

POWER PACK-1965: When C-123 SEA skills resolved a Hercules-sized SNAFU!

(Unofficial personal memoir of then Captain Hugh D. Perry, USAF, April 2010. Colleagues named were almost all C-123 SEA veterans at Pope AFB upgraded to the C-130E.)

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President LBJ's strategy for Vietnam turned sour in early 1965. He sorely needed a diversion. He found it in the Dominican Republic where our ambassador reported the natives becoming exceedingly restless and would the President please do something! LBJ did so with CINCLANT Task Force 122 combined with a massive airlift of the 82nd Airborne Division from Fort Bragg, NC. In crisis mode the Washington Establishment labored mightily and brought forth a succession of plans, all seemingly based on the assumption that any military option could be executed by the snap of a Presidential finger. Meanwhile, the actual military forces under wiser heads were being efficiently assembled for whatever strategy might eventually issue forth.

(I was a tiny cog in this giant Chinese Fire Drill and the following begins with mostly indirect knowledge from others. The Army version of Power Pack was presented at an Army Historian's Conference in 1998, thirty-three years later by a non-participant in the event. That Army version suffers the same probable memory lapses as my version crafted from the Air Force airlifters' viewpoint. Other airlifters' generally similar personal accounts are on various web-sites. Edit this with your own memories of interesting times.)

From all domestic U.S. bases an armada of C-130 Hercules airplanes assembled at Pope AFB. Their crews spent endless night and day hours in briefings, re-briefings and re-re-briefings. About noon April 28th they were finally sent home for eight hours crew rest, only to be scrambled prematurely by an abrupt White House decision to "GO!". In the mission Command Post I added delay to confusion by initiating the wrong alert net, admitted later to a displeased Colonel Rodney "Red" Newbold.

As usual the crews overcame that and every other obstacle and within a very short time C-130's earlier readied with 82nd Airborne equipment and troops were taxiing for takeoff. Some taxied short of crewmen, the slots filled willy-nilly as men arrived and went to leading planes in line. Captain Frank Goodell sent Captain Randy Fisher forward, probably to join Captain Leon Franklin. Similar move-ups were common.

For over two hours at half-minute intervals 144 very heavy Herk's rolled and rolled and rolled, lifting off barely clear of the trees to the north. Major Harry Slater was dispatched to Raleigh ATC to convey in person the overriding military necessity. He reported the irate dismay of controllers and commercial traffic alike at the sudden disruption of airways all down the east coast into the Caribbean. A PanAm flight was heard to defy ATC re-direction, complying only when told a stream of C-130s were closing in at his altitude.

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Captain Carl Wyrick was the lead Aircraft Commander with Captains Huey Long, Bobby Gassiot and John Coble. Colonel William B. Welch was aboard as mission commander. The mission had been planned to secure San Isidro Airport at Santa Domingo with an initial airdrop of troops and equipment to secure the airfield, to be followed quickly by normal assault landing with more troops and heavier equipment.

Wyrick was in continuous contact with TALKING BIRD, the National Command Authority's Airborne Command Post. When advised en route of the White House decision changing the initial air drop portion to assault land the entire force together he immediately realized the enormity of that change. By Colonel Welch's authority he relayed through TALKING BIRD the immutable facts that equipment rigged for airdrop cannot be readily offloaded on the ground

except by heavy equipment K-loaders and fork lifts, none of which existed at San Isidro. All the initial elements' rolling equipment if assault landed would be useless to the troops.

When these unwelcome facts finally sank in at the National Command level a series of on-scene decisions were allowed to sort out the mission elements according to fuel endurance and bases with 463L ground equipment. Most elements rigged for airdrop diverted to Ramey AFB, Puerto Rico, some to Homestead AFB, Florida and some landed at San Isidro where Captain Bobby Gassiot directed a 'volunteer' Army force to manhandle downloading of rolling stock rigged for parachute delivery.

Ramey AFB was a Strategic Air Command base notoriously unhelpful to any but other SAC forces. But in this instance fortune smiled in the persons of Major Roy Stoufer from Pope, and the SAC commander. He brooked no delay in turning out every piece of equipment and able body to lend a hand, while under Stoufer's expert guidance the planes were downloaded, derigged,

re-rigged and loaded for assault landing and ground off-load and the mission resumed in record time.

In due course all mission elements arrived, secured San Isidro Airport and established the force ashore under overall command of Vice Admiral Masterson commanding Joint Task Force 122 from the LANTCOM cruiser *Newport News*. Marines from the aircraft carrier *Boxer*, earlier first on the scene to protect American evacuees, had played a part in the engagement, handing over to the 82nd a cease fire corridor through blacked out Santa Domingo to link the airport with the US Embassy and La Ambassador hotel across the city.

Comparing notes after approach and landing under low ceilings the pilots were at a loss to understand why one plane would breakout near the centerline and another plane only minutes later broke out way off course. Ah ha! All became clear when the Navy revealed that the TACAN (or maybe VOR) approach fix was aboard ship cruising slowly back and forth offshore.

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Intensive buildup continued by C-130's staging from Pope AFB of 82nd Airborne combat and Air Force support elements. A few C-123's arrived, probably from Hurlburt AFB, one pilot being Captain Jerry Axtell, formerly of Pope AFB and C-123 SEA. All the joint service forces settled in to undergird a diplomatic settlement while air lifters assumed intra-island support of ground teams and coordination with the Task Force off shore.

Major H.W. 'Bo' Bohannon summoned me to San Isidro and Colonel Welch dispatched me to be Airlift Liaison to VADM Masterson aboard the *Newport News*. From there Army helicopters lifted me ashore and back as needed, these being somewhat nerve wracking as Army pilots were unfamiliar with landing on a moving sea vessel. Captain Lester 'Pop' Warner was similarly assigned to the Army commander.

POWER PACK command soon shifted ashore to Air Force MGen McNickle for whom I became Protocol Officer. As such I took part in some interesting exchanges between the several elements of the Republic's belligerent parties, civilian and military. One involved escorting a decidedly Hispanic looking "Mr. Smith" to San Juan, make a phone call to have him met by persons unnamed, then "forget everything". Another of several was recording STATE officials' interviews of Hispanic women alleging violence and sexual assault by troops of uncertain allegiance. Still another was a tense afternoon assigned by General McNickle to stall two belligerent generals demanding of him a helicopter. As they slapped machine guns against their boots and eyed helicopters nearby, my Army aviator friends assured me every one was unflyable, until I got the signal and one miraculously became available.

While most Latin American countries remained conspicuously aloof from the fracas in DOMREP some made token gestures. Argentina supplied some doctors who for some reason had to be delivered at night by a three car convoy I conducted through the cease fire corridor across the blacked out city to La Ambassador Hotel. By the time they found no room at the inn and the plumbing, food and everything else a disaster, their transportation was long gone, per General McNickle's explicit instructions to me, "Don't bring them back!". (Major Bohannon flew in some Argentine army troops in late May, after the time frame of this memoir.)

These varied assignments seemed sufficient for MGen McNickle to nominate me for the Joint Services Commendation Medal, presented at Tachikawa, Japan later that year. Possibly the shortest period for anyone among my illustrious airlift colleagues to earn that prestigious award. Major Benjamin Kraljev, a C-123 SEA veteran of the first Muletrain deployment, replaced me at San Isidro. Bored by the reduced DOMREP tempo he somehow arranged for Captain Charlie West to encounter Ellise Kraljev with a broken knee in the commissary parking lot, bringing Ben home for medical reasons. Tricky fellow that Ben.

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The Dominican Republic crisis lingered on for several months without any notable realignment of political forces in the Carribean nations. But it had the desired result of diverting the media and public scrutiny from President LBJ's growing follies in Vietnam. Several objective history sources agree that Vietnam strategy deserved more, not less public attention during that critical period before escalation to a half-million US ground forces. Sharper questions might have tempered LBJ and his advisors' running roughshod over, through and around statutory military channels and experienced commanders.

So much for POWER PACK, an ill-timed, high level distraction.

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