

THE BOEING B-17s by Dr. Joe F. Leeker

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CAT Boeing B-17G 44-85531, bearing the abbreviated serial “531” (left) and the fake serial “639” (right), both taken at Clark AFB in the fall of 1957 by Merle C. Olmsted (with kind permission from Merle C. Olmsted)

Most people who heard about the aircraft owned or operated by Air America would say that a Boeing B-17 had been used at the time of Civil Air Transport, but that Air America had never had one. Yet, among the papers preserved at the Air America Archives at Richardson, there is an undated list called “CAT Incorporated / Air America Inc.”¹ that lists key words concerning the history of CAT and Air America. Each key word is followed by one or more dates ranging from 1950 to 1976. The key word “Aircraft” has several entries, and one of them is

“Accept delivery of Boeing 16 AUG 1960”.

As the Boeing 727s ordered via Air Asia arrived only in October and November 1966, the Boeing in question cannot be one of them – the different month even excludes that it is simply a typist’s error for the year. So this Boeing was most certainly the B-17G that was to be used on *Project Coldfeet*: N809Z no.1, that is Boeing B-17G 44-85531, c/n 8440. This B-17 was one of the aircraft formerly operated by Western Enterprises Inc. of Taiwan. Western Enterprises had been founded by the CIA in 1951 to funnel covert American assistance to the Republic of China. Their activities included airborne intelligence flights over mainland China as well as dropping agents, using aircraft and crews of Civil Air Transport.² In 1952, the CIA also trained 5 Taiwanese pilots and 2 mechanics in Japan in low-level flights and drop techniques, and in 1953, this new “Special Mission Team” or “Special Operations Unit” was supplied with 2 B-17s on loan from Western Enterprises – with more to follow.³ Between 1954 and 1959, 3 of these B-17s are known to have been shot down by the People’s Liberation Army:⁴

- one over Fujian on 26 May 54 by anti-aircraft artillery, killing 4 crew members
- one in Jiangxi on 22 June 56 by a PLA MIG-17, killing 11 people aboard
- “835” of the 34th Squadron over Guandong on 29 May 59 by a PLA MIG-17PF, killing 14 people aboard.

¹ “CAT Incorporated / Air America Inc.”, in: UTD/CIA/B4F6A.

² Conboy / Morrison, *The CIA’s secret war in Tibet*, pp.37/8.

³ Conboy / Morrison, *The CIA’s secret war in Tibet*, pp.57/8.

⁴ See: “ROCAF combat losses since 1950”, at: <http://www.taiwanairpower.org/shootdowns.html>.

In 1957, the workhorse for covert China overflights from Taiwan still was the B-17. These CIA aircraft had been stripped of all weapons and national markings and had been painted black. In mid-September, one of these Taiwan-based B-17s was flown to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. Here two Polish five-man crews from Wiesbaden in Germany – code name “Ostiary”–, who normally flew penetrations of Soviet airspace, were trained on the aircraft for covert missions into Tibet. After the training had been completed, the B-17 was flown to Kadena, Okinawa, where training was continued with the Tibetan agents that had to be parachuted into their country. Two missions into Tibet are known to have been flown by the B-17: the first one in early October 57, and the second one in early November 57, each time staging thru Kurmitola airfield, East Pakistan, but in 1958 the program was continued using a C-118A.⁵ The aircraft – Boeing B-17G 44-85531, c/n 8440 – was sometimes flown as “531”, but sometimes it used other, fake tail numbers like “639” – probably during the missions into Tibet in order to make the aircraft non-attributable. It was last flown in December 57 and then put into storage at Clark where it was photographed in June 1958 by Merle C. Olmsted. When it remained at Clark, it bore USAF insignia, probably in order to avoid attention.⁶ Its ultimate fate is unknown, but it was probably scrapped. Merle C. Olmsted recalls: “After it went into storage, I remember we got orders from USAF to remove the windshield assembly and other parts, which we did. I assume they went somewhere to go on another B-17. I think the airplane was still there when I left.”⁷ The salvage of the B-17 began in March 58 (removal of windshield and carburetors), when it had a total of 2,000 hours on it, and the remains of the aircraft were still at Clark in October 58.⁸

Nevertheless, this very same aircraft, B-17G 44-85531, was registered to a CIA front called Atlantic General Enterprises, Washington, DC, as N809Z (no.1) on 1 September 60, evidently after having passed thru the hands of Air America, as mentioned above – possibly only a nominal change of ownership. In May 61, however, Atlantic General Enterprises changed the identity of B-17G N809Z from 44-85531 (c/n 8440) to 44-83785, that is c/n 32426, as has been reported⁹ – probably when it became evident that the former Tibetan workhorse could no longer be used, and this second B-17G N809Z (44-83785 c/n 32426) was to become the first aircraft of the newly founded Intermountain Aviation. The official explanation of this change of identities was another one: “Involved in the history of 44-83785, as recorded in FAA registration records, was that the B-17 was initially identified as 44-85531, that documents recording the sale to its first civil owner, Atlantic-General Enterprises of Washington D.C. (617 Blair Bldg) were lost, and that later a Franklin Schultz of Atlantic-General corrected the serial number to 44-83785.”¹⁰ This was the B-17 that was handed over to former Air America pilots Connie Seigrist and Douglas Price on 18 August 1961.¹¹ The origin of N809Z (no. 2) is unknown, but it is believed to be another survivor of the Taiwan-based CIA fleet. For “about 1961/2 Doc Johnson ferried the last of the B-17s back to the West Coast.”¹² Probably between May and August 61, it was modified by Lockheed at Burbank to be able to carry the Fulton Skyhook recovery system. Only on 4 October 1962, N809Z (no. 2) was officially re-registered to Intermountain Aviation,¹³ although its use with Intermountain Aviation during *Project Coldfeet* in May / June 1962 is well described in the excellent book

⁵ Conboy / Morrison, *The CIA's secret war in Tibet*, pp.58-65; 71-75.

⁶ E-mail dated 15 February 2004, kindly sent to the author by Leif Hellström.

⁷ E-mail dated 21 March 2004, kindly sent to the author by Merle C. Olmsted.

⁸ E-mail dated 26 March 2004, kindly sent to the author by Merle C. Olmsted.

⁹ Goodall, *Warbirds directory*, p.27.

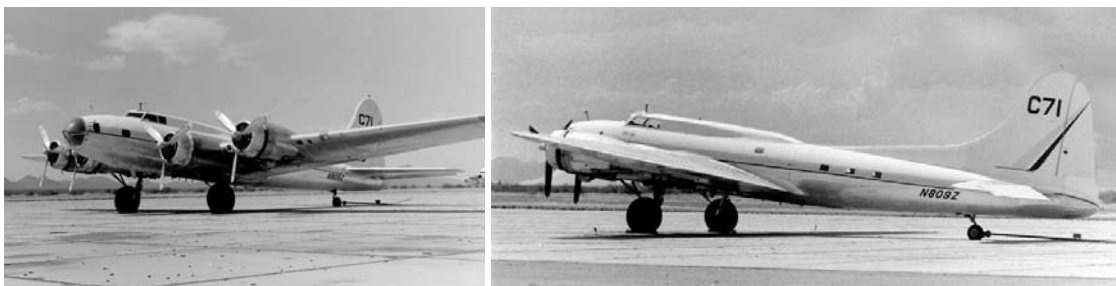
¹⁰ Letter dated 4 May 1987, sent to Prof. Bill Leary by Scott A. Thompson, in: UTD/Leary/I B22F5.

¹¹ Leary / LeSchack, *Project Coldfeet*, pp.119-20.

¹² Letter dated 3 June 1981 sent to Prof. Bill Leary by (signature unreadable, but believed to be E.C. Kirkpatrick), at: UTD/Leary/I B20F4.

¹³ E-mail dated 25 February 2004, kindly sent to the author by Leif Hellström.

by Leary / LeSchack. A photo of N809Z with the Fulton Skyhook system installed can be found at <http://cia.gov/csi/studies/95unclass/104.gif>. In 1965, Intermountain's N809Z even performed in the James Bond movie *Thunderball*.¹⁴ Its subsequent history is well documented by publications like *Aviation Letter*. In July 69, it was converted to fire tanker, serialised "22", "C71", and "B71" and used as a fire-fighter. On 7 March 73, it was still present at Marana with Intermountain,¹⁵ which became part of Evergreen Helicopters, Marana, AZ, on 1 March



Two pictures of N809Z taken at Marana, AZ on 21 September 74 by "eLaReF"
(with kind permission from the photographer)

75; a photo of N809Z in action, taken by Tim Foley at Carefree, AZ in July 1979, can be seen at <http://www.wildlandfire.com/pics/air/b17.jpg>. On 6 March 79, it was re-registered as N207EV.¹⁶ The aircraft was current with Evergreen at least until 1992, when it was withdrawn from use and stored. At that time it was registered to Evergreen Ventures Inc, who transferred it to Evergreen Vintage Aircraft Inc., McMinnville, OR, on 29 March 99 and re-registered it on 21 April 99; it was still current with them in March 2004.¹⁷

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¹⁴ Leary / Le Schack, *Project Coldfeet*, p. 152.

¹⁵ *Aviation Letter* 77, April 73, p.4.

¹⁶ Goodall, *Warbirds directory*, p.27.

¹⁷ Request submitted to the FAA on 13 March 2004 at <http://162.58.35.241/acdatabase/>.