienced it.

No Way To Treat A Lady

By Jeff Noecker, Spectre Gunner 1970-71

The date was March 24th, 1971. The night started off as usual with the crew brief and sanitization of our flight suits. I still recall hearing the pilot brief, "AF ID, dog tags, and green money". Crew 7 consisted of our AC, LtCol. Sam Schism, CP, 1Lt. Ron Biennas, Table Nav, Maj. Ed Panareese(sp), FE, Tsgt. Floyd England, NOD Operator, Maj. Larry Michealove, IR, Maj. Hank Sullivan, and IO, John Roye (sp). The gun crew (we called ourselves Sam's Hams) consisted of myself in the Rt Scanner's seat, Dale Compton on the 20's, Cal Brown in the aisle and Cliff Pound on the 40's. Sadly, I do not recall who the fifth gunner was. After pre-flight and engine start, we taxied towards the runway. We hadn't taxied very far when I noticed a great deal of liquid coming out of the bottom of the #3 engine and reported it to Floyd. He came down and took a peek. It turned out to be the P&D valve, which was stuck open and pouring JP-4 all over the taxiway. The maintenance folks came out and told us there was nothing they could do about it in any short period of time so we taxied back and parked on the hardstand. We unloaded our gear and took the bus back to the squadron. It began to look as if we were going to be cancelled when we got the call telling us that they found us another airplane. So back on the bus and out to the flight line. The tail number of the replacement aircraft was 129. Back then, most of us were in our early 20's and didn't know anything about the significance of that particular number. All gunship gunners were laterally-trained bomb loaders and weapons weenies before training in gunships. For example, Dale loaded flare and chaff cartridges on RF-4s while I loaded hard bombs and nukes on B-52s. None of us had ever heard the term "First Lady" and, even if we had, it wouldn't have had much impact on us.

We obviously had a very late take-off and by the time we crossed the Fence, it was March 25th. After patrolling our assigned area for a very short time, we came up on what is commonly referred to as a target rich environment. The good news was that we had movers all over the place. The bad news was that there were three or four 37mm guns all over the place as well. I had never seen so many guns in such a small area before so it definitely got our attention. Initially, the AAA wasn't very accurate and we spent most of our time counting the number of rounds that Gomer fired at us so we could report the numbers to the intel folks in Saigon. There was a point in the orbit in which the moon was about the two o'clock position and a gun located just outside the path of the orbit would open up. I would lean WAY out the window til my eyes watered and could see the muzzle flash of the gun when they began firing. It looked like someone taking flash pictures just a couple of seconds before the tracer ignited. This gun, too, wasn't much of a threat and I would call out the number of rounds over interphone. This went on for about a half dozen, or so, orbits. It got so predictable that I'd start leaning out the window as soon as I saw the moon appear off the nose. By the time the moon was just off the right wing, they'd open up again. A few orbits later, I'm leaning out again when several rounds of 37mm came from inside the orbit, which is an area the Right Scanner can't see. One round just missed the spinner on the #4 prop while another just missed the wing tip. I sucked myself back through the window so fast I must have looked like a turtle that just gotten spooked. I began putting pressure on the mic button to report 25 rounds, accurate, when I heard the noise of what seemed like a large rubber mallet striking a piece of hardwood on a metal table. Initially, it sounded like someone had dropped a clip of 40mm in the back. But this is where "denial" comes in. First off, I'm in an open window with a very loud turboprop engine running about 15 feet away. Secondly, I have my back to the booth, which is effectively blocking the front end of the cargo compartment from the aft. There's obviously no way I could have heard ANYTHING from the aft gun area. We rolled out and began the EPs. The first order of business was interphone check in. Everyone reported in except the NOD operator. Dale went to check on him and found where his interphone cord had been cut by the shrapnel. He, however, was OK and Dale informed the crew. We immediately contacted Moon Beam (night time ABCCC), declared an emergency, and headed west to Thailand. After we'd all settled down and determined that the airplane was "flyable", we began checking out systems. At the pilot's request, I put my NiCad Habu light between my teeth and turned around in the scanner's seat to monitor the RH side hydraulic accumulator. It had a gauge glass on it similar to a 40 cup coffee percolator. During normal gear lowering, the red fluid would drop about an inch within the glass tube and then rise again. When he put the gear handle down THAT night, the red fluid disappeared down the tube and sprayed all over the place. We had to put the main gear down manually, which isn't fun. It takes 360 turns with a speed handle connected to a crank system that hadn't been used since the airplane was built in the 1950's. We all took turns at it and it had to be done separately for each main gear. It occasionally took about 30 seconds to make one full turn on the speed handle. A dozen turns would wear you out. The CP has the responsibility to manually lower the nose gear by lifting up an access plate on the floor near his feet, turning the then exposed valve, and using a pump handle located near the valve. It was just about then when Floyd, who had previously come down from the flight deck to inspect everything, came up on interphone and briefed us on the damage. We'd

been hit in the belly, just aft the nose gear wheel well bulkhead. There's a raised wheel well pocket that that can be seen on the cargo deck floor, directly under the flight deck. It has a 6x6 (approx) inch Plexiglas widow that allows one to inspect the nose gear from inside the aircraft. Floyd reported that the Plexiglas window had been replaced by a rather large, jagged hole that measured in excess of a foot square. I don't know if any of you ever stood up in a 130's nose gear wheel well but it is cavernous. The strut and wheels only take up about 50% of the space. The remainder is chock full hydraulics and electronics. Because of the damage there, we weren't able to tell the condition or position of the landing gear as the indicators no longer functioned. After the CP did his manual pumping routine, Floyd looked back in the inspection hole with a flashlight and pronounced the nose gear down. Meanwhile, Cal and I opened the case of hydraulic fluid, that lived under the electronics rack in front of the scanner's seat, and began refilling the accumulators that had emptied out on the gear lowering attempt. We weren't going to attempt the gear handle bit again but those accumulators serviced more systems than just the landing gear.

We had just crossed the fence back into Thailand when Floyd unexpectedly appeared on the cargo floor and disappeared back under the flight deck again with his flashlight. He later said that, while still up on the flight deck, the hair stood up on his neck and felt that something was terribly wrong. Well, thank God for Floyd's neck hair! The nose gear had cycled itself back up and, with no working indicators, we had no way of knowing it. So, take your choice; divine intervention or neck hair. He had the CP do his pump thing once again but, this time, Floyd remembered something from his Tech School days. He grabbed a stick of some kind and reached into the gear well with it. He told us later that there's a little white mark on the strut that can be seen when the gear is locked. He used the stick to over-center some kind link and locked the gear down manually. OK, so everything is peachy dandy. The gear is down and locked, the flaps worked, all of the engines are running, no more leaks were detected, equipment is stowed, and we're all strapped in on final. My crash position was on the floor with my back to the booth. We touched down and I knew all was good in the world once again. Yeah, foolish me. Col Sam calls out, "hang on crew...got no brakes"! I pictured myself surviving through all that crap while airborne, just to be killed in a ground loop at the end of the runway. He reversed the engines, (louder than I'd ever heard before), and we decelerated in pretty short order. When we were about 5 mph, Sam tells everyone to un-strap and get ready to "get the hell away from this airplane"! Just as I had un-strapped and began standing up, the CP decided to try HIS brakes and THEY worked! If anyone ever wondered what a redundant system was, there's your answer. The airplane jolted to a stop and I went flying, ass over teakettles, across the plywood 20mm brass box that was built into the floor. (Insert unkind officer/Pilot epithet here). We all exited off the ramp, to nearly be run over by every vehicle on base with a rotating red light on it's roof, that had chased us down the runway. Ed Wakeman recalls the ominous number 13 on the crash truck. (Apparently way too many "nasty" 13's in Ed's career) We waited off in the grass, several hundred feet away, waiting for the all clear to approach the airplane. Out of the darkness, this character in civilian attire approached us and asked who the pilot was. We all pointed to Col Sam. This guy was the Lockheed Tech Rep for Ubon, wanting to know how we got the airplane back. In his familiar Tennessee drawl he replied, "Just flew

it.....Piece of cake". DURING this conversation, we "youngsters", with the immortality complex, were joking about cheating death and "just another day in Spectre". That's when the tech rep replied to Sam, "This airplane shouldn't have been flyable with THAT amount of damage in THOSE places". After that statement, I begin to understand the end of a Billy Joel, Piano Man lyric that goes, "as the smile ran away from his face". At that moment, the smiles ran away from ALL of our faces. When the aircraft was deemed to be safe to walk around again, I went up to see the damage. Had I seen THAT hole while we were still airborne, surely goodness and mercy would have followed me cuz I'd have grabbed my chest pack and gotten the hell out of that airplane!

In the following days, a subsequent inspection showed the full extent of the damage. The Nav and NOD operator were found to be two of the luckiest puppies alive. The 37mm exploded directly under the Nav's seat, and directly behind the NOD position. The floor at the Nav's position had a horseshoe shaped pattern of holes that left the seat UNTOUCHED, in the middle of the horseshoe. The NOD had a similarly shape pattern of holes around the circumference of the crew entrance door, where his sensor was located. Additionally, life support found shrapnel fragments in his parachute back pack. He was leaning over into the scope when the round exploded. Had he been sitting upright, there'd be another name added to the Viet Nam Wall.

John Roye was one of the best IOs I'd ever flown with. I found it inconceivable that he never saw the Triple A that hit us, nor called for an evasive maneuver. I approached him the next day and asked about it. As it turns out, there were so many accurate rounds heading our way, that ANY maneuver would have caused MULTIPLE hits. He said that, in the little amount of time he had to make a decision, he figured he was better off keeping that knowledge to himself rather than putting the aircraft in greater jeopardy.

So let it be known that at approximately 1:45 AM, on the morning of March 25, 1971, the First Lady was gang raped by shrapnel, and otherwise horrifically violated. But she maintained her dignity and, beaten and bloodied, she safely brought her crew home. Therefore, if any of you go to Eglin to visit her in the Air Force Armaments Museum, treat her with respect and honor. She deserves it and she's EARNED it.

The following are private and official photos taken of the First Lady in the days following the triple A hit. And one is of the shrapnel fragments that were recovered.

