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CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE KC-135 CREW CHIEF DURING THE VIETNAM WAR

by

SMSGT MARK R. QUERBACH

I began my Air Force career as a KC-135A Stratotanker crew chief. I enlisted after the Vietnam war was over, but many of the other crew chiefs I worked with had been there, primarily in Thailand. I never tired of listening to their stories of living and working in Thailand during the war. So I decided to write this article on their contributions to the war, hoping that you would find their story just as interesting as I did. I will start out by describing the actual duties of a crew chief. Then I will discuss the mission of the tanker during the war, and look at some of the bases that they operated from in Thailand. Finally, I will describe a crew chief's typical day at U-Tapao Royal Thai Navy Air Field, Thailand.

The crew chief, or aircraft maintenance technician, is extremely critical to the Air Force mission. He is responsible for the maintenance and care of the aircraft to which he is assigned. A crew chief typically takes great pride in this responsibility. He is specifically responsible for inspecting, servicing, and coordinating all repair actions on his aircraft. He always travels with his aircraft on deployments, often inspecting and servicing it before flight, flying on it, then inspecting, refueling, and repairing it after flight. This can result in some extensive duty hours, but most crew chiefs take it in stride. This builds a special relationship between crew chiefs and flight crews. The flight crew literally trusts the crew chief with their lives every time they fly. The integrity of the crew chief is of the utmost importance. As you can see, no mission involving aircraft is even remotely possible without crew chiefs.

The KC-135A Stratotanker is primarily used for air refueling of other

aircraft. Its mission relative to the Vietnam War was split into three very broad areas, as follows:

1. Supporting the deployment of fighter aircraft across the Pacific.
2. Supporting Tactical Air Command fighter aircraft striking against targets in North and South Vietnam.
3. Supporting Strategic Air Command B-52 bombing operations. (4:21)

Prior to deployment, fighters were married together with tankers at March AFB, California, for the trip across the Pacific Ocean, during which the tanker will provide both fuel and navigation. (4:22,25) Normally two fighters would be assigned to each tanker, unless two or more tankers are set up to escort and refuel a cell of fighters. (4:25) The aircraft would all stop at Hickam AFB, Hawaii, for crew rest and maintenance, prior to the 3300-mile leg to Guam. (4:25) The number of fighters in the cell may require the use of augmenting tankers. (4:26) Once at Guam, the mission is almost complete. All that is left is the final delivery of the fighters to their destination. The group of aircraft take off from Guam for the final stage. Somewhere over the western Pacific the fighters will leave their escorts behind and head for their base. The tankers usually return to Guam. (4:26) At this point, the last two areas of the tanker mission come into play. By this I mean the actual refueling of fighters and bombers engaged in combat operations. In April of 1965, this amounted to approximately 526 tanker sorties per month. (8:1) The air refueling part of these missions were very similar, but the operational environments were quite different. Two areas in which the differences occur are target distance and aircraft range. (4:27) The fighter aircraft are refueled very near their targets, sometimes within minutes and actually within sight of the tanker. (4:27) The bomber targets are unknown to the tanker,

usually quite distant and hours after refueling.(4:27) The fighter mission also requires much more flexibility, as the missions change to exploit temporary advantages.(4:27) Also different are the number of aircraft that can be refueled per tanker sortie. One tanker can only support one B-52, while the same tanker could support between 3.5 (from Kadena AB, Japan) and 5.5 (from Southeast Asia) fighter sorties.(1:4) As the number of required sorties continued to increase, leadership began to look at basing more tankers in Southeast Asia for fighter support, while utilizing Kadena tankers for B-52 support.(9:1-2)(6:1-2)

At this point, senior leaders began to look at the benefits from basing more tankers in Thailand, where currently they only had four, located at Don Muang Airport.(6:1) As the Royal Thai government would not allow any more to be staged from Don Muang, other locations had to be considered.(6:1) Their decision was to base 30 tankers at Kadena AB, Japan, 10 tankers at Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand, and 25 tankers at U-Tapao (Sattahip) Royal Thai Navy Air Field, Thailand.(2:3) (10:19,map) Eventually U-Tapao would support both tankers and bombers.(5:-)(7:5)(10:17-19) To understand the crew chief's point of view, let's take a look at the bases that he was required to operate from in Thailand. Don Muang Airport was located 17 miles north of Bangkok, Thailand, and was the home of the Royal Thai Air Force headquarters.(10:3) It also housed many Royal Thai Air Force military schools.(10:3) As noted earlier, only four tankers were allowed at this location at a time.(6:1) It was equipped with a 9,140-foot military runway, and had approximately 250 U.S. military assigned.(10:2) Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base was located 130 miles north/northwest of Bangkok.(10:10) Takhli was the home base of the 355th Tactical Fighter Wing, which participated in all of the

major strikes against North Vietnamese logistical areas.(10:10) Tankers were assigned there in 1972 as part of President Nixon's plan to protect the remaining forces in Vietnam and to halt increased communist aggression in Southeast Asia. (10:10) It had a 9000-foot concrete/asphalt runway and a 25 bed hospital.(10:9) U-Tapao Royal Thai Navy Air Field was located 116 miles south of Bangkok, on the Gulf of Thailand.(10:17, map) It was a forward operating base for Strategic Air Command bombers and tankers.(10:17) Considered one of the finest airfields in Southeast Asia at the time, it had an 11,000-foot runway.(10:18) It also boasted enough airmen dormitories and officer BOQs to support more than 7,000 airfield personnel.(10:19) Other facilities included three recreation clubs, a beach facility, library, base exchange, swimming pool, theatre, chapel, and hobby shops.(10:19)

Since U-Tapao was the main tanker base in Thailand, I thought that I would describe a crew chief's typical day there. For this information I interviewed SMSgt Ronald D. Capps, currently the Maintenance Flight Chief in the 28th Maintenance Squadron at Ellsworth AFB, South Dakota. SMSgt Capps, when he was an A1C, was assigned to U-Tapao RTNAF for approximately 100 days, from October 1973 to February 1974. Normally crew chiefs in Thailand were assigned TDY like that, for about three months. They couldn't be assigned much longer, because they were required to work twelve hours per day every day that they were at U-Tapao. A typical day went something like this: Every day was the same. You would wake up in the presence of about fifteen other guys, in a galvanized metal open-bay dormitory. After shaving, showering, and getting dressed, you head for the chow hall for breakfast. Considering where you were, the food wasn't that bad. After breakfast, you go out to the flightline, where you will spend the next twelve hours. That time will be spent doing aircraft

inspections, both before and after each flight. You will also be servicing aircraft systems, including fuel, water, engines, hydraulics, liquid oxygen, and others. Not to mention launching and recovering the aircraft, and insuring that all problems discovered are repaired to the flight crew's satisfaction. After twelve hours of this, it's time for another trip to the chow hall. As crew chiefs never had additional duties or details, the rest of your time was free. Amazingly, we actually still had the energy to participate in many activities, like sports, crafts, watching a movie, or just hanging out at the club. Then it was time for bed, to try to get a couple hours of sleep before you had to do it all over again. All in all, it wasn't bad duty, once you got in tune with the pace. Most crew chiefs remember duty in Thailand very fondly.

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Let's see if I can summarize the contributions of the tanker crew chief during the Vietnam War. I first explained a crew chief's job, and how critical he was to any operation involving aircraft. I talked of the pride that he has in his responsibility to take care of his aircraft, and of the special relationship that he had with flight crews, who depend on his integrity for their very lives. I then discussed the air refueling mission of the KC-135 during the Vietnam War, concentrating on three distinct areas; the deployment support for fighters crossing the Pacific Ocean, the combat support of Tactical Air Command fighter strikes into North and South Vietnam, and the combat support of Strategic Air Command bombing in North Vietnam. I mentioned the similarities and differences in these missions. As these missions increased, I looked at how decisions were made to base more tankers in Southeast Asia, specifically in Thailand. Then I toured three tanker bases in Thailand, Don Muang Airport, Takhli RTAFB, and U-Tapao RTNAF, talking about

their more important features. Then I finished up with a description of a crew chief's typical day at the main tanker base in Thailand, U-Tapao RTNAF. I hope that I have entertained you for a while, and maybe even kindled an interest in a very special group of people, United States Air Force crew chiefs.

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