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Crew Brings C-123 Through Weird Flight

SAIGON—The top 10 feet of a palm tree stuck fast to the C-123's wing as Maj. James R. McCarthy struggled to keep the aircraft from settling into the Gulf of Siam off the Vietnam coast. A1C Steve Bailey, the loadmaster, after a hurried okay to dump six tons of oil drums, had 45 seconds to jettison the load before the C-123 would slam into the sea.

It was only after the first 55-gallon drum rolled out of the plane and bobbed in the calm waters that the aircraft commander McCarthy felt he had a reasonable chance of saving his five-man crew and badly damaged C-123.

In the struggle with the crippled aircraft, the crew—whose members were flying together for the first time—experienced one of the most bizarre flights of the Vietnam war.

Several hours earlier they had left Tan Son Nhut AB outside Saigon, flying fuel oil to a small U.S. Army Special Forces camp southwest of Saigon.

The camp's 1500-foot strip would give McCarthy plenty of space to make an assault landing and drop off the oil. He had put the low-slung Provider into shorter places before.

Once unloaded, the plane could take off with no difficulty.

BUT WHEN the 309th Air Commando Sq. aircrew landed, they were in for a near-fatal-surprise.

As the transport rolled to a stop, armed Viet Cong ran out of the surrounding woods and began shooting at the plane.

McCarthy had 20 seconds to make up his mind whether to try taking off overloaded or jettison the cargo. "I chose to risk a shorter takeoff run, one that we normally would never attempt with a heavily-loaded aircraft, as I knew to stay long enough to jettison my cargo would have meant certain death," McCarthy recalled.

Even as he made his decision, McCarthy—pilot of 600 combat missions in Vietnam—began

turning his aircraft around. He had the added problem of a flat nose-wheel tire which had blown when he landed.

With a six-ton load aboard, every bit of the 1500 feet of runway was needed. Now with the nose gear tire flat, the extra drag meant even more space was necessary.

As the twin-engine transport lumbered along the rocky strip, a second band of Viet Cong came out of a jungle road about midway down the runway.

One of the VC ran across the runway, and the enemy fired both sides as the plane rolled past them. One bullet tore into the right wing.

AT THE END of the runway, the plane broke from the ground. Capt. Frederick D. Hutchinson, the co-pilot, retracted the landing gear as McCarthy tried to lift the plane enough to go over a barrier of 20-foot palm trees, but the big plane weighed too much. It slammed into one palm. The tree struck the plane just outboard of the left wing landing light well. Glass covering the well shattered, leaving a hole one foot high and a foot and a half wide on a critical control surface area of the wing.

Instead of shearing and falling away, the tree stuck in the metal skin covering the wing. The top four feet of the tree trunk which had six-foot-long fronds went along with the plane.

The hole and the palm, which now seemed to sprout from the wing, unsettled the plane's control surfaces. The plane dipped on its left wing.

McCarthy reduced power to the right engine to level the wings so the plane would not cartwheel if the wingtip should hit water or the beach.

Because of the reduced power, the plane began to sink. The pilots tried frantically to nurse the Provider up, but without full power and with the extra drag of a hole and a tree in one wing, the plane continued to descend.

Never more than 15 feet off the ground, the C-123 was now down to about three feet above the water. Flight mechanic TSgt Rogerio Molino adjusted engine power settings as needed, freeing McCarthy and Hutchinson to fly the aircraft.

Displaced air over the wing

surface set up a vibration. The flaps were still in full down position, but Hutchinson was gently maneuvering them to the up or standard flight position.

The pilots now had the plane in a slight nose-high position to help the jettison work going on in the cargo hold.

As Bailey slipped the first knot on the cargo tie-down straps, Maj. Vernon J. Rood, who was along as an extra navigator, pitched in to help. The crew navigator, Capt. Jack G. Donovan, also came back to help roll out the heavy drums.

As each barrel rolled away, the plane climbed slowly. McCarthy turned toward Binh Thuy AB, about 80 miles away near Can Tho.

SSgt Gerald A. Mason was on duty in the control tower when McCarthy radioed an emergency call. Mason called out the fire department and alerted rescue helicopters.

When McCarthy's crew got the aircraft to 2500 feet, they began testing to see if it could be landed. They found it could, but they would have to go in faster than design specifications.

It was then McCarthy began to think of having the crew parachute. Mason told him a secure area was adjacent to the base, but any drift from a particular spot would carry the crewmen into enemy hands.

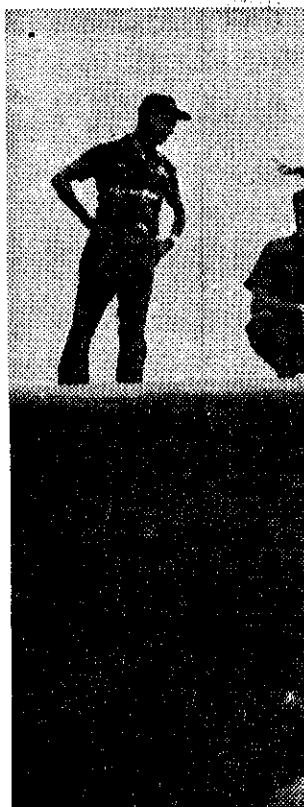
McCarthy elected to bring the plane into Binh Thuy with the crew aboard.

He wanted the runway covered with greasy foamite, a mixture used to smother fires. This would give him a slick surface and prevent sparks from igniting his aircraft should his nose gear fail because of the unusually high landing speed.

After laying a strip of foam down the runway, fire trucks stood by to cover the landing. They weren't needed. McCarthy and his crew landed safely.

Commenting on the flight, McCarthy said the only reason he and the five men with him are alive is that the crew displayed the highest degree of discipline.

"Each crew member," he said, "did exactly what he should have done in the exact sequence required. I believe this speaks favorably for the excellent crew training they have received and their own individual professional competence."



ONE OF THE MOST bizarre flights described to maintenance Rood was aboard a C-123 to make an emergency landing a palm tree. The top 10

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ONE OF THE MOST bizarre flights of the Vietnam conflict is described to maintenance men by Maj. Vernon J. Rood, left. Rood was aboard a C-123 which was attacked by VC and had to make an emergency takeoff, during which the aircraft hit a palm tree. The top 10 feet of the tree stuck in the wing.