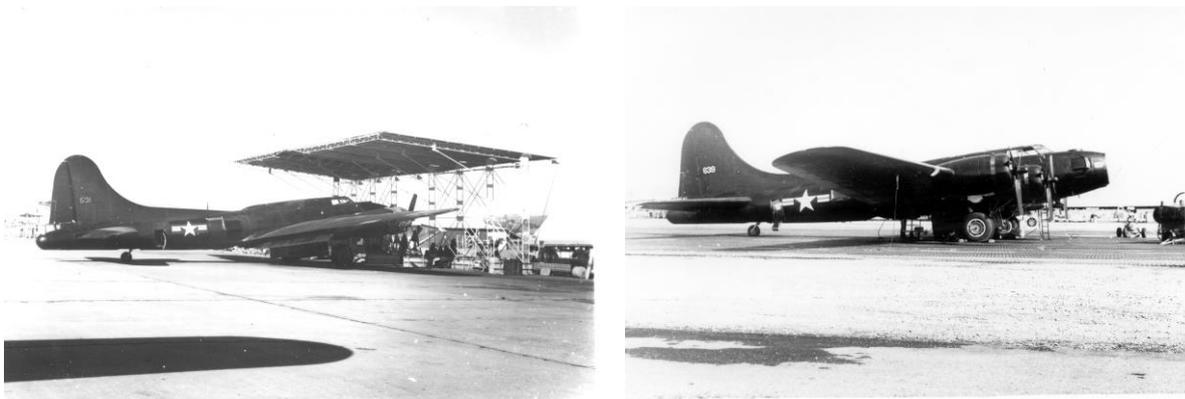


## THE BOEING B-17s

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”<sup>1</sup> 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 RB-17G 44-85531, msn 8440. This B-17 was one of the aircraft formerly operated by Western Enterprises Inc. of Taiwan and its successor NACC. 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, the unit that flew the B-17s had become the 34<sup>th</sup> Squadron of the Republic of

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

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

<sup>3</sup> Conboy / Morrison, *The CIA’s secret war in Tibet*, pp.57/8. One was RB-17G 44-85531 (msn 8440), which was used on the CIA flights to Tibet in 1957. This RB-17G had been was dropped from the USAF inventory in May 1950 “by reclamation”. A later replacement aircraft was 44-83785 (msn 32426), RoCAF’s last B-17. This VB-17G had been dropped from the USAF inventory in September 1956 “by transfer to other agency” (e-mail dated 30 October 2013, kindly sent to the author by Archie DiFante of AFHRA/RSA). For more details see the file *CAT, Air Asia, Air America – the Company on Taiwan III: Work for the US Government* within my *The History of Air America*.

China Air Force. Between 1954 and 1959, 3 of these B-17s are known to have been shot down by the People's Liberation Army:<sup>4</sup>

- one (probably "739") over Fujian on 26 May 54 by anti-aircraft artillery, killing 4 crew members
- "357" in Jiangxi on 23 June 56 by a PLA MIG-17, killing 11 people aboard
- "815" of the 34<sup>th</sup> Squadron over Guangdong on 29 May 59 by a PLA MIG-17PF, killing 14 people aboard.

In her e-mail dated 11 January 2013, Jeanne Jeng, member of the family of one of the persons killed in that crash, notes: "On the night of 5-29-1959, there were 2 B-17s "815" and "835" both of the 34th "Bat" Squadron that flew from Taiwan into China. Both were detected and attacked by the PLA MIG-17PF. The "815" B-17 was the B-17 shot down, killing all 14 on board including Lyland's paternal grandfather. The "835" made it back to Taiwan that night. The commander of the "835" was still alive in 1992 and was interviewed in the link below about what happened that night. Here is the link to the story about the "815" shot down on 5-29-1959 as told from the Taiwan side:

<http://youtien.pixnet.net/blog/post/4603783-%E5%8A%89%E6%96%87%E5%AD%9D%EF%BC%9A%E9%82%A3%E5%80%8B%E6%98%9F%E5%A4%9C%EF%BC%8C%E5%85%B1%E8%BB%8D%E6%94%94%E4%B8%8B%E6%88%91%E7%9A%84%E5%90%8C%E8%A2%8D>"<sup>5</sup>

From the USAF Assignment Records preserved at the Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA) at Maxwell AFB (compact disks nos. AC-19, AC-20, and ACA-10), the 5 B-17s that flew with the Republic of China Air Force can now be identified, and I'd like to express my sincere thanks to AFHRA's archivist Archie DiFante for helping me read these records. While the first B-17 (44-85531) apparently came from CIA stocks, all the others were the only B-17s dropped from the USAF inventory during the 1952-60 period while still in the Far East, while most of the B-17s formerly serving in the Far East returned to the US, ending their life on the civilian market, with one of the USAF's drone squadrons or on the junk yard at Davis Monthan. So these were the 5 RoCAF B-17s:

44-85531 RB-17G msn 8440 (Clark in July 48 > Fairfield, CA in June 49 > Oklahoma City Air Materiel Area in Dec 50) > dropped from the USAF inventory in May 1950 "by reclamation" > apparently with the CIA Air Branch > to CAT in spring 52 on loan from Western Enterprises Inc (as "1004") > **to the RoCAF/Special Mission Group in June 53 (as "004")**<sup>6</sup> > to Clark Air Base in September 57 as "531" for the CAT Tibetan missions flown in late 1957 (as "639") > scrapped at Clark in 1958, but regd. as N809Z (no.1) to Atlantic-General Enterprises of Washington D.C. (617 Blair Bldg) on 1 September 60; the identity of N809Z was changed in May 61, when it became clear that this aircraft did no longer exist.

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<sup>4</sup> Fu/Pocock, *The Black Bats*, p.129; see also: "ROCAF combat losses since 1950", at: <http://www.taiwanairpower.org/history/shootdowns.html> . The book by Clarence Fu (Fu, Jing-ping (傅鏡平), *Kong jun te zhong zuo zhan mi shi : di sa si zhong dui ji qi ta dan wei de zhuang lie gu shi*) contains photos of the wrecks of B-17s "739" (p.35) and "815" (p.61). RoCAF B-17G "357" is believed to be the one that crashed on 22 June 56 (p. 38), and "739" seems to be the one shot down on 26 May 54 (p.33); Fu / Pocock, *The Black Bats*, pp.96/7 give "739" as the P2V shot down in June 1963; but Li, Chongshan (李崇善): *Hei bian fu zhong dui : An Ye Chuan Qi : li chong shan xian sheng te ji*, Hsinchu City 2011, also contains a photo (p.134) that clearly identifies "739" as the wreck of a B-17.

<sup>5</sup> E-mail dated 11 January 2013, kindly sent by Jeanne Jeng to Paul Oelkrug who forwarded it to the author.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP62S00101A000100020111-3.pdf> and <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP62S00101A000100020094-3.pdf> .

- 44-83774 TB-17G msn 32415 (Hickam in 1951/2 > Haneda, Japan 1952/3 > 15<sup>th</sup> Weather SQ, Kadena in 1953 > 6400<sup>th</sup> Air Depot Wing, Tachikawa) > dropped from the USAF inventory at Tachikawa on 11 March 53 “by reclamation” > to CAT as ? on loan from Western Enterprises Inc >  
**to the RoCAF/Special Mission Group in June 53 (as “739”?) >  
 believed to be the RoCAF B-17G “739” that was shot down over Fujian on 26 May 54 by anti-aircraft artillery, killing 4 crew members.**
- 44-83547 VB-17G msn 32188 (6332<sup>nd</sup> Air Base Wing, Kadena, on 13 Jan. 55 > 18<sup>th</sup> Fighter-bomber Wing, Kadena on 14 Feb. 55 > Northern Air Materiel Area, Tachikawa on day “153”, 1955 (= 2 June 55) > dropped from the USAF inventory at Tachikawa on day “067”, 1956 (= 7 March 56), code LI (= loss to organization outside USAF)  
**to the RoCAF on 7 March 56, probably as “357” >  
 believed to be the RoCAF B-17G “357” that was shot down in Jiangxi on 23 June 56 by a PLA MIG-17, killing 11 people aboard**
- 44-83785 VB-17G msn 32426 (Hickam in Dec 1948 > Komaki AB, Japan in Oct 1949 > Northern Air Materiel Area, Tachikawa in April 1955) > dropped from the USAF inventory at Tachikawa “by transfer to other agency” > (according to ACA-10, p.264, it left Tachikawa on day “260” (= 16 September) in 1956; code LI (= loss to organization outside USAF)  
**RoCAF as “835” on 16 September 56 >**  
 to Air America on 16 Aug. 60 > repainted as N809Z (no.2) for Atlantic-General Enterprises of Washington D.C. (617 Blair Bldg), which had been regd. on 1 September 60 with the wrong identity 44-85531 msn 8440; flown from Tainan to Burbank, CA from 29 October and 2 November 1960, still with the wrong identity; the identity of N809Z was corrected to 44-83785 in May 61; modified by Lockheed at Burbank to be able to carry the Fulton Skyhook recovery system, probably between May and August 61; handed over to former Air America pilots Connie Seigrist and Douglas Price on 18 August 1961 for Intermountain Aviation; used during *Project Coldfeet* in May / June 1962; officially re-registered to Intermountain Aviation on 4 October 1962, still as N809Z (no. 2); converted to a fire fighter in July 69, coded “22”, “C71”, and “B71”; Intermountain became part of Evergreen Helicopters, Marana, AZ, on 1 March 75; re-registered as N207EV on 6 March 79; withdrawn from use and stored in 1992; transferred to Evergreen Vintage Aircraft Inc., McMinnville, OR, on 29 March 99; registration N207EV was cancelled on 23 August 2012.
- 44-83465 VB-17G msn 32106 (6332<sup>nd</sup> Air Base Wing, Kadena on 13 January 55 > 18<sup>th</sup> Fighter-bomber Wing, Kadena on 14 February 55 > HQ 5<sup>th</sup> Air Force, Komaki AB, Japan on 14 October 55 > Northern Air Materiel Area, Tachikawa on day “149”, 1956 (= 28 May 56) > dropped from the USAF inventory at Tachikawa on day “19K” 1956 = 19 October 56, code LI (= loss to organization outside USAF)  
**to the RoCAF on 19 October 56, probably as “815”>  
 believed to be the RoCAF B-17G “815” that was shot down over Guandong on 29 May 59 by a PLA MIG-17PF, killing 14 people aboard**

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.<sup>7</sup> The aircraft – Boeing B-17G 44-85531, msn 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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 (msn 8440) to 44-83785, that is msn 32426, as has been reported<sup>11</sup> – probably when it became evident that the former Tibetan workhorse had already been broken up,<sup>12</sup> and this second B-17G N809Z (44-83785 msn 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.”<sup>13</sup> This was the B-17 that was handed over to former Air America pilots Connie Seigrist and Douglas Price on 18 August 1961.<sup>14</sup> This N809Z (no. 2) was the last survivor of the Taiwan-based CIA fleet,<sup>15</sup> – apparently former RoCAF “835”. For “about 1961/2 Doc Johnson ferried the last of the B-17s back to the West Coast.”<sup>16</sup> From his father’s log book, James Johnson, son of Doc Johnson gives the exact dates:<sup>17</sup> “The only other flight mentioning a B17 was dated from 29OCT - 02NOV1960, leaving Tainan and arriving in Burbank, CA via Kadena, Wake Island,

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<sup>7</sup> Conboy / Morrison, *The CIA's secret war in Tibet*, pp.58-65; 71-75.

<sup>8</sup> E-mail dated 15 February 2004, kindly sent to the author by Leif Hellström.

<sup>9</sup> E-mail dated 21 March 2004, kindly sent to the author by Merle C. Olmsted.

<sup>10</sup> E-mail dated 26 March 2004, kindly sent to the author by Merle C. Olmsted.

<sup>11</sup> Goodall, *Warbirds directory*, p.27.

<sup>12</sup> See my file: *Missions to Tibet*.

<sup>13</sup> Letter dated 4 May 1987, sent to Prof. Bill Leary by Scott A. Thompson, in: UTD/Leary/B64F5.

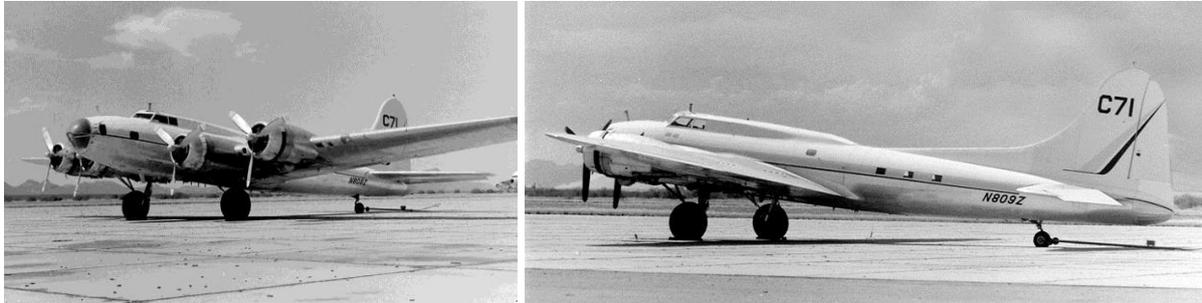
<sup>14</sup> Leary / LeSchack, *Project Coldfeet*, pp.119-20.

<sup>15</sup> Fu / Pocock, *The Black Bats*, p.56.

<sup>16</sup> Letter dated 3 June 1981 sent to Prof. Bill Leary by (signature unreadable, but believed to be E.C. Kirkpatrick), at: UTD/Leary/B43F1.

<sup>17</sup> E-mail dated 5 September 2012, kindly sent to the author by James Johnson.

and Honolulu. This aircraft was listed as N809Z and flown with Captain Tom Sailer and Captain Aubrey.” 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,<sup>18</sup> although its use with Intermountain Aviation during *Project Coldfeet* in May / June 1962 is well described in the



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

excellent book by Leary / LeSchack. A photo of N809Z with the Fulton Skyhook system installed can be found at <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/95unclass/104.gif> . In 1965, Intermountain’s N809Z even performed in the James Bond movie *Thunderball*.<sup>19</sup> Its subsequent history is well documented by publications like *Aviation Letter*. In July 69, it was converted to fire tanker, serialled “22”, “C71”, and “B71” and used as a fire-fighter. On 7 March 73, it was still present at Marana with Intermountain,<sup>20</sup> which became part of Evergreen Helicopters, Marana, AZ, on 1 March 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.<sup>21</sup> 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;<sup>22</sup> but the registration N207EV was cancelled on 23 August 2012.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> E-mail dated 25 February 2004, kindly sent to the author by Leif Hellström.

<sup>19</sup> Leary / Le Schack, *Project Coldfeet*, p. 152.

<sup>20</sup> *Aviation Letter* 77, April 73, p.4.

<sup>21</sup> Goodall, *Warbirds directory*, p.27.

<sup>22</sup> Request submitted to the FAA on 13 March 2004 at <http://162.58.35.241/acdatabase/>.

<sup>23</sup> Request submitted to the FAA on 30 January 2013 and results received at [http://registry.faa.gov/aircraftinquiry/NNum\\_Results.aspx?NNumbertxt=207EV](http://registry.faa.gov/aircraftinquiry/NNum_Results.aspx?NNumbertxt=207EV) .