

A former Forward Air Controller (FAC) is witness to one of the most memorable and life changing events of a long career, and that from the perspective of an uninvited guest. He found front row seating above a cast of thousands at an event of global significance.

BACKGROUND:

As a combat veteran of the Vietnam conflict, with tours of duty as a BATCAT at Korat RTAFB, Thailand, and Nakon Phanom RTAFB, Thailand, as a Nail FAC, I was given my choice of available assignments upon my DROS from Vietnam. My decision had been made well before my departure, it would be a change of Command from Air Defense Command to a billet with Military Airlift Command (MAC), Travis AFB, California. Serving first with the 75th MAS, in the C-141 "Starlifter" then with 7th MAS. I was to return to the 75th MAS as cadre for the first delivery of a C-5A "Galaxy" to the global transportation fleet.

While there were rigors in fielding a new aircraft and facing logistic challenges to keep the new inventory in the air, by 1972 the system had come of age and reliability of the C-5A had improved markedly. So it was that by early 1973 I found myself back at Korat moving critical retrograde cargo from SEA to the states. We had been given a tight schedule from Clark AFB in the Philippines but after arriving at Korat in a heavy rain one of the casting trucks of the main landing gear slid off a taxiway, necessitating a takeoff delay that no one was happy about. Mother MAC was livid but since our new gross weight exceeded the ramp capacity, we had to make an untimely departure for Clark AFB, the only viable destination for ground support.

Our flight was uneventful until we landed (12 February 1973, 1600hrs) and it became apparent that they REALLY did not want to see us! We were escorted by several vehicles to the only suitable parking spot, and our crew was informed that NO ONE was to leave the airplane. Our radios were still on when "Freedom 1" called in for landing. By then we realized what was happening, so I took it upon myself to open the overhead hatch, assemble a safety harness and climb out above the crowd to watch the first arrival of our prisoners of war from the Hanoi Hilton! By 1616 the arriving C-141 had made a clockwise turn to place the crew door directly in front of me and the entourage and dignitaries and family members. I watched POWs Alvarez and Reisner step off the airplane, salute the flag, and meet Admiral Gayle and General Moore. Then one by one the entire FREEDOM FLIGHT deplaned, finally, home!

It was both a somber event and a joyous occasion for me. Simply being a "fly-on-the-wall" at one of the greatest military events in history left me with an enduring appreciation for the sacrifice these gallant aviators had made, for themselves and for their country.

In retrospect, I have always wondered what the POWs thought as they departed the Freedom Flight crew door. The first thing each of the returning prisoners would notice was a "HUGE" C-5A sitting before them, something few would have known even existed. And, on top of the airplane sat a proud young officer enjoying the show of a lifetime. Nail 213