When Communist China invaded Tibet in August 1950, the Dalai Lama was allowed to remain on the throne, but some of his guard fled as refugees to India, Nepal and northern Thailand. Others, the valiant Khampa horsemen, banded together to form the National Volunteer Defense Army of Tibet, sworn to serve and protect the Dalai Lama. As fighting continued in Tibet throughout the fifties, the resistance leaders requested the help of the US government, apparently as early as 1950.¹ So US President Eisenhower approved the provision of covert help by the CIA. The CIA decided to train some of those Tibetans as guerrillas, to equip them with modern weapons and to send them back into Tibet either on foot or by parachute drop. Once they were in Tibet, they were supported with food and ammunition by air drops (Operation STBarnum).

B-17G 44-85531 disguised as “639”, taken at Clark in the fall of 1957 by Merle C. Olmsted
(with kind permission from Merle C. Olmsted)

In the summer of 1957, the first six Tibetans selected by resistance leaders in northern India were trained at a secret CIA base at Saipan and then taken to Okinawa for parachute training. In mid-September 57, a B-17 which had been stripped of all weapons and national markings, painted black, and modified with engine mufflers to shield the exhaust, and which belonged to the CIA air fleet based on Taiwan,² was flown to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines to pick up and train the Polish air crew from Wiesbaden, code named “Ostiary”, that was to make the first infiltration flight into Tibet. “All six of the first trainees made three familiarization jumps each on Okinawa, including two jumps from the ‘joe hole’ of a B-17, the chosen infiltration aircraft. All of these jumps were without reserve parachutes, reflecting that the blind drops into Tibet were without reserve parachutes in order to lighten the jumper’s

² From 1951 to 1955, the CIA air fleet based on Taiwan was owned by Western Enterprises Inc. For Western Enterprises see: Holober, Raiders of the China Coast; Hagedorn / Hellström, Foreign Invaders, pp.169/70; Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, pp.37/8, 55, and 58. Leary (Secret missions to Tibet, p.64) and Trest (Air Commando One, p.91) state that it was a CAT B-17, but CAT only leased one of Western Enterprises’ B-17s in 1952 for overflights over China and a second B-17 in 1953. In the late fifties, Western Enterprises had been succeeded by the NACC, another CIA front, and their B-17s flew with and in the colors of the Republic of China Air Force’s 34th Squadron. For details, see my file CAT, Air Asia, Air America – the Company on Taiwan III: Work for the US Government.
load. Two CIA trainers (McElroy and McCarthy) also jumped with this group a total of 7 times, all without a reserve parachute.\(^3\) In early October 57, the B-17 crewed by the “Ostiary”\(^\text{4}\) group carried the Tibetans from Kadena, Okinawa, to Kurmitola, an emergency Strategic Air Command recovery field outside of Dacca in East Pakistan.\(^4\) The following day, all of them boarded the B-17, which dropped the Tibetans to a large sandbar in the Brahmaputra River south of Lhasa.\(^5\) Of these original 6 trainees, three were killed in Tibet in 1958-59. Wangdu was killed by the Chinese on the Nepalese-Indian border in 1974. Lhotse died of natural causes in India in the mid-90s. Athar was living in New Delhi in 1993, where he was active in the Chushi Gangdrug.\(^6\)

In the same way, the next three Tibetans were dropped near a resistance force in the province of Kham in eastern Tibet in the first week of November 57.\(^7\) The supply bundle for the first 2 teams was suspended over the “joe hole” in the B-17 and by a quick release triggered by the jump master. The jumpers, seated on the side, would immediately follow the bundle.\(^8\) The aircraft – Boeing B-17G 44-85531, msn 8440 – was mostly flown as “531”, but sometimes it was painted as “639” – probably that fake tail number was used 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 AFB where it was photographed in June 1958 by Merle C. Olmsted. When it was at Clark, it bore USAF insignia, probably in order to avoid attention.\(^9\) 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.”\(^10\) 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.\(^11\)

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\(^3\) Roger McCarthy, Letter dated 3 December 97 to the editor of an article by Ken Dallison, “Secret Mission to Tibet”, copy to Prof. Bill Leary, formerly in: UTD/Leary, Ser.I, B12F1, now probably at UTD/Leary/B93F1.

\(^4\) Roger E. McCarthy, the CIA Case Officer who trained the first six Tibetans on Saipan in the summer of 1957 and was directly involved in their return by parachute into Tibet in the fall of that year, points out the multitude of problems that had to be resolved along that way: “This required the coordination and efforts of a select few people located in many areas and in a variety of activities, ranging from locating staging areas, selection of drop zones in Tibet, flight routes, outfitting the trainees for their return to Tibet, to developing a personnel parachute and cargo parachutes and delivery techniques equal to the demands of high altitudes, to appropriate clearance approvals not only from our own government but those of other governments such as East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and Thailand, etc.” (Letter by Roger E. McCarthy to Jim Keck, details kindly forwarded to the author by Jim Keck with kind permission from Roger McCarthy).

\(^5\) This first flight into Tibet is described in: Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, pp.59-64. As Roger McCarthy states, “the first aircraft used in the overflight portion of the operation was a B-17 flown by a European crew. Parachute drops were made from the “joe hole” in the belly of the aircraft, and the Tibetans made practice jumps from it on Okinawa. Jim McElroy and Roger McCarthy made extensive modifications to the T-10-parachute, including test drops at Atsugi AFB in Japan, and developed the drop techniques for the cargo and personnel drops from the B-17. The B-17 was used on two flights in the fall of 1957 to infiltrate two teams of Tibetans and their equipment onto the drop zones selected by the respective team members. Staging involved support by Air Force Det.2 at Kadena, then under the command of Art Dietrich, who left no stone unturned to provide excellent support to the operation. Major Robert Kleyla, who had previous B-17 experience, helped provide crew training and flew the B-17, with the six Tibetans aboard to the staging area at Kermitola” (Letter by Roger E. McCarthy to Jim Keck, details kindly forwarded to the author by Jim Keck with kind permission from Roger McCarthy).

\(^6\) Roger McCarthy, Letter dated 3 December 97 to the editor of an article by Ken Dallison, “Secret Mission to Tibet”, copy to Prof. Bill Leary, formerly in: UTD/Leary, Ser.I, B12F1, now probably at UTD/Leary/B93F1.

\(^7\) For the November 57 flight see: Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, p.65.

\(^8\) Roger McCarthy, Letter dated 3 December 97 to the editor of an article by Ken Dallison, “Secret Mission to Tibet”, copy to Prof. Bill Leary, formerly in: UTD/Leary, Ser.I, B12F1, now probably at UTD/Leary/B93F1.

\(^9\) E-mail dated 15 February 2004, kindly sent to the author by Leif Hellström.

\(^10\) E-mail dated 21 March 2004, kindly sent to the author by Merle C. Olmsted.

\(^11\) E-mail dated 26 March 2004, kindly sent to the author by Merle C. Olmsted.
When CAT took over the job in January 1958, they first sent in one of their C-54s, but this mission nearly ended in a disaster. The DC-4 took off from Kadena, Okinawa, flew to Kurmitola outside Dacca, East Pakistan, refueled, made the drop in Tibet, and returned to Kurmitola. The last leg from Kurmitola to Taipei had been calculated for 14 hours, but when the DC-4 did not appear at Taipei at the estimated time, CAT gave it up for lost and turned off the runway lights. But then, after more than 17 hours, the DC-4 turned up and landed on the darkened runway.

Then, still in January 1958, an unmarked USAF C-118A belonging to the special cell (Detachment 1) of the former 322nd TCS of Kadena, Okinawa, by then

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14 Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, p.75, state that the first C-118A drop into Tibet was only in mid-October 58, but Jim Keck remembers to have flown in the C-118 that was forced down over Armenia in June 58: “We had a favorite plane that Det.2 always gave us. It had low time engines, good fuel economy, and carried very few ‘squawks’. It had many of the part numbers removed or modified so that it might not be traced if captured. There was a small metal frame (about 12 inches square) on the side of the body, near the rear door. We used to put different country’s flags into this frame as needed. Usually on an over-flight we would be ‘bare’, [...] On that C-118, our favorite. I taped up a pin-up girl from an issue of playboy, right next to my Nav. Station. As everyone left the cockpit after a mission, they would stop, say thanks and give her ‘pats’ on her butt. As I was always the last to leave I always gave her a special thanks and a thankful pat. The Air Force used these airplanes during the rest of the month, when we weren’t flying missions, on various other flights. Nobody ever missed handled ‘our gal’. One day and stormy night Det. 2 had a flight from Kadena to somewhere along the Turkey-Russian border. The weather was poor. And a fake Russian radio station put out a really strong signal. They believe that’s what happened. Anyway they crashed and I think our little pin up is on the wall of some dirt shack, high in the Russian Mountains” (Letter dated 10 July 2001, written by Jim Keck to the author). As the crews were never allowed to log any flight time for these flights nor to make any photos, there are no written records about the aircraft used, as Jim Keck points out. However the fact that their favorite C-118 went down in Russia allows to identify this particular aircraft: The USAF C-118 that was forced down by Russian fighters over Armenia on 27 June 58 was 51-3822 (msn 43569) (Eastwood / Roach, Piston Engine Airliner Production List, p.336). It returned to Okinawa only in January 60 (Interview conducted by Prof. William Leary with Lawrence Ropka at Ft Walton Beach, FL, on 29-30 August 1990, transcript preserved at: UTD/Leary/B43F4), when Air America did no longer use USAF C-118As. While 51-3822 was in Russia, another C-118 was used for the over-flights over Tibet, until it was finally replaced by C-130As. This C-118A was most probably Douglas C-118A 51-3820 (msn 43567, also known as N6184M); although it may have been returned to the USAF as 51-3820 by July 59, it is not listed on the microfilms of the AFHRA between July 64 and early 1967; then it appears on microfilm no. AVH-6 as returned from outside the USAF (code “GI”) on 67090, that is on 31 March 67; at that date, it was assigned to the 1045th Operational Evaluation & Training Group, Headquarters Command, Eglin, that is to the unit that really ran the Tibetan missions.

Former CAT B-17 “531” in storage at Clark Air Base in June 1958, without windshield (taken by Merle C. Olmsted – with kind permission of the photographer)
renamed Detachment 2, 313th Air Division,\textsuperscript{15} was bailed to CAT\textsuperscript{16} to continue these missions as well as for airdrops of arms and other material to the Tibetan resistance groups. Former USAF pilot Lawrence Ropka, who flew those C-118As out of Kadena, Okinawa, since the fall of 1957, recalls that the unit’s operations office was in a Quonset hut. In the back of the hut was a small room, portioned off, that contained two “Air Force” officers. He soon learned that there were certain pilots in the unit who flew C-118s and were considered a “semi-elite.” After a couple of months, he was invited into the back room to sign a secrecy agreement, after which he flew to some “strange places”.\textsuperscript{17} Around January 58, a fighter pilot from Tokyo, Colonel John W. Weltman, turned up at the 322nd Troop Carrier Squadron (Medium Special) at Kadena, Okinawa. “He took a C-118 crew to Clark, where they ran the first mission to Tibet. There was a little house on the edge of Clark Field which contained a communications room. [Lawrence] Ropka was not allowed inside the room, but he would be given long telexes from SAC Weather Control. He also had some photographs, which he used to designate the drop zone. He then worked out a route backwards from DZ, using old WAC charts. They all spent the afternoon with paint remover, trying to take the USAF marking off the C-118. It proved to be quite a job. In fact, they missed the first day on the moon phase. On the second day, a CAT crew (Doc Johnson?) flew the mission.”\textsuperscript{18}

Jim Keck, CAT Navigator of the very first C-118A drop mission, remembers: “We got over the D.Z. and we were between layers of clouds. The pilot, Doc Johnson, kept turning in a circle with his wing low in the turn. The C-118 has only weather type radar and in a steep turn my radar scope only paints part of the screen. That part that’s on the inside of the turn. The picture becomes distorted and you can’t rely upon it until you roll out straight and level. As I couldn’t be of any help on the radar I asked the Flight Engineer, Bill Lively, to fold up his seat and I’ll come up and help look for the drop zone lights. It was my very first overflight and I had my seat pack type parachute on at all times. The first thing that happened was that I got the chute stuck in the small opening between the two pilots. […] Lively unhooked me and I slipped forward so that I could see out of the windows. We had been in a steady turn for several minutes now. […] We broke out of the clouds and directly straight-ahead we saw several huge snow covered mountains higher than we were. […] I asked Doc to roll out straight and level as soon as he could, so I could use my radar. When he did, I was able to get a good fix from a mountain peak and gave him a new heading back to the D.Z. As we rolled out on this new heading, the clouds parted and we could see the ground. The co-pilot, Al Judkins, gave me several visual sightings and we made it to the drop zone. Those five fires looked wonderful!”\textsuperscript{19} The next flight was a month later, when the next moon phase came back. On a later flight, the static line cable ripped loose from its front anchor plate, malfunctioned and required multiple passes to complete the drop. “Yes, we most likely spread that load over a couple of miles, but there was nothing else we could do”, Jim Keck remembers who helped the kickers on that flight, but from the following flight on, a new “A” frame type anchor was installed.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{15} Only that Kadena-based special cell (Detachment 1) of the 322nd TCS survived, when the 322nd TCS itself ceased to exist in November 57 (Conboy / Morrison, \textit{The CIA’s secret war in Tibet}, p.271, note 17).
\textsuperscript{16} The USAF insignia on these aircraft were decals, “the plastic kind with the sticky backs. That […] Air Force captain that usually came with the airplane to Kermitola always produced a set for the flight back to Clark” (E-mail dated 29 March 2002, sent by former CAT mechanic Bill Lively to former CAT/Air America Chief Navigator Jim Keck, kindly forwarded to the author by Jim Keck with kind permission from Bill Lively).
\textsuperscript{17} Interview conducted by Prof. William Leary with Lawrence Ropka at Ft Walton Beach, FL, on 29-30 August 1990, transcript preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F4).
\textsuperscript{18} Interview conducted by Prof. William Leary with Lawrence Ropka at Ft Walton Beach, FL, on 29-30 August 1990, transcript preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F4).
\textsuperscript{19} Letter dated 12 August 2001 written by Jim Keck to the author.
\textsuperscript{20} Letter dated 12 July 1997 written by Jim McElroy, CIA loadmaster in the Tibetan Program, to William Leary; details kindly forwarded to the author by Jim Keck with kind permission from Jim McElroy; and letter dated 12
“During 1958, Ropka would be assigned to the project every month during the moon phase for 6 months of the wet season. They operated out of Clark for a couple of months, then moved to Takhli (the C-118 had to make a refueling stop out of Clark at Dacca). There was nothing at Takhli except a long SAC recovery runway and jet fuel. The Thais provided a guest house. There were two hangars. The Thais turned it over to the USAF. One side was cleaned out and rooms were put in for operations and communications. They had to take everything that they needed from Okinawa in one airplane. They used the C-118 for most of the year, then got C-130As out of the 315th Troop Carrier Wing on Okinawa.”

Similar CAT / Air America-piloted C-118A flights to Tibet are known to have taken place in mid-October 58, in November 58 (when Air America was still called CAT Inc.), in mid-April 59 (after the company had been renamed Air America), in mid-May 59, and in June 59—probably, a total of 10 missions to Tibet were flown in the C-118A until mid-1959. “Doc” Johnson’s log book states that he flew DC-6 “3820” from 6 to 10 October 58 and from 20 to 28 October 58 plus an anonymous DC-6—probably the same aircraft—from 22 to 28 November 58; he also flew an unknown type of aircraft—probably still the same C-118A—from 16 to 24 May 59 and an unknown C-118 from 19 to 25 July 59—probably 51-3820 all the time. For the second “black” C-118A—51-3822 (msn 43569)—returned to Okinawa only in January 60.

In “Doc” Johnson’s log book, all of these missions are officially declared as “local training” flights out of Kadena, Okinawa, but it is obvious that the USAF wouldn’t make its special mission aircraft available just for training. The mission of 6-10 October 58 lasted 17.5 hours, the one of 20-28 October 58 lasted 39 hours including 5 hours of instrumental flying, and the one of 22 to 28 November 58 lasted 29.5 hours, including 10 hours of instrumental flying.

The mission to Tibet that “Doc” Johnson flew from 6 to 10 October 58
(Page from “Doc” Johnson’s log book kindly supplied by his son James on 18 February 2013)

The mission to Tibet that “Doc” Johnson flew from 20 to 28 October 58
(Page from “Doc” Johnson’s log book kindly supplied by his son James on 18 February 2013)

The mission to Tibet that “Doc” Johnson flew from 22 to 28 November 58
(Page from “Doc” Johnson’s log book kindly supplied by his son James on 18 February 2013)

August 2001, written by Jim Keck to the author.

21 Interview conducted by Prof. William Leary with Lawrence Ropka at Ft Walton Beach, FL, on 29-30 August 1990, transcript preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F4).

22 Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, pp. 74-79; 80-105.


24 For this C-118A of (51-3820, msn 43567) see the DC-6 file within my The Aircraft of Air America.

25 Pages from Doc Johnson’s log book kindly supplied by his son James on 18 February 2013.

26 Interview conducted by Prof. William Leary with Lawrence Ropka at Ft Walton Beach, FL, on 29-30 August 1990, transcript preserved at: UTD/Leary/B43F4.
“Things changed a bit in 1959. Weltman left and was replaced by his deputy, Art Dietrich. The operation had been run from Tokyo, with operating elements on Okinawa. The Tokyo office was closed and Okinawa became the Asian Air Office. […] The Agency set up Detachment 2 as an all-detailee operation (formerly the detailees had been a cell inside the 322nd). […] Things were sort of ‘bumping along’ in Det.2 when Aderholt arrived in January 1960 ‘and turned our world upside down’. Ropka had been in the US when Aderholt arrived, picking up a second C-118 in Baltimore. (It had been used in Europe and was the airplane that had gone into Russia with CIA men and been forced down).”

Most people would think that on those thirteen-hour flights celestial navigation, that is measuring the height of the sun, moon, stars and planets, was used to find the drop zone, but Chief Navigator Jim Keck states that he used it very little: “This system works lovely when flying in dark nights over the vast Pacific. […] But here you are over someone else’s country, everyone’s adrenaline is racing and you must listen to and plot every visual sighting from other crewmembers – it’s just too long to stay away from your navigation station. As a result I would only go to celestial when it was absolutely necessary. There is another reason. To get good celestial results the airplane must be on autopilot. […] Most sextants will take two minutes to average out the autopilot. When somebody is hand flying, the airplane may be held slightly left wing low for most of the two minutes or it may oscillate back and forth without a constant attitude.”

But the C-118As of the same squadron were also used on other flights, as at Kurmitola near Dacca, they also picked up the exfiltrated Tibetans who had trekked down from the Himalayas and had been bused from Darjeeling to Dacca by CIA case officers, and flew them to Saipan. At Saipan, the CIA operated a training complex between 1949 and 1962 that was called “Navy Technical Training Unit”, where Chinese Nationalists were trained for assaults on to the Mainland. And there were at least more missions to Tibet flown in the old C-118A: From “Doc” Johnson’s log book we know that he flew 41.8 hours out of Naha, Okinawa, between 16 and 24 May 59, including 12.5 hours of instrumental flying, and this must have been the C-118A mission mentioned by Conboy/Morrison. And the last C-118A mission to Tibet that “Doc” Johnson mentions in his log book was from 19 to 25 July 59; it lasted 36.3 hours and included 8.5 hours of instrumental flying.

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27 Interview conducted by Prof. William Leary with Lawrence Ropka at Ft Walton Beach, FL, on 29-30 August 1990, transcript preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F4).
30 Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, pp. 98/9.
31 Page from Doc Johnson’s log book kindly supplied by his son James on 18 February 2013.
An unknown CAT / Air America C-118A at Kurmitola, East Pakistan, in 1958/9
(with kind permission from Ken Conboy)

Then, in March 1959, a rumor that the Chinese intended to abduct the Dalai Lama created an uprising in Tibet. The revolt was short-lived and ineffective, but, disguised as a soldier, the Dalai Lama was able to flee, with the assistance of one of the CIA-trained radio teams, and was granted political asylum in India, where he arrived with several thousand adherents.32 Inside Tibet, open war broke out between the Tibetan natives and the Chinese army, and while the Chinese troops frequently crossed the borders of Sikkim, Bhutan and India, resulting in continuous skirmishes, CAT planes further supplied the rebels.33 In May 1959, two months after the escape of the Dalai Lama to India, the Eisenhower administration authorized an expansion of Operation STBarnum: A total of 700 Tibetans were to be trained in the isolated old Army base of Camp Hale in central Colorado, the first group of whom arrived in August 1959. They had crossed the border from Tibet to India by foot and had been smuggled to Kurmitola Air Base, East Pakistan, where CAT planes had picked them up and flown to Takhli and then to Kadena, Okinawa.34 From there, they were flown to Petersen Field, Colorado, by USAF C-118s or C-124s, from where they were taken to Camp Hale in buses that where blacked out. Already in June 59,35 the C-11836 used on the airdrops into Tibet had been definitively replaced by USAF C-130As belonging to the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron, which was part of the 483rd Troop Carrier Wing, Naha, and then part of the 315th Air Division at Tachikawa.

32 The Dalai Lama left Lhasa on 17 March 59 and arrived in India on 1 April 59 (Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, pp.90-93). Apparently he was resupplied by repeated airdrops arranged by the CIA, because the party had left Lhasa without anything (Prados, John, Presidents’ secret wars. CIA and Pentagon covert operations from World War II through the Persian Gulf, New York 1986, p.162. This chapter of the book is preserved at UTD/CIA/B57F1).
33 Robbins, Air America, pp.90-98; Hagedorn / Hellström, Foreign Invaders, pp.169-74; Leary, Secret mission to Tibet, pp.62-66; Trest, Air Commando One, pp.91/2. Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, mentions 5 C-118s flights into Tibet: in mid-October 58 (p.75), in mid-November 58 (pp.78/9), in mid-April 59 (p.97), in mid-May 59 (p.104), and in June 59 (p.105).
34 Leary, Manuscript, p.304, in: UTD/Leary/B19F3.
35 Leary, Manuscript, p.304 (in: UTD/Leary/B19F3) gives June 59; Leary, Secret mission to Tibet, p.68, gives July 59; these dates fit with the last known C-118A mission which had taken place in June 59. Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, pp.117/8, state that the first C-130 drop of agents into Tibet took place on 18 September 59; Jim Keck states that from his C-130, he observed the convoy of the Dalai Lama going to exile in India (Letter dated 11 September 2002, written by Jim Keck to Tenzin Taklha, Deputy Secretary, Office of the Dalai Lama, kindly forwarded to the author). As the Dalai Lama went into exile in the second half of March 59 (Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, pp.90-93), there must have been at least that March 59 C-130 flight prior to July 59.
36 When Major Aderholt arrived at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, the 313th Air Division’s Detachment at Kadena had 2 C-118s and 3 C-54s (Trest, Air Commando One, p.85). According to an interview with B.G. Aderholt given to Prof. Bill Leary at Fort Walton Beach, FL, on 28-30 August 1990, Detachment 2 had even 5 C-54s (Interview dated 28-30 August 1990, in: UTD/Leary/B68F9).
An unknown Air America C-130A in 1959-60, after the USAF tail markings had been removed prior to an overflight of Tibet – reportedly taken at Kadena, Okinawa, but probably at Takhli, Thailand (with kind permission from Ken Conboy)

But before introducing the C-130As, CIA-man Gar Thorsrud had to convince the USAF that the C-130s were the right aircraft for the mission, and Air America’s Managing Director George A. Doole was unhappy with the C-130A and wanted to use DC-7s, which were available from Southern Air Transport. So Air America pilots William Welk and Doc Johnson ran a profile mission with the DC-7, but the problem was unreliable engines.  

On 19 February 60, “Doc” Johnson flew a Northwest DC-7 for 1.8 hours – possibly the test flight requested by George Doole  

(Pages from “Doc” Johnson’s log book kindly supplied by his son James on 18 February 2013)

Because of political sensitivities between Pakistan and India, the staging area for the flights into Tibet was moved from Kurmitola near Dacca to Takhli (T-05) in Thailand at the same time, so that from the beginning of the expanded program in July 59, all C-130A missions were flown out of Takhli. Some of these flights went as far north as 150 miles north of Lhasa. Since that time, Kurmitola was used only as an emergency recovery location for the C-130As. But in spite of this move, the multiple flights made to drop zones in Tibet were not interrupted. At that time, Major Art Dietrich was mission commander on Okinawa. Jim McElroy, CIA loadmaster to the Tibetan program, states that “he did an outstanding job,

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38 “Doc” Johnson also flew Riddle Airlines’ DC-7Cs N301G (on 30 November 60 for 3.4 hours and on 1 December 60 for 12.3 hours) and N8215H (on 13 January 61 for 11.2 hours) on training flights out of Miami (Pages from “Doc” Johnson’s log book kindly supplied by his son James on 19 February 2013).
39 Interview with M. D. Johnson conducted by Prof. William Leary on 4 Aril 81, written summary in: UTD/Leary/B43F1.
40 Letter by Roger E. McCarthy to Jim Keck; details kindly forwarded to the author by Jim Keck with kind permission from Roger McCarthy; letter dated 12 August 2001 written to the author by Jim Keck.
especially since we had to travel to Takhli Base without the support of a unit like Det.2. The Thai Air Force billeted and fed us the best they could."\footnote{Letter dated 12 July 1997 sent by Jim McElroy to William Leary; details kindly forwarded to the author by Jim Keck with kind permission from Jim McElroy.}

In July 1959, some 20 C-130As belonging to the 483rd TCW were based at Naha,\footnote{See the USAF Assignment Records preserved by the AFHRA at Maxwell AFB, AL; the aircraft are listed in the C-130 file of this database.} and as many different aircraft were used on the airlift,\footnote{Fax dated 14 June 2000, kindly sent to the author by Brigadier General Aderholt.} probably most of these 20 C-130As were used at one time or another. The USAF unit that ran the airlift was then upgraded to Detachment 2, 1045th Operational Evaluation & Training Group, reporting directly to CIA headquarters,\footnote{Letter by Roger E. McCarthy, the CIA Case Officer who trained the Tibetans at Saipan, to Jim Keck; letter kindly forwarded to the author by Jim Keck with kind permission from Roger McCarthy; letter dated 12 August 2001, written to the author by Jim Keck.} as the command and control of the operation rested completely with and by the CIA in Washington. Drop zones were proposed via clandestine radio communication with the CIA in Washington by the Tibetan teams on the ground in Tibet for review and approval by the CIA. The overflight paths in and out of Tibet were also the responsibility of the CIA in Washington. The types and amounts of equipment to be dropped were decided in Washington and coordinated with the CIA’s logistical base on Okinawa. The CAT crews and jump masters were briefed and debriefed by CIA officers at the launch and recovery sites. Crew selection for the overflight missions, however, was made by Robert E. Rousselot, Air America’s Director of Flight Operations at Taipei.\footnote{Letter dated 12 July 1997 sent by Jim McElroy to William Leary; details kindly forwarded to the author by Jim Keck with kind permission from Jim McElroy.} Other operational planning was done by Al Wueste, while E. C. Kirkpatrick’s job was to arrange cover for the flights and to determine the degree of hazard for the pay – the highest pay was $1,500 for pilots in the flights to Tibet.\footnote{See the USAF Assignment Records preserved by the AFHRA at Maxwell AFB, AL; the aircraft are listed in the C-130 file of this database.} The C-130s carried double flight crews,\footnote{Trest, Air Commando One, p. 83. The insignia of Det.2 / 1045th OE&TG are depicted in: Cowboy / Morrison, Shadow war, p.77.} CAT and Air America crew members who flew in the airlift to Tibet included Merrill D. (“Doc”) Johnson,\footnote{Letter dated 10 July 2001, written to the author by William Leary.} A.L. Judkins,\footnote{Letter dated 17 January 1992, sent by Miles L. Johnson to Prof. William Leary, in: UTD/Leary/B69F11.} Jack Stiles,\footnote{Letter dated 12 July 1997 sent by Jim McElroy to William Leary; details kindly forwarded to the author by Jim Keck with kind permission from Jim McElroy.} Eddie Sims,\footnote{Interview with A. L. Judkins, conducted by Prof. William Leary on 9 September 1985, written resume, in: UTD/Leary/B43F3.} and William Welk\footnote{Interview with Neese D. Hicks, conducted by Prof. William Leary at Ashland, OR, on 3 August 1987, written resume, in: UTD/Leary/B43F2.} as pilots, Maury Clough\footnote{Letter dated 10 July 2001, written to the author by William Leary.} as engineer, Bob Aubrey,\footnote{Interview with D. (“Doc”) Johnson, letter to Prof. William Leary dated 19 February 93, in: UTD/Leary/B46F12.} and Harry Hudson\footnote{Letter dated 12 July 1977 sent by Jim McElroy to William Leary; details kindly forwarded to the author by Jim Keck with kind permission from Jim McElroy.} as radio operators, Jim Keck,\footnote{Letter dated 10 July 2001, written to the author by William Leary.} Leon C. Cartwright,\footnote{Letter dated 10 July 2001, written to the author by William Leary.} Cyril (“Pinky”) Pinkava,\footnote{Letter dated 10 July 2001, written to the author by William Leary.} and Thomas G. Sailer,\footnote{Interview with Neese D. Hicks, conducted by Prof. William Leary at Ashland, OR, on 3 August 1987, written resume, in: UTD/Leary/B43F2.} as navigators, Roland H. (“Andy”) Anderson,\footnote{Interview with Neese D. Hicks, conducted by Prof. William Leary at Ashland, OR, on 3 August 1987, written resume, in: UTD/Leary/B43F2.} Fred \footnote{Interview with Neese D. Hicks, conducted by Prof. William Leary at Ashland, OR, on 3 August 1987, written resume, in: UTD/Leary/B43F2.}
Barnosky, Ray Beasley, William R. Demmons, Darrel ("Yogi") Eubanks, Miles L. Johnson, Thomas G. ("Shep") Johnson, Art Jukkala, John ("Tex") Lewis, Richard A. ("Pete") Peterson, and Ray Shank as Parachute Dispatch Officers (PDO’s). Neese D. Hicks first volunteered as a radio operator, but after a few flights he went to Ashiya, checked out on C-130s, and then flew trips to Tibet as a captain. But during the height of operations in the early months of 1960, there were about 12-15 PDO’s involved in the operation. Most flights would carry 3 PDOs, some carried 2, and on one flight there were even 4 PDO’s.

For the Air America crews, there was a 24 hours notice. Then they would go to Kadena, receive a briefing there before leaving for Takhli. “There was a system of go-no go messages from headquarters at specific intervals: 24 launch alert, 12 hours, 6 hours, 2 hours, 1 hour, launch. If all was well, the message simply would say AFFIRM. These messages had to arrive for the launch to continue. They came from the Air Branch in Washington.” Drops were made upon a ground signal, and the fixed rule was no loitering in the drop zone. At first there were some problems with the cargo doors, but they were soon solved. “By mid-1959, multiple air drops were made in each full moon phase to designated drop zones in Tibet. For example, there were times when air drops were made to a single drop zone by three C-130s flying in tail. In all drops to resistance forces, information was passed to the teams on the ground as to how many bundles were to be dropped. This enabled the teams to have a sufficient number of horses and yaks in place to clear the drop zone expeditiously. In the course of the operation, the cargo bundles were rigged by McElroy in a manner enabling the reception teams to load already slung packs onto the backs of the pack animals, approximately 85 lbs. to a side.” When more than one C-130A was used, the lead aircraft of the mission carried a special bundle on the tailgate ramp. This bundle contained special items such as money, radios, instructions, commo plans, etc. The Agency team on the ground. This bundle was dropped a couple of seconds before the load. An orange and white parachute was used for identification. And indeed, several months no less than 5 C-130As were used on two

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71 Interview with Neese D. Hicks, conducted by Prof. William Leary at Ashland, OR, on 3 August 1987, written resume, in: UTD/Leary/B43F3.
72 Telephone interview with Miles L. Johnson conducted by Prof. William Leary on 18 July 1991, written version, at: UTD/Leary/B43F3.
73 Written resume, p. 3, of an interview with B.G. Aderholt conducted by Prof. Bill Leary at Fort Walton Beach, FL, on 28-30 August 1990 (Interview dated 28-30 August 1990, in: UTD/Leary/B68F9).
74 Thomas C. Sailer, interview made with William M. Leary at San Francisco on 8 September 1985; professor Leary’s notes, preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F5.
75 “Operations took place five days before and five days after the full moon. The attempt was made to get in 9 to 12 flights during this period” (Roger McCarthy, Letter to Prof. William Leary dated 19 February 93, formerly in: UTD/Leary/Ser.I, B8F14, now in: UTD/Leary/B46F12).
76 Letter by Roger E. McCarthy to Jim Keck; details kindly forwarded to the author by Jim Keck with kind permission from Roger McCarthy.
consecutive nights, three aircraft on the first night and two on the second one, weather permitting. The mission crews would land, debrief, eat, and try to sleep in the hot, humid day, then fly another mission that night.\textsuperscript{77} When more than one C-130 was used, the interval between the planes would be about 15 minutes.\textsuperscript{78} The CIA even made special leather boots for the Air America crews to wear on these overflights.\textsuperscript{79} As to the Tibetans, after a vigorous training program, the first group of them was ready in September 59. They were flown back to the CIA base at Kadena, Okinawa, then on to Takhli in Thailand, from where they were infiltrated into the Nam Tso area of Tibet for sabotage operations on 18 September 59.\textsuperscript{80} The main objective of these Tibetans was to mine the two major roads between Tibet and China and to cut communication lines, in order to slow down the flow of Chinese men and material into Tibet. When, in early 1960, USAF Major Harry “Heinie” Aderholt, who, later, was to become responsible for the construction of STOL sites in Laos, had taken over the program, he arranged for the entire unit at Kadena to be detailed to the CIA, not only two commanding officers, and this improved the atmosphere among the staff. One to three USAF C-130As – which were always different aircraft\textsuperscript{81} – were flown by USAF pilots from Naha Field, Okinawa, to Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, located some 20 miles apart, loaded with cargo (mainly arms and ammunition packaged into individual 80- to 85-pound loads)\textsuperscript{82} by personnel of the CIA’s main logistics base in East Asia, and then flown to Takhli by Air America crews who were accompanied by pilots from the squadron for monthly currency checks. At Takhli, where Detachment 2 had taken residence in 1960,\textsuperscript{83} the C-130As were “sanitized”, i.e. stripped of military markings to make them non-attributable. They were simply identified by codes like “Able flight” or “Baker flight”. When weather conditions at the drop zone allowed the mission, the Tibetans, normally 10-12 for each aircraft, would arrive shortly before

\textsuperscript{77} Letter dated 12 August 2001, written to the author by Jim Keck; and letter by Jim McElroy, dated 12 July 1997; details kindly forwarded to the author by Jim Keck with kind permission from Jim McElroy. Jim McElroy even says: “Several months we were able to fly 6 to 9 missions on consecutive nights”, that is 3 aircraft each time flown on two to three consecutive nights.

\textsuperscript{78} Letter dated 17 January 1992, sent by Miles L. Johnson to Prof. William Leary, in: UTD/Leary/B69F11.

\textsuperscript{79} In July 2002, former Air America navigator Jim Keck donated a pair of these boots to the Dalai Lama’s Tibet Museum in Dharamsala, India (correspondence with the Office of the Dalai Lama, kindly forwarded to the author by Jim Keck).

\textsuperscript{80} Fax dated 14 June 2000, sent by Brigadier General Aderholt to the author.

\textsuperscript{81} Jim McElroy, CIA loadmaster in the Tibetan program who was in charge of the Agency parachute loft and storekeeper for the FE airborne equipment stored at Okinawa, recalls that “each load (24,000-27,000 pounds) consisted of 34 to 40 bundles weighing 675 to 750 pounds. The bundles were loaded equally in two sticks on side by side center guide conveyor systems. The conveyor system had a center guide rail channel to keep the bundles on track. The pallets on the bottom of each bundle had two inline wheels which fit into the guide channel. Each bundle generally contained 8 individual containers weighing 75 to 85 pounds. Cross webbing straps held the containers together and served as a harness for the three nylon 28 foot parachutes used on each bundle. When the webbing straps were removed the container could be handled by one man or loaded on an animal for transport” (Jim McElroy, letter dated 12 July 97, details kindly forwarded to the author by Jim Keck with kind permission from Jim McElroy). “The packages came from the CIA supply facility at Chinan on Okinawa and contained different mixtures of guns, ammo, radios, and other supplies” (Written resume, p. 3, of an interview with B.G. Aderholt conducted by Prof. Bill Leary at Fort Walton Beach, FL, on 28-30 August 1990 (Interview dated 28-30 August 1990, in: UTD/Leary/B68F9). Jim Keck recalls the first C-130A flight to Tibet:

“I would always go back to help out with pushing out the load. As we were not pressurized with the doors open, I would always hook up to a walk around oxygen bottle and clip it on to my flight suit. As the load went out, on that first C-130 flight, I was frightened by the shuddering and “bumpy” vibration of the aircraft. After the mission we tried to figure what had caused this bumping. It was the fact that the pallets had wooden bases and during the flight from Okinawa all the way up to Tibet, the tiny rollers of the track had worn tiny grooves into the wood. As they raced out towards the open door, each groove sort of rattled as the small groove moved over to the next roller. It did vibrate the entire airplane.”

\textsuperscript{83} Trest, \textit{Air Commando One}, p.89.
departure in the twilight. Then the “quarantined” Air America crews, i.e. crews that had been taken from the normal schedules and given special clearances for clandestine (“black”) missions would fly the C-130As to Tibet and drop the Tibetans and their cargo. “The airplanes would depart in the late afternoon for the 13+ hour flight. They followed a certain route, laid out by [Larry] Ropka, and would send Q signals as they passed over designated checkpoints.”

From the log book of “Doc” Johnson, we know some details: Between 10 and 15 April 59 he had 35 hours of conversion training at Ashiya, Japan, home base of the C-130As. On 16 April 59 he ferried an unknown USAF DC-6 from Atsugi Naval Air Station, home of the CIA Japan, to Kadena. On 18 April 59, he flew a C-130 from Kadena to Clark (3.4 hours), then remained at Clark, and took another or the same C-130 back from Clark to Kadena on 23 April 59. This makes believe that between 19 and 22 April 59, another Air America crew flew the C-130 into Tibet and was later released on the return flight from Clark by “Doc” Johnson. It can only be guessed what “Doc” Johnson did at Clark Air Base from 19 to 22 April 59, which is not exactly the ideal place for recreation – perhaps he was on a flight to China that he wasn’t allowed to log.

The training mission to Clark on 18 and 23 April 59 (Page from Doc Johnson’s log book kindly supplied by his son James on 18 February 2013)

After another hour of C-130 training at Kadena on 17 July 59, “Doc” Johnson flew his first real C-130 mission into Tibet in September 59: On 1 September 59, he and Bill Welk took Air America C-46 B-136 from Taipei to Kadena. The same day, both of them flew an unknown USAF DC-4 from Kadena AFB to Ashiya AFB in Japan, home of the USAF’s 483rd Troop Carrier Wing. Apparently after some ground training, both pilots made some training flights out of Ashiya in an unknown C-130 on 3 and 4 September 59 and at the end brought a C-130 to Naha, Okinawa, logging a total of 10.3 flight hours. From 4 to 20 September 59, “Doc” Johnson’s log book only shows 68.7 hours of flying as pilot in command, including 50.1 hours of night flying as pilot in command, all done at Naha in a USAF C-130. The meaning is clear: As the flights from Takhli to Tibet and back to Takhli took about 13 to 14 hours and one flight from Kadena to Takhli or the other way round an estimated 8 hours, these were 3 or 4 flights to Tibet flown out of Takhli in more or less consecutive nights with a little rest in between, and the last flight seems to have been the flight of 18 September 59, when the first group of Tibetan agents was dropped into the Nam Tso area of Tibet for

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85 According to Neese D. Hicks, the C-130s sometimes had pylon tanks that carried 300 gallons each and a rubberized Benson tank in the back that held 2,000 gallons (Interview with Neese D. Hicks, conducted by Prof. William Leary at Ashland, OR, on 3 August 1987, written resume, in: UTD/Leary/B43F2).
87 Page from Doc Johnson’s log book kindly supplied by his son James on 18 February 2013.
88 Page from Doc Johnson’s log book kindly supplied by his son James on 18 February 2013.
sabotage operations. As to “Doc” Johnson, he was back to regular airline work on 21 September 59 as pilot in command of CAT’s DC-6B B-1006 on the scheduled flight from Naha to Taipei.

There were still more flights that “Doc” Johnson made to Tibet as pilot in command: On 4 December 59, he flew CAT DC-6B B-1006 to Naha, Okinawa, and on 24 December 59, we see him back again in the same aircraft on a scheduled flight from Taipei to Hong Kong. But between these dates, i.e. from 10 to 21 December 59, his log book notes 51.9 hours of “charter” flying, including 20.8 hours of night flying, in a C-130. There is no doubt that these were another 2 or 3 flights to Tibet flown out of Takhli in more or less consecutive nights with a little rest in between.

Between 4 and 17 February 1960, he logged 55.4 hours of C-130 flying at Kadena, which probably means 2 flights to Tibet during more or less consecutive nights. On 4 March 60 his airline service ended at Naha, where he had flown CAT’s DC-6B B-1006. Somehow, maybe by car, he got to Kadena, and from 6 to 20 March 60, he logged 64.7 flight hours at Kadena AFB in a USAF C-130, including 47.9 hours of night flying – which probably means again 3 flights to Tibet during more or less consecutive nights, that is with some rest between the flights. On 23 March 60, he piloted CAT’s Round-the-Island flight in C-46 B-856. “Doc” Johnson’s next known tour to Tibet was in April 60: On 5 April 60, an Overseas National DC-7 brought him from Taipei to Kadena. From 9 to 15 April 60, he logged 39.5 hours in a USAF C-130, including 22.5 hours of night flying as pilot in command, and on 17 April 60, he flew an Air America DC-6 from Kadena to Taipei, again as pilot in command. This time, it was apparently only one or two flights to Tibet. The following day, “Doc” Johnson piloted CAT’s Round-the-Island flight in C-46 B-856.

For details of this first infiltration using a C-130, see Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, pp.115-18.


Extracts from “Doc” Johnson’s log book showing the February 1960 and March 1960 flights to Tibet (with kind permission from James Johnson)

Extract from “Doc” Johnson’s log book showing the April 1960 flights to Tibet (with kind permission from James Johnson)

“Aderholt immediately ordered the C-130s stripped of excess weight. He managed to get the payload increased from 12,000 pounds to 28,000 pounds. This was later cut back to 18,000. One plane (Pappy Hayes) was late coming back. He called in 80 miles out that he was low on fuel. There was fog sitting on the runway at Takhli, as it often did. Hayes made a pass but could not find the runway. Aderholt (on hand-held radio) and Ropka went down to the end of the runway and shot off flares. This enabled Hayes to land. Word of the incident soon got back to Dave Fleming and the result was a ‘grand inquisition’. In the end, General Kirshaw reduced the payload to 18,000 pounds, where it stayed.”92 Generally speaking, as there were no landing strips capable of a C-130A in Tibet, the CIA was unable to retrieve the agents, once they had been parachuted, and sometimes, the extremely long flight caused fuel problems for the return flight, so that the aircraft had to land in East Pakistan. For such cases, Aderholt had always troops on standby at the airfield in East Pakistan. Although such a landing was declared as an emergency landing, the Indians, fearing trouble with China, constantly fussed about these landings. “Aderholt leaned over backwards to appease China, constantly fussed about these landings. “Aderholt leaned over backwards to appease the crews. They wanted larger parachutes, so he arranged for 34-foot canopies on personnel chutes. Someone at headquarters purchased Hillay’s first set of commercial gear at Abacrombie & Fitch for the crews. There were lots of toys and gimmicks: silenced .38s, emergency rations, gold bars. However, there was no real SAR program.”93

“About an hour out of the DZ (drop zone) area we would hook up all the static lines to the static line cables and tape the snaps secure so the exit vibration wouldn’t inadvertently unsnap them. We would check and make sure no loose straps or chains were on the tracks or unsecured. If personnel were involved we would double and triple check their parachutes and equipment. About 15 minutes out we would take off all the chains and stow them out of the way, leaving only the heavy duty nylon shear webs to hold the load in place. About 5 minutes out a red light would go on and the plane would depressurize. At this time we would be hooked up to walk around oxygen bottles, each bottle would be good for about 10 minutes, depending on how heavy it was used. When the pilot turned on the green light and bell, he would nose the plane up and the PDO’s would cut the shear web with a sharp knife and out it would all go. Like a roaring freight train – then all quiet. When personnel and cargo were dropped the cargo would go first and then the men. This all happened within a few seconds.

92 Interview conducted by Prof. William Leary with Lawrence Ropka at Ft Walton Beach, FL, on 29-30 August 1990, transcript preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F4).
93 Interview conducted by Prof. William Leary with Lawrence Ropka at Ft Walton Beach, FL, on 29-30 August 1990, transcript preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F4).
The majority of drops went off very smoothly, but occasionally the door would get jammed or the static lines would get fouled up and couldn’t get them in without a struggle.”

Air America Captain A. L. “Judkins recalls one two-plane mission. He flew with Welk in one aircraft, with Doc Johnson and Jack Stiles in the other. They got lost after the navigator corrected for a non-existent jet stream. Neither aircraft made the drop. Judkins headed south and landed at the emergency field north of Dhacca. It was raining, there were no runway lights, and there was a 30-knot crosswind. A bolt of lightning lit the strip just before landing. The crew had a tough time trying to reapply USAF markings in the rain. Meanwhile, Doc Johnson had gone on to Takhli. The weather was bad, and he had to make several passes before landing with low fuel warning lights on.”

Radar operator Leon C. Cartwright also recalls two flights that were memorable: “On one, Johnson and Judkins flew out of Takhli, turning left at Mt. Everest to the IP, then right to the DZ. The altitude was about 20,000 feet. Pinkava was onboard. He went back to deal with problems with the clamshell doors and nearly passed out. Judkins’ windshield cracked, causing him considerable apprehension. On another flight, with Stiles, they almost ran out of gas en route to Takhli. They lost one engine due to fuel starvation, then another as they neared the field, which was obscured by clouds. The decision was to make one pass and crash land if they missed, or to maintain altitude and bail out. At a critical point, someone on the ground fired a flare up through the clouds, giving Stiles his position and enabling him to land.”

When on 1 May 1960, the CIA pilot Francis Gary Powers was shot down in a U-2 near Sverdlovsk in the Soviet Union, all CIA planes were ordered not to violate international borders, and at that time, some 14,000 Tibetans dependent on air support for food, arms and equipment, were left fend for themselves. Since 18 September 59 (1 C-130A), there had been several C-130A drops – one in the second week of November 59 to Penbar, one in mid-December 59 to the same destination, one in January 60, one in February 60, 2 C-130As in mid-March 60, and 2 C-130As in mid-April 60, both of which encountered bad weather, which nearly resulted in accidents. In order to deliver as much equipment as possible before the weather would prove prohibitive, where after deliveries would be possible only in autumn, three C-130A flights were launched on two consecutive nights at the end of the April lunar circle. An emergency delivery had been scheduled for 1 May 60, but was cancelled because of the U-2, which had been shot down. So many of the Tibetan guerrillas were rounded up and killed, while supplies destined for them were held up in Okinawa, Taiwan and Thailand. Between November 1959 and May 1960, some 35 to 40 missions had delivered almost 400 tons of cargo to resistance fighters of Tibet. In May and June 1960, some Air America crew members like Thomas Sailer were sent to the United States to do low level training and radar avoidance with C-130s, and this program was run by Gar Thorsrud, but that training did not lead to any operation. Other Air America pilots did some training at Naha, Okinawa: On 30 November and on 1 December 60, “Doc” Johnson did a total 8.2 hours of C-130 training at

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95 Interview with A. L. Judkins conducted by Prof. William Leary on 9 September 85, written resume, at: UTD/Leary/B43F3.
96 Interview with Leon C. Cartwright conducted by Prof. William Leary on 5 October 87, written resume, at: UTD/Leary/B43F2.
97 Details of these flights in: Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, pp.117-34.
98 Leary, Secret mission to Tibet, pp.66-71; Trest, Air Commando One, pp.87/8 + 91-98. Jim Keck questions the number of 35 to 40 missions given by Leary: “There never were that many unless they were of some other type of missions flown. I was on each monthly operation and it couldn’t have been that many using the C-130s” (Letter dated 12 August 2001 written to the author). Leary, Manuscript, p.304 (in: UTD/Leary/B19F3) speaks of 27 missions flown in 1960, of which 19 were considered successful, and of an average load of 19,000 pounds per flight.
99 Thomas C. Sailer, interview made with William M. Leary at San Francisco on 8 September 1985; professor Leary’s notes, preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F5.
Naha. As the CIA apparently wanted to use more advanced versions of the C-130, “Doc” Johnson did a total of 10.3 hours of conversion training in a C-130B at Atlanta on 9 and 10 January 61. But apparently, this program was dropped, as the next time his log book shows him doing some training (3 hours) was on 19 March 61, when he flew C-130 “70467” out of Naha, and this was a C-130A.100

The airdrops were resumed on 31 March 1961 under the Kennedy administration, with known missions on 31 March 61 (1 C-130A), 2 April 61 to Mustang in Nepal (2 C-130As), and mid-December 61 to Mustang (2 C-130As),101 but the airdrop missions probably continued to about mid-1962.102 “By 1960, it was clear that attempts to nurture the resistance in eastern Tibet were a disaster, so instead it was decided to create an army of several thousand men who would make raids into western Tibet from Nepal. The place chosen as a base for this army was the remote Mustang Valley, a small sub-kingdom populated by people who were ethnically Tibetan and separated from the rest of the world by the 27,000-ft mountains of Annapurna and Dhauligiri. Strategically it was ideal, since it reached to within a few hours’ march of Tibet’s Sinkiang-Lhasa highway.”103 At this time, the C-130s “were carrying two navigators, one for the outward portion and one for the return. Radar navigation was used, coming and going. The navigator compared the map and radar details. He also carefully monitored the fuel burn.”104 “Doc” Johnson’s log book shows him again doing C-130 “training” out of “Naha” from 31 March to 2 April 60, but 11.3 hours of training on each of these days makes believe that in reality, he flew 2 missions to Tibet/Nepal out of Takhli in Thailand. For on 29 March 61, he took Air America C-46 B-154 on a 0.8 hour flight from Bangkok to “T” – apparently standing for Takhli. So the 11.3 hours of flying were just the round trip from Takhli to Tibet/Nepal and back to Takhli on both days. On 3 April 61, he did not need more than another 0.8 hours of flying from Takhli to Bangkok, this time in DC-6 “820”, that is in the USAF’s special mission DC-6/C-118A 51-3820. And on 4 April 61, he continued normal flying out of Bangkok for Air America.

Flights to Tibet/Nepal in March and April 1961
(Page from “Doc” Johnson’s log book kindly supplied by his son James on 18 February 2013)

From “Doc” Johnson’s log book we have details of a mission to Tibet or Mustang that seems to have involved 3 C-130As in mid-December 1961. On 7 December, Johnson ended his service with Air America at Bangkok, then was apparently deadheaded to Naha, Okinawa, and the next entry in his log book shows him training at Naha on 14 December flying in C-

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100 Pages from Doc Johnson’s log book kindly supplied by his son James on 18 February 2013.
101 Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, pp. 140/1, 158-64.
102 Fax dated 29 May 2000, kindly sent to the author by Brigadier General Aderholt.
104 Interview with Leon C. Cartwright, conducted by Prof. William Leary on 5 October 1987, written resume, in: UTD/Leary/B43F2.
130 “76” for 4.3 hours and on 15 December flying in C-130 “74” for 4.0 hours. On 16 December, he flew C-130 “74” from Kadena, Okinawa to “Romeo” (i.e. Takhli in Thailand) in 7.3 hours, on 19 December 61, Johnson flew C-130 “77” from “Romeo” to “Romeo” in an 11.3 hour flight – evidently the mission to Tibet or Mustang and back. On 20 December 61, he flew C-130 “76” back from “Romeo” (Takhli) to Kadena, Okinawa in 6.5 hours, and on 26 December, we find him flying CAT’s Round the Island service out of Taipei. This is the only

Flights to Tibet/Nepal in December 1961
(Page from “Doc” Johnson’s log book kindly supplied by his son James on 10 August 2013)

time that his log book notes the serials of the C-130As involved, apparently standing for 57-474, 57-476, and 57-477. So, all three C-130As flew from Kadena to Takhli, but it is not known if all 3 of them continued to Tibet/Mustang.

The C-130As used on that second Tibetan C-130 airlift still belonged to the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron, and the 20 or so C-130As of the 21st TCS based at Naha during that period were mostly the same that had operated the Tibetan airlift in 1959/60. For the air crews, two things changed: “First, they took away our 22 cal pistols that were equipped with silencers and we were given 45 cal pistols. These were very ‘ratty’ being put together with different part numbers (for security reasons). The other item was that we were told to forget any of the ‘cover stories’ we had been told and just go ahead and tell them everything: ‘They’ll get it anyway!’ Also from that night on, permission to make an overflight had to have the direct OK from the lips of the president.” At the end, the route to Tibet was changed: “Initially, they flew into Tibet through the back door: over Kunming and western China. Late in 1961, however, the Chinese shifted their air defense system 1000 miles to the west and flights were suspended for at least one moon phase. The route then shifted to fly over Burma, but the Burmese began to complain. About the time Khruschev pounded his shoe on the table at the UN, India gave permission to fly over their territory.”

In late 1961, a small detachment called E-Flight was established within the 21st TCS at Naha, Okinawa, and this small flight of C-130As at Naha was dedicated to support the Tibetan airlift, later also becoming responsible for clandestine cargo flights into Laos. The

105 See my C-130 file within The Aircraft of Air America.
106 Trest, Air Commando One, pp. 87, 92/3.
107 See the C-130 file of this database.
110 The official history of the 21st TCS, contained in microfilm no. K0716 preserved at the AFHRA at Maxwell AFB, notes a change in the maintenance system in the first six months of 1961: “The section was re-organized from a two flight system, and further divided into four flights. Also included in the reorganization was a night flight under TSgt Stamper.” And there was another change in October 1961: “In October 1961, the section reverted to a basic two-flight system. MSgt Ottmann assumed duties of “A” Flight Chief, and MSgt Napoliello assumed duties as “B” Flight Chief. The Special Projects function, formerly a “D” flight activity, was absorbed by “B” Flight during this change.”
111 Trest, Air Commando One, p.87; fax dated 29 May 2000, kindly sent to the author by Brigadier General Aderholt. Naha airfield is some 20 miles away from Kadena Air Force Base and is equally used for military and civilian flights.
four or five E-Flight ships were not camouflaged, because camouflage might have implied a combat role. The E-Flight ships were identical in internal configuration to the standard A-models except that skate-wheel rollers were installed on the cargo-compartment floor over which cheap wood pallets could be moved. The smaller pallets made handling easier at locations without forklifts and eliminated the need to recover pallets.¹¹² Detachment 1, 315th Air Division had responsibility for the C-130A squadrons at Naha and control of all Combat Cargo Airlift transiting the Ryukyus. The Maintenance and Material support at Naha was the responsibility of the host 51st Fighter Interceptor Wing. On 1 January 1962, Detachment 2 of the 315th Air Division was organized at Kadena, Okinawa, and assigned a special mission.¹¹³

In the summer of 1962, Col. Alpheus W. Blizzard replaced Aderholt as commander of Detachment 2. “Blizzard recalls that several flights to Tibet were made after his arrival at Det.2, with the last one coming in 1965.”¹¹⁴ But this was probably one of the flights to “Oak Tree” in India, as Robert E. Rousselot, Air America’s Director of Flight Operations at Taipei, notes that the Tibetan operation lasted “approximately three years.”¹¹⁵ At the end of the operation, 57 missions had been successfully flown, in which more than 50 agents and more than 500,000 pounds of cargo had been dropped.¹¹⁶

Since 1962 the Tibetan program was slowly reorganized as to include the cooperation of India. Already since the early sixties, US President Kennedy followed the idea that evolutionary economic development of Third World countries like India could ensure their noncommunist political stability, and so, India became the world’s largest recipient of US economic aid at that time, i.e. about 650 millions of Dollars per year between 1960 and 1965.¹¹⁷ When China attacked the North Eastern Frontier Administration area of India on 20 October 62, an air bridge was established between 2 and 11 November 62, bringing small arms from London, Frankfurt and Adana to Calcutta, to be used by the Indian Himalayan infantry. But then, on 21 November 62, maybe frightened by the idea of a major US intervention, China declared a unilateral cease-fire. Nevertheless, between 1963 and 1967, the tensions between India and China continued to be alive, as China constantly threatened the Indian Himalaya border, forcing the country to spend more and more money for weapons.¹¹⁸ US President Kennedy also offered India to construct a system of radar stations along the Indian northern border, which could survey any Chinese movements.

As to the Tibetans, in November 62 a Southern Air Transport DC-6 piloted by Neese Hicks made three shuttles between Takhli in Thailand and Charbatia airfield in eastern India, bringing in an assortment of military aid for building up a Tibetan resistance force.¹¹⁹ But things went very slowly in India so that in the fall of 1963, the CIA established Air Ventures Inc. inside Nepal to do the airlift. But then, in late 1963, the US and India found a way to cooperate, so that Air Ventures did not have to make covert supply drops.¹²⁰ US aircraft would fly the supplies to India, and Indian aircraft would fly them close to the Tibetan border. The US aircraft to do the job were the DC-6s¹²¹ and later the Boeing 727s¹²² of Southern Air

¹¹³ Official history of the 374th TCW, contained in microfilm N0497 preserved at Maxwell AFB, p.5.
¹¹⁴ Written resume of an interview with Alpheus W. Blizzard conducted by Prof. Bill Leary at Georgetown, SC, on 27 February 1993 (in: UTD/Leary/B68F10).
¹¹⁹ Conboy / Morrison, *The CIA’s secret war in Tibet*, pp. 174 and 284.
¹²⁰ Conboy / Morrison, *The CIA’s secret war in Tibet*, pp.196/7.
¹²¹ As it seems, initially, Air America C-130s were used for some time (Leary, Manuscript, ch. VI, p. 522, in: UTD/Leary/B19F4).
Transport. The “CAT and Air America in Japan” file of this database describes in detail how former Air America DC-6s then operated by Southern Air Transport, working under contract no. AF49(604)-4379 with the USAF’s Logistical Support Group, flew support missions out of Kadena Air Base on Okinawa, which was the main CIA supply station for the Far East during the sixties.123

In his diary now preserved at the Air America Archives,124 Clifford A. Costa describes in detail how those flights to India worked. The DC-6 went to Kadena in December 63 with 2 crews for a covert operation. Team I consisted of Messrs. Sims (Pilot in Command), Marsh, Barrett, La Pointe, Oliver, Keck or Cartwright, and Hudson, and Team II of Messrs. N. Hicks (Pilot in Command), Bussart, Parker, Costa, Scott, Keck or Cartwright, and Hudson. Hudson flew all flights because he was proficient in CW. On Okinawa, Air America operated out of Det.2; Company representatives were Bill Reid (“Mr. Okinawa”) and Bob Aubrey, but Aubrey handled most of the briefings.125 “This project [was] to fly Tibet tribesmen (insurgents + equipment) to India from Kadena. (A) White portion route: aircraft [N]90781 from Kadena to Bangkok. 100 [miles] out of Bangkok, cancel flight plan + proceed to alternate. Alternate was Takhli, Thailand, code name “The Ranch”, “Tic Toc”, “Romeo”, etc. At Takhli, aircraft number change to [N]81907 and aircraft completely sterilized. (B) Black portion route: aircraft [N] 81907 from Takhli to Tavoy, Burma direct across to Charbatia, India (code name “Oak Tree”), also called Cuttack on charts. Our call-sign was “Hightail 1, 2, 3, + 4”, depending on trip flown. Alternates were (1) Bhubanewar, (2) Kalaikundah. 100 to 200 miles out, down to 500 feet altitude to duck Calcutta radar, also blacked out aircraft. [The] story was: displaced hill tribesmen being sent for vocational training under charter or space available – the company was Marathon Aviation Co, Miami, Florida – to Bhubanewar. Four trips flown, starting Dec. 26, 1963 → Jan. 2, 1964, total about 100 hours flying time on aircraft [N]90781 [of ] SAT.”126 The Sims crew flew on 26-27 (“Hightail 1”) and on 30-31 December 63 (“Hightail 3”), and the Sims crew with Costa on 28-29 December 63 (“Hightail 2”) and on 1-2 January 64 (“Hightail 4”). The passengers were Chinese-looking, but nothing is known about the cargo. The missions were timed so that the flight arrived just at dawn. After landing, the passengers were promptly transferred to a waiting C-46, flown by Air America crews, which took off within minutes. Costa recalls a “mad scramble” to unload and transfer people and cargo. Although the crews had been given several contacts in case it was necessary – Dudley Foster at Tainan, “Mr. Long” at Takhli, “Mr. Baker” at Clark AFB, “Clancy” at Danang, “Mr. Leister” at Bangkok, and an Indian Air Force captain called Creywall127 at “Oak Tree” –, the flights maintained voice radio silence, but reported progress to the Customer on CW.128 The flights between Kadena and Takhli took about 8 ½ hours westbound and about 6 ½ hours eastbound, and the flights between Takhli and “Oak Tree” a bit less than 5 hours westbound and a little bit more than 4 hours eastbound.

122 Indeed, the decision to buy Boeing 727s was based on 2 factors, i.e. the need for faster planes to support overflights over Tibet (STBARNUM) and the desire by MATS to convert from DC-6s to jets in Southern AT’s inter-island contract with MATS. The purchase agreement was signed ion 2 August 65 (Leary, Manuscript, ch. VI, pp. 619+624, in: UTD/Leary/B19F5).

123 At Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, was the CIA’s main logistics base in East Asia, code-named ZRBLUSH and containing, among other supplies, arms and ammunition (see Leary, Secret mission to Tibet, p.69).

124 As part of the Leary collection; the notes are preserved at UTD/Leary/B44F5.

125 Written summary (preserved at UTD/Leary/B44F5) of a tape recorded interview that William Leary made with Clifford Costa on 5/6 November and 4/5 December 1984; diary of Clifford Costa, p.6, also preserved at UTD/Leary/B44F5.

126 Costa, diary, pp.5/6, in: UTD/Leary/B44F5.

127 Colonel Laloo Grewal (see Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, pp.188-95).

128 Written summary (preserved at UTD/Leary/B44F5) of a tape recorded interview that William Leary made with Clifford Costa on 5/6 November and 4/5 December 1984; diary of Clifford Costa, p.6, also preserved at UTD/Leary/B44F5.

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Costa's next flight to “Oak Tree” was on 15/6 May 1964: “This flight [was] both ‘black’ and white. Questionable cargo from Kad[ena], Okinawa, to India. (A) White portion: [The] aircraft [flown under the] military contract [was N]90782. Flight from Kadena to Bangkok. 100 [miles] out [of] Bangkok cancel flight plan and proceed to alternate, which was Takhli, Thailand. At Takhli, Peterson and Conway completely sterilized [the] aircraft removing all markings, tags etc. [The] new number painted on was [N]2782 on tail only (no flag at all). A false FAA certificate of registration was installed in [the] cockpit. It gave: serial # 44917, registration # [N]2782.129 Address of cover: Marathon Aviation Co., Box 884, Inter Airport Branch, Miami, Florida. (B) Black portion: sterilized are personal gear, and then flew to Tavoy, Burma, then direct to Charbatia, India (Cuttau on charts, code name ‘Oak Tree’). Load was ammo, explosives, radio gear + 4 passengers. Probably agents? 100 [miles] out, down to 500 feet to get under Calcutta radar. Plane blacked out and radio silence, except for Hudson on CW (coded replies).130 Mech[anic]s Peterson and Ed Conway went as far as Takhli. [The] white trip [flight] numbers: Kadena-Takhli: 531/14; Takhli-Kadena: 524/15. […] Crew: Bussart, D.E.; Hicks, N.D.; Hudson, H.J.; Costa, C.A.; Oliver, D.V.; Keck, J.W.; Rockwell, K.R.; Marlow, T.H.; Greiner, T.H. – Time: KAD-TAK: 8+00; TAK-OAK: 4+45; OAK-TAK: 4+27; TAK-KAD: 7+25, [making a total of] 24+37. On return to Takhli, aircraft again changed back to SAT, military contract, [reg. no. N]90782.”131

The following month, on 18-20 June 1964, Costa went to “Oak Tree” again: “Aircraft [N]90781. Marsh, H.L.: captain; Walton, J.B.: co-captain; Barrett, R.L.: pilot; Costa, C.A.: flight engineer; Lopshire, L.B.: flight engineer; Sanders, W.L.: navigator; Aubray, R.J.: C.W. operator; Haynes, D.: C.W. operator; Umbach, W.: security; Herald, R.J.: load specialist […] This flight [was] white to Takhli as before. Then sterilize [the] aircraft and change # to [N]2781 with phony registration certificate from our old friends Marathon Aviation of Miami, Florida. Black portion from Takhli to Charbatia, India via Tavoy, Burma. Again down to 450-500 feet 150 miles out, to duck Calcutta radar. Cargo to ‘Oak Tree’ (Charbatia) was 1 jeep and hot cargo, ammo etc., radio gear. Contact at ‘Oak Tree’ is Ed Rector. We had [a] very important passenger out of there, looked Chinese.132 […] At any rate, he was V.I.P., had an American escort (CIA). We took them back to Takhli and then direct to Hsin-Chu airfield, Taiwan. Saw the ‘black’ B-26s and P2Vs there; they make the flights over the ‘mainland’. Flight terminate at Kadena. – Time: KAD-TKL: 8+00; TKL-OAK: 4+35; OAK-TKL: 4+47; TKL-Hsin-Chu: 54-56; Hsin-Chu-KAD: 1+45, [making a total of] 25+03.”133 By then, cargo flights from Kadena to “Oak Tree” followed the same pattern. On 19/20 September 64, Clifford Costa was on another mission to India, this time aboard N90782 piloted by D.E. Bussart and A.R. Gibson: “This flight same as previous black flights. Flight was white to Takhli, Thailand. Then complete sterilization of crew and aircraft and a ‘black’ flight to India (Oak Tree) and back. Aircraft # change to [N]2782, and our old cover company – Marathon Aviation of Miami, Florida – was used with fake FAA credentials. Again used low altitude 4-500 feet ‘in’, in order to get below Calcutta radar. Cargo was guns, radio gear, ammo, 129 Costa, diary, p.10, in: UTD/Leary/B44F5. While the registration N2782 was false, serial # 44917 was the correct msn of that particular aircraft, that is of DC-6 N90782.
130 The aircraft arrived on the coast at dawn and followed a river to the isolated airfield. The pilots were Bussart and N. Hicks (Summary of the interview with Clifford Costa recorded by William Leary, in: UTD/Leary/B44F5).
131 Costa, diary, pp.10-12, in: UTD/Leary/B44F5.
132 Costa speculated that the passenger might have been “a Chinese communist engineer from Tibet who defected” (Diary, p.17, in: UTD/Leary/B44F5). According to Conboy / Morrison (The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, p.290, note 27), a senior Chinese official had secretly defected to Kathmandu, Nepal, and had been flown to Charbatia by Air Ventures helicopter pilot Jerome McEntee. On the pretext of servicing two ARC C-46 transports, a CIA-operated DC-6 arrived at Oak Tree, took aboard the ex-communist while the plane was taxiing at the end of the runway and flew him from India to Taiwan.
133 Costa, diary, pp.16-18, in: UTD/Leary/B44F5.
explosives and other supplies to the ‘boys’ up on the border. Contact man at Oak Tree is Ed Rector.”

The security was especially tight when the DC-6s brought back Tibetan guerrillas who had been trained outside India. Cliff Costa was on two of such flights. On 24/25 September 64, the aircraft was N90782 piloted by H.L. Marsh and H.J. Hudson. “Same type trip as previous. Black portion from Takhli with crew and aircraft black, with the old Marathon Aviation cover story. This time [we] carried cargo and 30-35 of the rebels (guerrillas). Security is tight with these passengers on board. [We] brought up Dudley Foster (CAT security) from Tainan plus customer liaison man – unknown. These boys look to me like Tibetans or from Nepal. Anyway, they are tough little guys. Believe they go up to the Tibet / India / Burma-China border to stir up trouble. On these passenger flights we are always met at Charbatia at [the] far end of the runway by a ‘black’ C-46, and they are ‘off’ on [the] last leg of their long journey in a matter of minutes. Aircraft # and paper changed to [N]2782 (Marathon Aviation Co, Florida).”

On the last flight to “Oak Tree” mentioned in his diary, that of 27/28 October 64, Cliff Costa was aboard DC-6 N90782, piloted by N.D. Hicks and A.R. Gibson: “This was a ‘white’ SAT flight as far as Takhli. Then crew and aircraft [were] sterilized and left Takhli as Marathon Aviation aircraft [N]2782 with phony FAA documents and no flag. [The] flight to India (Charbatia) was ok – [the] route is now changed. We used to cross directly over Burma (Tavoy), but as of late, have been going south out of Takhli over [the] Gulf of Siam, till we hit past Burma, then cross over and take up a direct route to Charbatia, India. Still going down to low level 150 miles out, to duck radar. This trip we had 50 more ‘insurgents’ on board. They all look same – still believe they are Tibetans or Nepalese. Also supplies. Ed Rector still at ‘Oak Tree’ as ‘contact’, Dick Long at Kadena and Takhli is still a mystery: Company or

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134 Costa, Diary, pp.20/1, in: UTD/Leary/B44F5.
135 Costa, Diary, pp.22/3, in: UTD/Leary/B44F5.
Customer? They have tightened up security a lot. Don’t want us back aft around our passengers any more than necessary. They (the passengers) are really kept in the dark. They never know where they have come from. Keep their trucks covered and aircraft curtains pulled; so they never know where we land, who we are, etc. etc. Same old C-46 pick-up as soon as we landed at ‘Oak Tree’.”

But there were more Air America crews working for Southern Air Transport who, from time to time, flew DC-6 missions from Kadena, Okinawa, to “Oak Tree” on the East coast of India. Captain Jesse Walton made 3 flights to “Oak Tree”: no.1 on 18/9 June 64, as described above, no.2 on 25/6 August 64, and no.3 on 3/4 February 1965; each time, the flight was at night, and each time, the aircraft descended to 500 feet above the water to avoid radar detection. Air America Captain Joe Hazen, also working for Southern Air Transport at that time, recalls similar flying conditions, when he flew his DC-6 to “Oak Tree” on 20 March 67 and on 27 April 67. Others were probably to follow, as in May 68, Air America DC-6 N90782 was still assigned to contract no. AF49(604)-4379 with the USAF’s Logistical Support Group for use by SAT out of Kadena. On 15-17 May 65, a SAT DC-6 piloted by Eddie Sims even delivered ammunition, weapons, and a small number of radios and inflatable rubber boats all the way from Okinawa to a drop zone a few kilometres from Tangya inside Nepal, making refuelling stops at Takhli and “Oak Tree”. In 1966/67, John E. Lee also made three or four trips to India, “arriving at ‘Oak Tree’ on the coast of India just before daylight. Zeke Zelitis, whom he knew at NACC, would meet [the] airplane and arrange for offloading (mainly arms; a Helio on one occasion). The crew would have a good meal, shower, and go to bed, then return that night.”

Southern Air Transport DC-6A N90781 at Taipei in February 61
(with kind permission from Mel Lawrence / Airliners.net)

In 1966, the CIA even scheduled four Boeing 727 flights between Okinawa and “Oak Tree”, to be made at low level to avoid radar and anti-American opposition at New Delhi – evidently using the aircraft of Air America / SAT. One such flight is known to have been

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138 E-mail dated 9 August 2004, kindly sent to the author by Joe Hazen.
140 Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, pp.216-18.
141 John E. Lee, interview conducted by William M. Leary at Watkinsville, GA on 27 May 1987; Prof. Leary’s paper is preserved at UTD/Leary/B46F10.
142 Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, p.210; for the aircraft see the file “The jets” of this
flown for LSG in the night from 5 to 6 April 71, with “Doc” Johnson at the controls of 727

The 727 mission to “Oak Tree” on 5-6 April 71

N5055. In later years, the Boeing 727s were even tested at Takhli for air drops with conveyer belt and rollers, because the aircraft could be pressurized until the drop, but although the system worked well, it was never used in operation. The LSG flights that “Doc” Johnson made to Takhli, Thailand between 22 and 24 April 70 probably included air drop and jump exercises as can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrqdmXxBZjI. The Air America documentary, where these scenes are taken from, was made in 1970. Apparently, there were similar exercises on 4-7 March 71 and 23/4 June 71.

LSG flights to Takhli on 22-23 April 70, probably including air drop and jump exercises

LSG flights to Takhli on 4-7 March 71, possibly also including air drop and jump exercises

LSG flights to Takhli on 23/4 June 71, possibly also including air drop and jump exercises

Probably, the technique to air drop and jump from a Boeing 727 mentioned here was intended to be used on flights for the Tibetan program, but it seems that this technique never left the phase of exercises carried out at Takhli, Thailand. Eddie Sims made several supply runs into

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143 Thomas C. Sailer, interview made with William M. Leary at San Francisco on 8 September 1985; professor Leary’s notes, preserved at UTD/Leary/B43F5.
144 Pages from “Doc” Johnson’s log book kindly submitted by his son James on 19 August 2013.
“Oak Tree” in the Boeing 727, but no drops.145

Southern Air Transport Boeing 727 N5092 at Nha Trang in 1968
(UTD/Misc.Mat./B4F4)

“Oak Tree” was the code-name of Charbatia Air Base, located north of the city of Bhubaneswar in the east of India, home of the Aviation Research Center (ARC), an intelligence joint venture between the CIA and the Indian Intelligence Bureau, created on 7 September 63.146 Already earlier that year, crews of Intermountain Aviation of Marana, AZ had come into contact with the Indians. Former CAT, Air America, and Intermountain pilot Connie Seigrist recalls: “22 March 1963: Gar [= Garfield Thorsrud of Intermountain] and I flew a C-46 N9700Z on a local flight at Washington National airport in Washington, DC. Before take-off we were introduced to some Indian Nationals from India. They were there for the purpose to have an introductory flight in a C-46 type aircraft. There were six or eight of them dressed in civilian clothes introduced to me as representing the Air Force, CAA, and Commercial Interests from India. During the flight I let those that wanted to fly around a bit to get the feel of the controls to do so. One did most of the flying and I let him make the landing. I assisted him as necessary but he still did a respectable job for anyone the first time at the controls of a C-46. I would find much later his position was a Commander from a special unit in the Indian Air Force. His name: Commander Grewal. A few days before this flight, Gar had briefed me of the possibility of such a flight. The Agency was interested in forming an associated airborne type project in India with the Indians. The Agency proposed to quickly get the operation off the ground and into the air would be to acquire the C-46 model D readily available from USAF storage depots. When that opportunity began to materialize, the Agency gave Southern Air Transport of Miami, Florida a contract to perform a major overhaul on some C-46D’s to be flown to India for the project. Later Intermountain received part of the contract to do maintenance and flight test on some of the C-46D’s. Southern Air Transport also received the contract to deliver all of the C-46D’s to India. Air America Inc. from Tachikawa, Japan became the first proprietary involved in having received the first part

145 Interview with Eddie F. Sims conducted by Prof. William Leary at Watkinsville, GA on 27 May 1988, written summary at: UTD/Leary/B43F5.
146 Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, pp.190/1. In May 1964, a CIA U-2 took off from Charbatia Air Base, performed a spy mission over Xinjiang Province of Red China, and rolled off the end of the runway after it had touched down again at Charbatia; hastily manhandled into a hanger, it was later repaired, and then discreetly flown out without attempting further overflights from Indian territory (Conboy / Kohli, Spies in the Himalayas, pp. 23/4).
of the overall contract, flying three\textsuperscript{147} of its C-46’s to Agra, India. Air America made available its American national pilots on the C-46’s. Air America also assigned one of their Helio Courier aircraft from Vientiane, Laos with its American pilot instructor for the project.\textsuperscript{148} Air Asia Co Ltd, an Agency maintenance proprietary from Tainan, Taiwan and Intermountain Aviation shared the maintenance responsibilities in India for the project. The Indians would receive ground school and line maintenance training until they were capable of managing their own maintenance. The India air operation was code named ‘Oak Tree’\textsuperscript{149}

Since September 63, that unit trained agents for infiltration into Tibet,\textsuperscript{150} parachuted them to launch sites close to the border of Tibet, re-supplied those agents as well as paramilitary outposts, dropped supplies to the Tibetan guerrillas of Mustang, made reconnaissance flights close to the Chinese border,\textsuperscript{151} installed sensors on high mountain tops close to the border,\textsuperscript{152} later installed wiretaps, and did other covert operations, using among other aircraft up to 4 Helio Couriers, up to 7 Helio 500 Twin Couriers, and probably up to 22 C-46s. Former Air America and Intermountain pilot Connie Seigrist gives some details about testing the C-46s destined for the project: “22 November 1963: I test flew N10703. It was a C-46D and our first aircraft of the Indian contract. Four other aircraft I personally flight tested were numbered N10708, N10710, N10705, and N10706.”\textsuperscript{153} All of those aircraft are described in detail in the C-46, Helio, and Twin Helio files of this database. Officially, even as late as 1969, at least the C-46s – which were later based at Delhi and did not bear any markings apart from the registration – were understood to have been used in relief work, especially in the Kashmir region,\textsuperscript{154} and so the flow of aircraft that joined the ARC was never affected by the total arms embargo and the termination of US military aid that President Johnson inflicted on India and Pakistan after both nations started a war in August 65. As starvation due to a constant shortage of food was a big problem in India during the early sixties, during this time, i.e. until 1967, many millions of tons of wheat per year were shipped from the United States to India.\textsuperscript{155}

Two Helio Twin Couriers on their way to India: N8745R (msn 2, to become VT-DVC) and N10037 (msn 7, to become VT-DVD), passing thru Sharjah on 16 March 66 and 6 April 66 respectively (with kind permission from the photographer, John Phillips)

\textsuperscript{147} Only 2 Air America C-46s remained with the project: B-846 became VT-DRH, and B-854 became VT-DRI (see the C-46 file of this database).

\textsuperscript{148} Helio B-847 became VT-DRJ; the second Helio, VT-DRK, had formerly been a VIAT aircraft: XV-NAI.

\textsuperscript{149} Connie Seigrist, Memoirs, p.67, in: UTD/Leary/B21F11.

\textsuperscript{150} Head of that Tibetan force was General Sujan Singh Uban, who, in the hill village of Chakrata, turned Tibetan refugees into warriors. ARC had been conceived as a covert air wing to infiltrate General Uban’s commandos into Tibet in the event of renewed hostilities with China (Conboy / Kohli, Spies in the Himalayas, pp.16+54).

\textsuperscript{151} Several missions are described in Conboy / Kohli, Spies in the Himalayas, pp.54-56 and 92/3.

\textsuperscript{152} These missions are described in detail in Conboy / Kohli, Spies in the Himalayas.

\textsuperscript{153} Connie Seigrist, Memoirs, p.67, in: UTD/Leary/B21F11.

\textsuperscript{154} Letter dated 29 April 2001, kindly sent to the author by Peter G. Hillman, Air-Britain’s specialist for India.

\textsuperscript{155} Wirsing, Indien, pp.287-93.
As to the aircraft of ARC, one of their C-46s was converted by CIA technicians into an electronic intelligence (ELINT) platform in 1964. Kent O. Williamson recalls: “The ELINT system was designed at Hsin Chu by me and I supervised the installation and modification of the bird down at the Air Asia facility in Tai Nan. There was an APR9, tape recorders, and a set of UHF receivers installed, after which we ran test and evaluation there in Taiwan. The bird was then ferried over to Charbatia, which at that time was pretty primitive and we immediately followed to set up the electronics shop, electronic spares and train the crews and electronic techs. About a year later I was sent over there by HQS to do a fire investigation because the Indians had a ground fire and the aircraft was damaged to badly to fly. After wading through all the tall tales, some quite fantastic, I found the steel bottom of a can with the sides mostly burned off where a hole had been melted in the aircraft floor by the GNU [ground power unit] which puzzled me until I started watching members of the ground crews charged with cleaning the aircraft drawing avgas from the overflow valves at the trailing edge of the wing and using rags and the gas to clean the other aircraft. This rather dangerous practice seemed to be standard. In any event to ground crew member had been cleaning the inside of the aircraft and punched the start button on the GNU. He then dropped the gas can which set one foot on fire and the gas rag stuffed into his back pocket burned his behind, which explained why he was in the hospital with burns on his behind and foot. The aircraft was a total loss because the ELINT crew oxygen which was routed to each operator position has ruptured and the entire top of the fuselage had burned through. At the conclusion of the investigation I was having drinks one evening with the Indian Air Marshal who was a white bearded, Sikh with a turban and he insisted it was no one’s fault, ‘ – just fate.’”

This aircraft flew regularly along the Himalayas recording Chinese telecommunication signals from inside Tibet. Sometimes, the ARC C-46s had problems with the altitude of some airports. Connie Seigrist recalls: “February 1964: The Indians had an airfield in the Himalayas located at about 12,000 foot elevation they wanted to service with the C-46D. They requested performance charts from sea level up to 12,000 feet. To the best of our research we were unable to locate performance charts for the D model C-46. […] As a result of the Indian request the Agency awarded Intermountain a contract to conduct high altitude take-off performance tests and construct charts for the aircraft. […] February 1964: N10705 was made available by the Agency for Intermountain to fly the altitude tests which would enable us to construct the performance charts. Intermountain maintenance installed a 1000 gallon fuel tank aboard N10705. The tank had a visual sight gage so that we could monitor filling the tank accurately with water to any desired level to be able to control our aircraft gross weight for take-off at different altitudes. […] The three airfield chosen as stepping stones in elevation were Albuquerque, NM 5,350 ft., Bogota, Columbia 8,000 ft, and La Paz, Bolivia 13,300 ft.”

The tests took place between 28 February and 30 March 64. Perhaps as a result of these tests, some of the remaining 9 ARC C-46s received rocket boosters in 1964 that were installed on the bottom of the fuselages to allow the aircraft to take off from some of India’s highest airfields with heavy loads. As many Third World countries feared CIA infiltration even thru humanitarian organizations like the Peace Corps, Air America kept a very low profile in India, and many aircraft delivered to the ARC by the CIA passed thru the hands of the lesser-known Miami-based Marathon Aviation, which had close relations with Southern Air Transport, another CIA-property since October 1960. Marathon Aviation was not only the cover used by SAT DC-6s for their flights to “Oak Tree”, it is also known to have furnished at least 3 Helio Couriers plus Helio 500 Twin Courier VT-DVL, while Twin Courier VT-DVM,
acquired in December 67, was the former N10034 of Air Ventures Inc., the CIA-property previously operating in Nepal.

As to Air America, the Company not only supported the ARC by supplying the first 2 C-46s (VT-DRH and VT-DRI) and the first 2 Helio Couriers (VT-DRJ and VT-DRK, of which VT-DRJ had belonged to Air America) in September 1963, but they also sent some of their best pilots to act as instructors for the ARC crews. Head of the C-46 conversion team was Bill Welk, and the Helio Courier and later the Helio Twin Courier conversion team was headed by Jim Rhyne, who also flew some reconnaissance missions in the Himalayas in 1965, using one of ARC’s Twin Couriers. Other instructors included M.D. Johnson, Al Judkins, and Maurice Clough, with Connie Seigrist and Tom Sailer providing additional C-46 training at Charbatia in early 1964. In the 1964 period, Connie Seigrist even flew Indian Air Force aircraft, when requested by the CIA to do so. The C-46s also dropped agents into Red China, and the Helios and Twin Helios also flew reconnaissance and penetration missions into Red China.

In his memoirs, Connie Seigrist recalls his time in India as follows: “The last week of May [1964] I proceeded to New Delhi per Gar’s instructions and reported to Ed [= Col. Ed Rector]. Ed introduced me to Commander Grewal, the Indian Commander for the project. Ed and Commander Grewal informed me my first assignment would be at an airfield outside the city of Agra. I would be required to participate in an airdrop exercise that was scheduled. Also I might be required to fly an aircraft in the exercise. I reported to the airfield as required. I was introduced to some Americans I already knew and met some Indian Air Force Officers who informed me they would like me to fly a C-46 in a two ship night drop pattern late that evening over the Yamuna river bed nearby. The other C-46 would be flown by one of the Indian pilots in the program. Our drop would consist of Tibetan refugees who were in paramilitary parachute training. I noticed the parked C-46s we would fly were Air America aircraft. The Air Force weather forecast for the first night was a strong wind and the exercise was canceled until the following night. […] The next day the weather […] was forecasted to be fine that night for our airdrop exercise. […] I taxied out behind the other aircraft to the runway. He took off and I waited the prescribed time for my take-off. After take-off I turned left, climbed to 1,200 feet, and was already established in the pattern as I could see the lighted drop zone on the sand and the river in the moonlight, although for some unknown reason the other aircraft’s navigation lights were not in sight. The lights had been on for take-off. I called on the radio to ask where he was so that I could space myself properly in case he had in some way gotten close in behind me. There was no answer to my radio call and I became concerned he might be in trouble. By this time I am approaching the lighted DZ when suddenly his navigation lights came on and he was directly in front of me slightly higher coming directly at me. If I had tried to turn out of his way following air navigation rules he would surely have flown into my wing. I had no choice but push on the stick and go under him with hopes he did not fly into the top of my tail. We missed by a hair. I turned quickly to the left hoping to miss any jumpers in case he had made his first drop. Luckily he had not made the drop. I continued my turn to get behind him and keep him in sight at all times determined, if he wanted to kill himself, he was not going to take me with him. After some time he finally made a left hand 180 turn over the river and went straight back to the DZ with me following behind him.

162 In August 63, Chief Pilot Bob Rousselot sent Messrs. Rhyne, Welk, Sutphin, and Clough to “Oak Tree” to start the program there. They were the pilots of the 2 C-46s. Jim Rhyne remained in India until February 64, working most of his time “up in the hills” (Jim Rhyne, Interview conducted at Clayton, NC on 13 October 90 by Prof. Bill Leary, p. 2, in: UTD/Leary/B47F9).
163 Conboy / Kohli, Spies in the Himalayas, pp.54-56
164 Conboy / Morrison, The CIA’s secret war in Tibet, pp.191/2, 255, 286.
165 Interview with Connie Seigrist, dated 1 June 2006.
I gave the jump master the light signal to prepare for the first jump. He came forward and said he was ready. Over the DZ I rang the jump bell. There was a pause for some reason, then immediately there was noise and yelling in the cabin. The jump master ran to the cockpit and said two of his jumpers were entangled and one was hanging by his leg out in the slip stream. I already realized by then we were in an emergency predicament as I was now having my hands full just trying to control my aircraft. The jump master went back to the jump door, but soon came to the cockpit again and said one jumper had parachuted free, but the other one was still hanging by his leg to a static line out in the slip stream. Also the jumper was too heavy for them to pull in. Suddenly the aircraft was controlling normal again. By now the excitement was on the level that English was forgotten and Hindu reigned supreme with me totally cut-off from any communication of what was going on in the aircraft. Finally when the jump master realized I was not getting the word, he informed me in English the rest of the jump was cancelled, some of his jumpers were injured, and we would go back to land. We landed, taxied back, and parked without further mishap. After one hell-of-a-sigh of relief on my part I departed the aircraft ready to celebrate for having come out alive of such a conglomeration of events. […]

My opening initiation into the Indian operation was an eye opener to say the least, which left me elated the next morning when I was informed I was scheduled to return to New Delhi and catch a flight to Charbatia for continuing duties. […] I flew the same C-46 back to New Delhi. It was decided to use it as the air transport commuter for the project until cable mountings were available to restore it for parachute jumping. The Indians liked the Air America C-46’s much more than the C-46D’s we were making available for them. I assumed the reason they liked the AAM C-46’s better was from their polished aluminum commercial appearance compared to the militant blue-white paint look of the D models. Arriving in Charbatia I observed construction of major proportions in progress such as new hangars, runway improvement with extension of length, billets, admin buildings, transit quarters, etc., and close by permanent type construction of family housing. […] From this point on my stay and activity in India was mundane in the nature of aviation. I participated in flying, training, classroom instruction, and joined in casual social functions with the Indians. I commuted to New Delhi when called in by Ed. Ed would also come to Charbatia to stay abreast of the activities and see how I was fitting into the scene. […] I left the first week of July [1964] and returned to Marana.”

In 1966, other ARC air bases like Doomdommah or Sarsawa were added for special operations. But in the summer of 1967 the CIA reduced its links to the ARC, and the Indians decided to introduce Antonov An-12s to the ARC fleet and to increase the number of Mil Mi-4 helicopters already introduced earlier. In 1969 cooperation between the CIA and the ARC still existed, but it had come down to nothing, when the war between India and Pakistan began in 1971.  

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