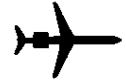


A Long, Nervous Night in Phnom Penh

by Jerry E. Tobias



The U. S. Air Force Fairchild C-123K Provider was a tactical airlift workhorse during the Vietnam War. With two Pratt & Whitney R2800 18-cylinder radial engines, two General Electric J-85 wing-mounted jet engines, a cargo capacity of 2420 cubic feet, a dry wing (no fuel storage in the wing), and an impressive short field capability, the C-123K was very well suited for both the tactical airlift mission and the combat environment.



I was assigned to the 310th Tactical Airlift Squadron in July of 1971, and flew the C-123 out of Phan Rang Air Base in Vietnam. Although I had hoped for a different assignment, I soon learned to appreciate this rugged and dependable airplane. I also learned that challenges and surprises were just a normal part of every mission. Few missions were more memorable, though, than the one in my logbook that reads: “October 7, 1971, USAF C-123K, Serial No. 540687, 3.6 hours day, 1.1 hours night, 2 day landings, 1 night landing, 999.”

That “999” referred to Phnom Penh, Cambodia. I had been qualified to fly to Cambodia, and had done so on several previous occasions. On this particular day, my crew and I were enroute to another airfield in Vietnam when “Saigon Tea,” the airlift control center in Saigon, called us and asked if I knew the procedures for “crossing the fence.” When I told them that I did, they directed us to “proceed to 999.” So we changed our course, followed the prescribed routing into and across Cambodia, and landed safely in that nation’s capital city less than two hours later.

We had been sent there to pick up 60+ Cambodian troops who needed to be airlifted to Vietnam. When these troops arrived, our loadmaster ushered them aboard, seated them on metal cargo pallets that were fastened to the aircraft’s floor, and secured them by placing cargo tie-down straps across their laps. Although this procedure for transporting large numbers of personnel on the C-123 was practical and safe, it certainly gave new meaning to the term “no frills” flying.

After the troops were all loaded, we completed our preflight checks, started the R2800s, and began to taxi. The Phnom Penh runway surface and the pavement in the cargo-loading area were both in good condition, but the taxiway that connected the two was just an unpaved path covered with broken rocks. I was familiar with this rough taxiway from my previous trips, so I inched our aircraft along as cautiously as possible. Just as we approached the edge of the runway, however, the left wing dropped downward and the whole airplane listed awkwardly to the left.

“What was that?” I exclaimed over the interphone as I brought the airplane to a stop.

“Tower, we’ve had a problem and need to hold our position,” my copilot called.

“If you block the runway, we will push you off the runway,” the agitated Cambodian control tower operator warned us.

“Negative, Sir,” my copilot responded. “We are not on the runway, but we do need to shut down our engines right here,” as I had just instructed him.

Apparently satisfying the tower controller’s immediate concerns, we turned our attention to the problem at hand. The flight mechanic exited the airplane as soon as the propellers stopped turning. He quickly returned with the bad news.

“One of those rocks must have punctured our left main tire,” he informed me. “It’s completely flat.”

“Great!” I thought. “No spare tire, no aircraft jacks, no maintenance facilities, and no other Air Force personnel anywhere in the area!”

My first concern was to somehow explain what had happened to the commander of the Cambodian troops. Because of the obvious language barrier, I escorted the commander off the aircraft and showed him the deflated tire. He understood the situation, and quickly led his troops off of the airplane.

I next discussed the problem with our flight mechanic to get an idea of what all was going to be needed for the tire change. After getting his input, I informed “Saigon Tea” of our needs via our onboard high frequency (HF) radio. They called back a few minutes later and informed me that another C-123 would eventually be sent from Phan Rang with the necessary men and equipment to change the tire.



About this time, several of the U. S. State Department personnel that had met us upon our arrival came back out to our crippled airplane. I told them about our situation and plan, but was surprised by their response.

“You cannot stay here overnight!” they stated emphatically. “This is a very hostile area right now, and you have to get out of here as soon as possible!”

That sounded like a really good idea, but there was nothing we could do about it. And when we finally received an estimated time of arrival for the maintenance flight, no one was pleased. Getting the C-123 that was to become our “rescuer” loaded and all the way to Phnom Penh was going to take several hours, which meant that it would certainly not arrive until well after dark.

That was a serious problem, because the Phnom Penh airport was operational during daylight only. Due to the number of rebel troops in the area, the airport control tower was closed during the night, the runway beacon and lights were turned off, and even the local radio navigation aids (VOR and NDB) were shut down. The airport, for all practical purposes, simply disappeared after dark.

And this particular night was no exception, for at dusk - right on cue - the airport became eerily lifeless and quiet. The State Department people also returned about then with a dozen or so heavily armed Cambodian soldiers that they posted as a perimeter guard around our immediate area. They also insisted that we stay on the airplane and try to keep out of sight. That got our attention, as did the tracer bullets that began to crisscross the darkening sky. So we sat in our C-123, away from the aircraft’s windows ... and waited.

Meanwhile, Major Joseph E. Walker, the 310th TAS Operations Officer, prepared to fly the maintenance mission to Phnom Penh. And while he and his crew pulled things together at Phan Rang, my crew and I discussed ways that we could help him land. We realized that even if Joe could locate the now-invisible airfield in the middle of the city, it would be extremely difficult

for him to find the approach end of the runway in the moonless night. The other very real problem, of course, was security. We didn't want to do anything that would draw attention to ourselves, but Joe's situation was even more critical. He needed to arrive unnoticed, which meant that he could not use normal aircraft lighting or, especially, his landing lights until the last few seconds before landing. Any earlier use would turn his C-123 into a brilliantly lighted target that would probably draw small arms fire from all around the area.

When Major Walker and his crew finally got within UHF radio range of Phnom Penh, we discussed the limited options and agreed upon a plan. When they were just a few miles out of Phnom Penh, I would turn on the red rotating beacon on the top of the tail of our airplane. Hopefully, this beacon would be visible to them in the darkness that surrounded our C-123. Joe would then fly toward our beacon at traffic pattern altitude and would also turn his beacon on as he neared our location. That way, I could tell him when to make his downwind, base, and final turns to the runway by observing his position through the overhead hatch in our C-123.

The first part of the plan worked well. Joe was able to see our tail beacon clearly, and flew right over the top of us, perpendicular to the runway. The rest of the job was not as easy, though, as his beacon provided only a limited visual perspective of his altitude, turn radius, and sink rate.

In spite of this, our unorthodox ground-directed approach procedure actually got Joe's aircraft very close to the runway on the first attempt ... but not quite close enough. His altitude and descent rate were good, but I delayed his final turn to the runway too long and he overshot the runway centerline. When his copilot turned on the landing lights at around fifty feet above the ground, they were too far to the side of the runway to be able to land. So they turned off their lights, climbed back to traffic pattern altitude, and prepared for a second approach.

On the next attempt, Joe and I both applied the lessons that we had just learned. Incredibly, this time he was able to cross the runway threshold on centerline and at the appropriate altitude, turn on the landing lights, flare, and safely land. He sped past our position during his landing rollout, then taxied back and positioned his C-123 nose-to-nose with ours so that his aircraft lights could be used as work lights for the maintenance crew. And after the large aircraft jacks and other equipment were unloaded from Joe's C-123, the tire change finally got under way.

The process took much longer than anyone thought it would. But when the new tire was mounted and the last piece of equipment was reloaded, Joe and I brought our C-123s back to life, roared down the Phnom Penh runway just minutes apart, and climbed into the late night sky. I'm fairly certain that even the loud R2800s and J-85s didn't drown out the massive sighs of relief emitting from our airplane as we brought the gear up and turned toward Vietnam. And the fact that we made it out of the area without taking a single enemy hit was even a greater relief.

The rescue of our aircraft and crew under such difficult circumstances was really a remarkable feat. In hindsight, Major Walker should have been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross or other appropriate decoration for his exceptional airmanship. At the time, though, it was all just recorded as two more tactical airlift missions, albeit missions that no one onboard either of those C-123Ks would ever forget! ■

Copyright © 2011, Jerry E. Tobias