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Lockheed C-141C, 66-0177, makes a final flyby on its way to retirement as a Vietnam POW memorial at the National Museum of the USAF captured here by Lockheed Martin photographer John Rossino.

The Lockheed C-141 #66-0177

The “Hanoi Taxi”



By Mike Novack

The last operational Lockheed C-141, 66-0177, known as the “Hanoi Taxi,” makes its final landing at the National Museum of the United States Air Force in Dayton, Ohio, May 6, 2006, 38 years after its delivery. (USAF photo from the author’s collection)

During the brief history of aviation a large number of aircraft types have been particularly “famous.” The B-25, B-29, P-51, X-15, C-47, Mitsubishi *Zero*, MiG (in several flavors), U-2, the Piper *Cub*, and many others come readily to mind.

However, there have been relatively few specific airframes of any particular type that have been famous. Most of the production run of any aircraft type goes into service in near anonymity. They do what they are built to do, whether that means being used to train new pilots, fly passengers or cargo, or fight wars.

Even if an aircraft has been part (or the center) of a major event it is highly unlikely you know the tail numbers. Think of the 9-11 crashes. How about TWA Flight 800? The collision of two 747s on Tenerife Island in 1977? Pan Am 103 at Lockerbie? Nixon in China? Do you know the tail numbers? Not likely. Can you remember the tail number of the last airliner you rode on? Even more unlikely.

Think of specific aircraft of any type you can remember. The list will likely be fairly short: The Wright *Flyer*. “The

Spirit of St. Louis.” “Memphis Belle.” “Enola Gay.” “Glamorous Glennis.” “Friendship 7.” The Space Shuttle “Columbia.” All of these have two things in common: They were all involved in important ‘firsts,’ and all were referred to by a name, not a tail number. With famous aircraft like these it is the event that you remember more than the specific aircraft, and if you remember anything about the aircraft, it’s more likely you remember the name than the tail number.

On May 6, 2006, another famous airframe made its last flight. At the same time it was the last flight for the type. The Lockheed C-141, tail number 66-0177. After 38 years, and almost 40,000 flying hours carrying military and humanitarian relief cargo, and troops and passengers to and from the four-corners of the globe, the last C-141 was retired to the National Museum of the United States Air Force (formerly the Air Force Museum) near Dayton, Ohio, home of the Wright brothers. Fortunately, unlike the majority of other C-141s, it will be preserved for future generations to view and admire. A few other C-141s are at museums around the country. A few were lost in accidents, both while flying and on the ground. All the rest

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A photo of 66-0177, in "A" model form being operated by the 63rd MAW, taken shortly after its historic Hanoi flight. The aircraft is still displaying the Red Cross on the tail used for all the repatriation flights. The C-141 went through a series of paint schemes; from bare metal, to the white and gray shown here, a camouflage pattern known as European One and eventually a "Proud Gray." (USAF photo from the Paul Minert collection)

have been scrapped at the AMARC facility in Tucson, Ariz., (better known as the "Boneyard").

What was it that made 66-0177 famous, and saved it from the Boneyard grinding machines?

OPERATION HOMECOMING

At the conclusion of the Vietnam war 66-0177 was the first aircraft to make the trip to Gia Lam airport near Hanoi to pick up the first group of POWs to be released from the Hao Lo prison (nicknamed the "Hanoi Hilton") as well as the "Zoo," "Alcatraz," and Son Tay, and other locations throughout North Vietnam. On February 12, 1973, 0177 returned the first 40 POWs to Clark AB in the Philippines. It marked the start of Operation Homecoming. On the same day, an additional 76 POWs were flown out of Hanoi on two additional C-141 flights, 40 on 65-0243, and 36 on 65-0236. These aircraft landed in Hanoi just minutes after 0177 departed.

In quick succession over the next few weeks, additional flights were made by 0177 and 15 other C-141s (see Note 1) (and a few C-9 "Nightingales" as well) to return all the remaining POWs to Clark and from there back to the United States.

A total of 591 POWs, including non-U.S. military, and a few civilians, were flown to Clark during the period from February 12 to March 29, 1973. Starting February 13, flights returning the POWs from Clark to the United State began, and continued through April 4. In total, 16 C-141s participated in the return of POWs, either from Hanoi to Clark, or from Clark to the United States. The term "Hanoi Taxi" was not used to refer to 0177 until some time later, when the POWs gave it that name. Of the 51 C-141 missions flown, 0177 made two flights into and out of Hanoi, and four roundtrips from Clark to the U.S. in support of *Operation*

*Homecoming.*¹

Because it was first into Hanoi, 0177 gets the glory and survives as a museum piece at the NMUSAF.

Unlike most airlift missions, what became known as *Operation Homecoming* had the benefit of a great deal of time available for planning. Many years of detailed planning for repatriation of the U.S. POWs had been completed and reviewed and reviewed again. It was one of the most comprehensive airlift operations plans ever devised. A series of plans involving return of the POWs had been created beginning in 1968 with *Sentinel Echo* which was renamed *Egress Recap* in September 1972.²

Sentinel Echo/Egress Recap was polished and refined over many years and finally renamed *Operation Homecoming* by the Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird on January 19, 1973.³ Though extremely long

the thorough planning process paid off handsomely. *Operation Homecoming* went off without a hitch.

Given the fact that the POW repatriation flights were probably second only to the moon landings in terms of public visibility there was nothing that could be anticipated in terms of things that could go wrong that didn't have a "plan b." A spare aircraft was positioned at Clark AB in the Philippines in case anything at all happened to one of the primary aircraft. Due to the fact that special clearances had been obtained for specific aircraft tail numbers to overfly North Vietnamese airspace, the Air Force was even ready to paint the tail number of one of the pre-approved aircraft on the spare aircraft if there had been any reason one of those could not have made the flight.

The long and frustrating final negotiations related to a cease fire had been underway in Paris between the U.S. and North Vietnam for months and were culminated with the signing of the peace accords on January 27, 1973. Per the terms of the agreement, POWs held by the North Vietnamese and Viet



66-0177, after conversion to C-141B configuration, displaying the European One camouflage scheme. (USAF from the Paul Minert collection)



The noticeable differences between the original "A" model and converted "B" are evident in this photo clearly showing the fuselage stretch and refueling receptacle above and behind the cockpit. Ship 66-0186 is in the foreground with 65-0269 in the back. (Lockheed Aircraft photo)

Cong were to be released in small groups as the U.S. withdrew its forces. On February 12, the first group of 116 was turned over to the U.S. at Hanoi's Gia Lam airport, and 19 were released by the Viet Cong in Saigon.

During the planning process for *Operation Homecoming*, some internal MAC politics resulted in 0177 being selected as the lead aircraft. General Kearney, the commander of the 63rd MAW at Norton AFB requested that one of his airplanes be the first to land in Hanoi. As it happened the airlift manager in charge of the detailed planning for the missions had been assigned to the 14th MAS, based at Norton, and had taken his checkride to become an aircraft commander in 0177. Being in a position to assign the tail numbers, 0177 was a shoe-in for the first aircraft to land in Hanoi.⁴ It was piloted by Major James E. Marrott of the 15th MAS from Norton AFB, Calif. It was a short two hour and thirty minute flight from Clark to Gia Lam. Weather enroute from Clark and at the destination was good. Since no U.S. aircraft had been to Gia Lam before there was some uncertainty about the condition of the runway, but as it turned out there were no problems. The POWs to be released had been transported to the field on buses a couple of hours prior to the arrival and were waiting when 0177 arrived. They were quickly loaded onto the aircraft, and a mere 35 minutes after landing 0177 departed, followed shortly thereafter by the arrival and quick departures of 245 and 236.

As the wheels broke ground and the aircraft was airborne, Marrott reported that even over the roar of the engines he could hear a very loud cheer from the back of the aircraft. When the aircraft crossed out of North Vietnam airspace there was another

very loud eruption from the back of the plane. Everyone was ecstatic to finally be heading home.

Marrott said later "It's got to be the biggest thrill of all! It's certainly the most gratifying and it's far and above anything else I've done."

James C. Warren, the navigator on the flight, said in April 2006, "I enjoyed flying the C-141 and as the navigator on 'Homecoming One' this was the greatest and most heartwarming mission that I flew in my air force career. I can still hear the roar that came up from the back of the aircraft from the returnees when we rotated off the runway at Gia Lam. The fact that one of my friends Col. Fred Cherry, a prisoner for seven years and five months was on board made it all the more exciting for me."⁵

The reaction of the C-141 flight crew and medical team members was emotional; there were many smiles and lots of tears. But for the POWs it was far beyond that. After years of captivity, some as long as nine years, they had been through countless ups and downs over the years. Despite the despair they suffered in captivity, hope of return to freedom was always on their minds. As new POWs joined them in captivity (some as result of the December 1972 bombing campaign, and one on January 27, the very day the peace accords were signed⁶), news of the progress of the war and peace negotiations offered tantalizing clues about their pending freedom. When the accords were signed they stipulated the details of the release and repatriation of the POWs. The Vietnamese delivered copies of the release terms to each of the POWs during the last few days of January, giving them their first confirmation that their release was at hand.⁷ The countdown had begun, but in the back of their minds, many feared that something would happen to further delay their release.

A number of the ex-POWs wrote books in the year following their release from captivity. There is a very common thread that runs through all of their descriptions of what happened when they were released.

Their first glance of the C-141 sitting on the ramp at Gia Lam airport represented the first leg of the long flight to freedom. The C-141 had entered regular service in 1965, and some of the POWs had never even seen one. When the first group of POWs arrived at Gia Lam via bus, they noticed the field was very quiet and that tower and hangers had been damaged from the recent heavy bombing campaign conducted by the U.S. in the lead up to the cease fire. They quickly spotted a C-130 aircraft parked across the field. It had landed a few hours prior to the first C-141 arrival, checking field conditions and was serving as a communications relay for the repatriation team which set up operations on the ground. The POWs waited and wondered: Was this really the end of their captivity?



66-0177 will become part of a Vietnam memorial honoring the POWs. On May 5, 2006, the POWs participating in the retirement ceremonies signed this airconditioning panel in 66-0177 with their name and period of internment. (Photo from the author's collection)

“Shortly after noon we heard a low deep droning and in moments a beautiful sight appeared in the clear sky; the high tail and swept wings of an American C-141.”⁸

Of the POWs assembled at Gia Lam for the initial release, it was Everett Alvarez who had been in captivity longer than any other⁹, wrote, “As it touched down and threw up a cloud of dust we cheered at the top of our lungs. It was the first C-141 I had ever seen and it was love at first sight.”¹⁰

The senior ranking officer of the POWs, Air Force Colonel Robinson Risner said, “It was so beautiful. We couldn’t believe a bird that big could be so graceful.”¹¹

For the busloads of POWs waiting for their turn to board the C-141s that would take them to freedom, there were some tense moments during their wait to board the aircraft. Because the USAF planners were not sure of the medical condition of the POWs, they planned to fill the C-141s only to partial capacity on each flight, carrying a maximum of only 40 POWs on each flight. Space was reserved for those that might need to be carried on litters, and this reduced the number of available airline type seats that could be installed on the C-141.

Larry Chesley, released on the first day, but scheduled to be on the third and last flight out for that day, wrote about his arrival at Gia Lam: “There we saw a beautiful sight – a U.S. C-141 aircraft sitting out there on the runway with a big American flag on its tail. The first two buses went over to the aircraft and we watched with eager anticipation as they unloaded and friends and comrades disappeared into the airplane. When the third bus made no move, we began to express some sense of urgency at their delay. We had an English-speaking guard on our bus, and responded by telling us the plane was loaded. ‘Baloney!,’ I said. ‘That plane will hold all 112¹² of us. Let’s go and get on it!’ ‘No,’ he replied, ‘that one is loaded. Here comes another one now.’ If a stationary C-141

was a beautiful sight to us on the runway, how shall I describe the elegant bird the second one flew beneath a deck of white clouds, circled around, and landed? In the emotion of the moment, I could readily accept that it was the loveliest site I had ever seen.”¹³ After watching the second C-141 (65-0234) load and depart, Chesley and those in the remaining group anxiously waited for the third aircraft to arrive. As soon as the second aircraft left, the third (65-0236) landed, they all loaded as quickly as possible. He added, “We were met at the door by three pretty young ladies, the first American girls we had seen in years. They were attractively dressed, well groomed and smelled delightfully of perfume. We sat down in the seats and looked around. Everything seemed just like heaven. When the back doors of that C-141 closed, there were tears in the eyes of every man on board.” The aircraft taxied out and left Gia Lam and North Vietnam for good.

Charlie Plumb, a navy pilot, captured May 19, 1967,¹⁴ was released on February 18. He noted in his book, “I’m No Hero,” that “Above us circled a beautiful C-141. It dropped landing gear and made the approach to Gia Lam.” After all the passengers were loaded, he noted that “The pilot taxied down the runway, pushed the throttles, and at the moment of liftoff, suddenly it hit us. We were off North Vietnamese soil!” We screamed above the noise of the jets.”¹⁵

Don MacPhail, released on March 16, and flown to Clark on tail number 65-0280, recalled: “Everyone was silent. Not a damn noise on that aircraft except the engines. When the plane finally left the tarmac, that aircraft went crazy! Everybody started screaming and yelling, “Thank God” and “I told you so!” We hugged the nurses.”¹⁶

Lonnie Johnson, also on the same flight added “The men were out of their seats, throwing things, jerking cushions off their seats, just letting it out. I thought a few would break their knuckles beating on the fuselage. Lots of emotions, lots of tears. Such a moving experience.”¹⁷

Ernest Brace, released on March 28, recalled, “At Gia Lam Airport, we saw the tall tail of a U.S. C-141 jet transport rising behind the control tower. It was the most beautiful sight I had seen in years.” He added “The C-141 was enormous. I had never seen such a large aircraft.”¹⁸

On the first day of OPERATION HOMECOMING, 0177 departed Gia Lam at 12:30 p.m. and arrived at Clark AB at 4:25 p.m. local time. The other two arrived at Clark at thirty minute intervals. But there were still another 400-plus POWs remaining in Vietnam. The operation continued until all were released.¹⁹

The one common thread among all their stories is that not one mentions a specific aircraft tail number. They just refer to the C-141 itself, and they all say “It was the most beautiful airplane” they’d ever seen. And what a beautiful sight it must have been.

While the first *Homecoming* mission was most certainly the highlight of 0177’s flying days, it is far from the whole



During 66-0177's retirement ceremonies, former POWs were given the opportunity to relive the "freedom flights" that liberated them from Vietnam. Loud cheers of joy erupted as the wheels broke ground just as they had back in 1973. (Photo from the author's collection)

story. On April 1, 1973, 0177 made its last flight related to Operation Homecoming, returning 17 ex-POWs to the United States. Three days later, all the POWs that were coming home on C-141s were "back in the USA." A few months later, the red-cross markings on the tail were removed. Now 0177 and the others were unceremoniously placed back in service as a normal 'line' aircraft, performing the routine missions they had done prior to the glory days of Operation Homecoming. There was nothing to indicate that 0177 was special in any way except a small plaque mounted on the engineer's control panel quite some time after the original flight into Hanoi.

My log book shows about 20 hours in the pilot's seat of 0177 a few years after the POW flights out of Hanoi. If anyone on the crew was aware that it was the "Hanoi Taxi" nobody said a word about it. To all of us crew members, 0177 was just another aircraft we picked up some place and flew to some where else, as we did with any other tail number hundreds of times while flying airlift missions around the world.

In all, 0177's first flight of the first group of POWs out of Vietnam represented only about three hours of flight time, out of the nearly 40,000 hours it flew over its entire lifetime. Years later, when the special story of its "15 minutes of fame" caught up with the aircraft it started to receive the recognition that it, and all other C-141s, deserve.

It was due to the care and concern of maintenance crews assigned to the 445th MAW, a USAF Reserve unit at Wright-Patterson that 0177 was saved the fate of most other C-141s. While doing routine maintenance on the aircraft, several people noticed a small blue label attached to the flight engineer's control panel. It said "Hanoi Taxi." TSgt. Dave Dillon, TSgt. Jeff Wittman, TSgt. Henry Harlow, and others became very interested in this aircraft and started a campaign to convert the aircraft into a "flying museum." After doing lots of research they managed to start the process of preserving as much of the detailed history of 0177 as possible. Visiting the aircraft today is like taking a step back in time, starting with the outside,

which has been repainted in the same colors it carried during the POW repatriation flights. Inside the aircraft, there are memorabilia from 0177's past. Some of the items on display include photos of the original *Operation Homecoming* missions and rubbings of all the names of Ohio military personnel killed during the Vietnam taken from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, DC. In the cockpit, the names of the crew-members from that first flight out of Hanoi are on engraved plaques at each crew station. All of these items, and much more, will be permanently displayed at the museum after a brief period of additional preparation for display.

On May 5, 2006, the day before 0177 was to make its final flight, about 150 ex-Vietnam POWs gathered at Wright-Patterson AFB in Dayton, Ohio, to relive the "freedom flights" which took them out of Vietnam 32 years before. In two groups they were boarded on 0177 in the order in which they had been taken captive and made a short flight around the Ohio countryside. Loud cheers of joy erupted inside the aircraft when the wheels broke ground just as they had back in 1973 when 0177 (and other C-141s) left Gia Lam in Vietnam and flew to Clark AB in the Philippines. Upon landing, they relived their emotional return to the U.S. and were greeted by members of their families.

Minutes after 0177 made its final landing at the retirement ceremony on May 6, the director of the National Museum of the USAF, Maj. Gen. Charles Metcalf detailed the reason that 0177 is the most famous and special C-141:

"You need to know that we put a marker down on this airplane almost immediately after the operation to repatriate our POWs. We deal in stories...we deal in hardware, certainly...the material history of the USAF is well-represented in these several buildings...but more than that we deal in stories and images. I think back to all the humanitarian operations around the world. When you watch that event on TV you always saw a C-141 or two or three on the ramp unloading humanitarian supplies. Images of operations in Vietnam and around the world...military operations...you saw the C-141 involved. Images of troops coming back from the desert in Iraq and casualties ... you always saw the C-141 involved. These are a few of the images you could see...and if that were enough, if that were the only thing we were interested in, any C-141 would have done...it would have filled the void in the collection. But that isn't enough. Truly, we are the keepers of the stories of the rich history and tradition of the USAF. I remember the images as commented on before...of POWs marching proudly to the airplane. I remember seeing some good friends get off airplanes here in the States. I remember seeing, probably the single image, that when we think about the repatriation of the POWs ... the images inside the airplane ... "we're free!" My good friend John Stavast...just yelling his heart out. Magnificent. That's why, just any C-141 would not do. We promise to honor and preserve this aircraft for future generations. That's why we keep these stories. These stories are to preserve the traditions and heritage of the USAF for future generations to learn about and to understand why we were all involved in these operations. It's for more than just

your grandchildren and your great-grandchildren ... it's the vast American public. These stories will live because of this."

By May 6, 2006, 0177 had accumulated just under 40,000 flight hours, when it was flown to the museum. The final flight of 0177 was the end of the line for the C-141. As it flew several low passes over the crowd assembled near the runway at the west side of the field at the National Museum of the USAF there were very few dry eyes in the crowd. Most of those gathered, including many of the POWs who had flown out of Hanoi in 1973, they had worked on or flown the C-141 at one time or another during their military careers and knew that a great aircraft was about to make its last landing.

The scene was a sad repeat of hundreds of such flights that had taken place over the last few years at the Boneyard in Tucson, Ariz., but this one was very different in an important way. Where the earlier flights meant a lonely trip to the Tucson desert and to certain destruction, here at Dayton on this fine day in May, 0177 landed and was greeted by several hundred admirers. There were cheers and tears and speeches and a chance to hear its screaming TF33 engines wind down for the final time.

By the end of the day on May 6, 0177 sat alone in silence on the tarmac waiting to be towed to its final location at the museum. As I drove by it on the way back from dinner in Dayton that evening I could not take my eyes off that beautiful but sad site. While taking the last glimpse of 0177 that I would see in a long time, perhaps the last ever, I sailed right by my freeway exit at 60 mph. Fortunately, for all of us, the museum will be displaying the aircraft for generations to come.

EARLY C-141 HISTORY

In February 1959, the air force defined the initial operational requirements of what was to eventually become the C-141. Part of the plan was adoption of a uniform palletized cargo handling system (called 463L) which provided easy loading and unloading of cargo.

Initially, the aircraft was intended to be used for both commercial and military use, with the idea that civilian versions could be used for military purposes in a national emergency. At the beginning of the jet-age, the idea of a high speed "air freighter" was quite appealing but as agreement on exact specifications became more and more difficult, the military and civilian camps soon parted ways. Even the pallet and container standards eventually became different for the civilian and military worlds.

The need for a high-speed long-range jet transport had been under discussion for many years by the time the C-141 program was initiated with the passing of Public Law 86-60 in July 1960. Congress allocat-

ed just under \$311 million dollars to develop and procure the transport aircraft envisioned by the air force planners. There were provisions in the law that the aircraft could not be used for regular passenger service which would compete with scheduled airlines.

By today's standards the pace of progress on the C-141 contracting process was truly remarkable. A set of final requirements was issued in a document called SOR 182 in August 1960. By December, the USAF had solicited bids from Boeing, Douglas, Convair and Lockheed, and by mid-March 1961, it was announced that Lockheed had won the deal. The "Super Hercules" project was started.

The roll-out of the first aircraft from the Lockheed-Georgia plant was on August 22, 1963. Just six days later, the USAF accepted delivery.

The C-141 first flew on December 17, 1963. Though some would argue it was coincidence, it stretches the imagination to believe the story that this date was not selected purely for symbolic and dramatic effect. It was the 60th anniversary of the Wright brothers first flight at Kitty Hawk.

Following a series of successful test flights, full production was ordered and the first airframes were delivered to the USAF on or ahead of schedule beginning in 1964. The first four were dedicated to test flight and follow-on development and testing. One was built by Lockheed for the purpose of using it as a 'demo' model to try and sell the aircraft for commercial use. This later was sold to NASA which used it as an airborne observatory platform for space research.

INTO SERVICE

By October 1964 the first C-141 to enter active service (63-8078) was delivered to Tinker AFB where initial crew training was commenced. Six months later, tail number

Delivery ceremony for the first C-141, 63-8078, to enter service. (Lockheed Aircraft photo)





Inflight refueling capabilities added to the C-141Bs extended the aircraft's range capabilities to a truly global reach. Here YC-141B, 66-0186, is seen from the refueler's window on a KC-135 during flight testing of this aspect. (Lockheed Aircraft photo)

63-8088 was delivered to Travis AFB and was the first aircraft to enter squadron service. It made a non-stop flight from Travis to Japan in nine hours and twenty minutes in May 1965.

Over the next months Lockheed's production line swung into full gear. By the end of 1965, 65 *Starlifters* had been delivered, and by the end of June 1966 the final block of aircraft to be ordered was finalized and a follow-on order for 134 C-141s was placed. The total USAF acquisitions stood at 284, plus the one aircraft that Lockheed built as a demonstrator and eventually sold to NASA, bringing the total C-141 production run to 285 aircraft.

By the end of 1966, a total of 164 *Starlifters* were in service on both the east and west coasts of the United States, and by December 1967, a total of 220 were deployed. In February 1968, the last C-141 rolled out of the assembly plant, bringing to an end the extremely successful project to bring the air force transport business into the jet age.

The aircraft were initially based at Tinker AFB, Okla., Travis AFB, Calif., and Dover AFB, Del. As time progressed, additional C-141 bases were established at McChord AFB,

Wash., Norton AFB, Calif. and Charleston AFB, S.C. C-141 operations were moved from Dover to McGuire AFB, N.J.

As the new C-17 *Globemaster II* aircraft deliveries started in the '90s, C-141s were transferred to reserve units around the country. The last operating unit for C-141s was the 445th MAW at Wright-Patterson, where 0177 was based until its last flight on May 6, 2006.

Flight hours on C-141s accumulated rapidly. A few of the earliest line aircraft were chosen to participate in a high utilization rate test called *Lead the Fleet*. These aircraft flew many more than a normal day's flight hours for about a year to determine what operational and maintenance problems might be expected over an extended period.

Tail number 0177 rolled off the assembly line in March 1967 and was turned over to the Air Force on April 4 with eight hours on the clock. It was initially assigned to the 63rd MAW at Norton AFB, Calif., and unlike most other C-141s which saw service at numerous active duty and reserve bases over their lifespans, 0177 remained assigned to Norton until it was finally transferred to the 445th MAW at Wright-Patterson in May 1997.

The aircraft was converted from its original C-141A configuration to a 'stretched' C-141B in October 1981. The stretched conversion consisted of adding about 23 feet to the fuselage to increase the cargo volume capacity by 30% and adding an in-flight refueling capability to the aircraft. All but four C-141s were converted to "B" models. The "C" model conversion for 0177 occurred in January 1999. It included updated fuel management systems, modern glass-cockpit instrumentation, and other improved communications and avionics equipment.

COATS OF MANY COLORS

During the lifespan of most C-141s they went through several paint schemes, starting with no paint at all. This was the original fresh-from-the-factory, bare-aluminum finish. After a few years, it was determined that in order to protect the airframe from the effects of exposure to the elements and associated corrosion problems the aircraft should be painted. A gray/white paint scheme was adopted. This was the color scheme that 0177 had when it participated in the *Operation Homecoming* missions, and which the entire fleet used during most of the Vietnam conflict and into the late '70s.

In the early '80s, which witnessed increased activity in the European theater, most of the aircraft were given a camouflage pattern called "European One." Yet another paint scheme called "Proud Gray" was eventually adopted. 0177, after sporting the Proud Gray scheme for a few years, was reverted to the Gray/White scheme in February 2001. This was in anticipation of a return to Vietnam to pick up additional newly recovered POW remains later that year.

THE LAST FEW YEARS

During its final years in service, 0177 participated on a regular basis in the normal missions of the 445th MAW, making nearly weekly flights to and from Europe and the Southwest Asia (Iraq) theater performing medevac missions.

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Apollo 11's special Airstream isolation trailer being loaded onto 66-7951. (Lockheed Aircraft photo)

In September 2005, 0177 flew several Hurricane Katrina relief missions, and like it had all its life, made the national newscasts and front pages of many newspapers. It seems that no photographer, no matter how many times they have seen it, can resist the beautiful C-141 T-tail shot.

The C-141 MISSIONS

A large number of the early missions for C-141 aircraft revolved around supply of cargo in support of the conflict in Vietnam and medical evacuation of wounded back to the U.S. on return flights. Most troop movements to the Southeast Asian theater were handled by commercial contract carriers.

In addition to routine cargo and medivac operations, the C-141 was put to great use in many special missions. For example, a C-141 picked up the Apollo 11 crew after their return from the moon. They were sealed inside a special Airstream trailer to guard against possible contamination. The entire trailer, space pioneers and all, was loaded on a C-141 and returned to the U.S. C-141s made routine flights to the McMurdo Sound in the Antarctic region to perform routine supply and medical evacuations missions from the area. C-141s flew many presidential support missions over the years, including flights to China and Russia.

A few C-141s were modified with extra heavy duty floors to support the weight of a Minuteman missile. The C-141s were used to fly them to the missile bases and to and from repair/test facilities at Hill AFB near Ogden, Utah. Flights were also made to ferry missiles drawn randomly from the live fleet at their assigned bases to Vandenberg AFB, Calif., where they were test fired to verify operational readiness.

Wherever there was a natural disaster in the late '60s, through the '90s, C-141s participated in all manner of humanitarian relief missions. They were frequently some of the first aircraft to arrive with relief supplies and ferried thousands of people from disaster areas to safer locations.

Following the destruction wrought by hurricane Katrina in September 2005, 0177 participated in several relief missions. It was one of the few C-141s still operational at the time. By the fall of 2005 all but six had been flown to the Boneyard in Arizona and all but 0177 were quickly retired in the last few months of 2005 and early 2006.

SAY THANKS

There was virtually no place that the C-141 didn't go over its many years of service to the country. If any aircraft can rightly claim "I've been everywhere!," it is the C-141.

The story of 66-0177, both prior to and after *Operation Homecoming* is the story of all C-141s. The C-141 was a great airlifter, and in this writer's judgment, possibly the best ever.

As of May 6, 2006, you can't see them in the air, where they really belong. There are several C-141s on display at air museums around the country, including March AFB in southern California, Travis in northern California, McChord in Tacoma, Wash., Pima Air Museum in Tucson, Edwards AFB, Scott AFB in Ill., Dover in Delaware, and the NMUSAF in Dayton, Ohio.

If you are lucky enough to see one, give it a hug, and say "Thanks for all you did for this country and the world."

About the Author:

Mike Novack is a former C-141 pilot who flew the C-141A from 1973 to 1978 while assigned to the 8th Military Airlift Squadron at McChord AFB in Tacoma, Washington.

After moving to Tucson in the fall of 2001 he became reacquainted with the C-141 while driving by the infamous Davis-Monthan Boneyard that Mike refers to, "As the place where old military aircraft go to die and make their final flight to airplane heaven."

Saddened by the sight of the destruction of so many C-141s, he started a web site devoted exclusively to the C-141 and all things related. WWW.c141heaven.com has since grown in size and has had tens of thousands of visitors. At the present time it is the largest single repository of information about the C-141 available thanks to all those who have contributed photos and stories about their time with the C-141. Its long and glorious service with the USAF will be continued at www.c141heaven.com and at the National Museum of the United States Air Force.

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The third pre-production aircraft, 61-2777, was assigned to the 1111th TS. The aircraft was nicknamed "The Gambler." It served as a test bed for a number of electronic systems including side-scan radar (seen on the fuselage under the engine) and ECM systems for the B-1 and B-2 that were mounted in the specially modified cylindrical aft fuselage extension. (USAF photo from the Paul Minert collection)



The C-141C model modifications included the installation of a glass-cockpit, seen here with a 445th MAW crew at the controls. (Lockheed Martin photo)



The C-141 was versatile and could fly a variety of missions, including medical evacuation transport of critically wounded personnel. (USAF photo provided by Lockheed Martin)

The huge "clamshell" doors to the cargo hold provided the USAF with the capability to transport both palletized cargo and bulky equipment. (From the AAHS Photo Library)



Navigator's console located behind the pilot. Also note the nose-steering control wheel on the console to the left of the pilot's seat. (Photo from Lockheed Martin)

Palletized cargo loading was accommodated by the use of specially designed transport trailers facilitating "roll-on, roll-off" capabilities. (Photo provided by Lockheed Martin)





Lockheed built one demonstrator model that was later sold to NASA, N714NA, and operated as the Gerard P. Kuiper Airborne Observatory by NASA's Ames Research Center at Moffett Field, Calif. It is seen here during an open house in the early 1980s. (From the AAHS Photo Library)

Lockheed C-141C, 66-0177, flies over its future home at the National Museum of the United States Air Force, at Wright-Patterson Air Base, Dayton, Ohio. (This photo by Lockheed Martin photographer John Rossino was the basis for the wonderful Journal backcover painting by another Lockheed Martin employee, K. Price Randel)



C-141 Facts and Figures

Number of C-141s built: 285

First Flight: December 17, 1963

Last Flight: May 6, 2006

There were three variations of the C-141, starting with the C-141A.

The aircraft was stretched to provide added cargo capacity, and given an in-flight refueling capability to provide additional range, and was re-designated the B model. These modifications were started in 1977 and completed by 1982.

In later years additional refinements were made to add state-of-the-art avionics (glass-cockpit) and improved fuel management and navigation systems. This was the C model. The initial C model was delivered in the fall of 1997.

A limited number of aircraft were given special low level navigation and night vision capabilities for special operations missions.

Model	A	B	C
Length	145	168	168
Wingspan	160	160	160
Height	39	39	39
Pallet Capacity	10	13	13
Air Evac Capacity (ambulatory/litters)	131/79	131/103	131/103
Passenger Seats (Overland/Overwater)	152/133	200/153	200/153
Cruise Speed (mph)	506	490	490
Ceiling (feet)	41,600	41,000	41,000
Empty Weight (pounds)	136,000	148,120	148,120
Normal Range* (statute miles)	4,080	2961	2961

The remaining figures are essentially the same for all three models

Wing Area 3,228 square feet

Fuel Capacity 23,592 U.S. gallons

Crew 5 to 6

Max Takeoff Weight 323,100 to 344,900 pounds

Ferry Range* 5,550 nm

Takeoff Distance* 6,800 feet

Landing Distance* 3,750 feet

Rate of Climb* 2,700 ft/minute

Wing Loading 100.1 lbs/square foot

Engines TF33-P-7 (Pratt & Whitney)

Thrust 20,250 lbs thrust per engine



* Affected by cargo and fuel weight and other factors such as altitude and temperature. Ranges for B and C models are obviously extendable by in-flight refueling.

The aft cargo hatches and ramp not only allowed for easy cargo loading, but could be opened in flight to allow parachute drops of bulky, oversize cargo. (Lockheed Aircraft photo)



0177 proudly flies the POW/MIA flag at the retirement ceremony in honor of all who served during the Vietnam conflict, in particular the prisoners and missing in action. (Lockheed Martin photo)

NOTE 1: These are the tail numbers of the C-141s that participated in the POW repatriation flights, either from Hanoi to Clark, Clark to the U.S., or both.

- 64-0618 scrapped
- 64-0641 crashed in 1975 near McChord
- 65-0230 scrapped
- 65-0232 scrapped
- 65-0236 possibly at Scott?
- 65-0238 scrapped
- 65-0243 scrapped
- 65-0258 scrapped
- 65-0280 scrapped
- 65-9398 scrapped
- 66-0161 used at Kelly ABDR trainer, subsequently scrapped
- 66-0177 at NMUSAF as of May 6, 2006
- 66-7944 scrapped
- 67-0001 scrapped
- 67-0007 scrapped
- 67-0031 scrapped

1. The repatriation flights from Viet Nam

C-141 Missions

Date	Tail#	#Passengers	Route
Feb 12	60177	40	Gia Lam to Clark AB
	50243	40	"
	50236	36	"
Feb 18	40641	20	'
Mar 4	60177	40	"
	67944	40	'

	50243	28	"
Mar 5	60161	34	"
Mar 14	70007	40	"
	40641	40	"
	67944	28	"
Mar 16	50280	32	"
Mar 27	70001	32	"
Mar 28	70007	10	"
	70031	40	"
Mar 29	50280	40	"
	50238	27	"
C-141 Missions:	17	567	POWs

C-9 Missions

Date	Tail #	#Passengers	Route
Feb 12	10878	26	Tan Son Nhut to Clark AB
Mar 12	unk	1	Hong Kong to Clark
Mar 15	unk	2	Hong Kong to Clark
Apr 1	unk	1	Tan Son Nhut to Clark

Total Missions : 21 597 POWs

1. Air Force Journal of Logistics, Spring 1991, page 21
2. Source: "From Huffman Prairie To The Moon-The History of Wright-Patterson Air Force Base"
3. Cross II, Coy F, "MAC's Finest Hour," Air Force Journal of Logistics, Sprint 1991, page 18
4. Source: email from Don G (last name unknown), March 1, 2006
5. Warren, James, email to author, April 15, 2006
6. Navy Lt. Commander Phillip Kientzler. His copilot, Harley Hall, was killed in the shoot down. Hall was a former commander of the Blue Angels. Because Kientzler was shot down the same day as the peace accord was signed, his name was not on the list of POWs turned over to the Americans
7. Rochester, Stuart I. and Kiley, Fredrick, "Honor Bound, American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973," page 570
8. Denton, Jeremina A., "When Hell Was in Session," Chapter 20
9. In reality, another POW had been in captivity longer than Alvarez. This was Jim Thompson, an Army officer shot down in South Vietnam, and captured on March 26, 1964. Source: Tom Philpott, "Glory Denied," page 231
10. "Chained Eagle," Alvarez Jr., Everett, page 256
11. Risner, Robinson. "The Passing of the Night," p. 245
12. There were actually 116 POWs assembled at GIA LAM on Feb 12, 1973. Chesley's head-count was off by four
13. "Seven Years in Hanoi. A POW Tells His Story," Chesley, Larry, Page 121
14. Source: "Honor Bound"
15. "I'm No Hero," Plumb, Charlie, page 262
16. "Glory Denied," interview, page 234
17. "Glory Denied," interview, pages 234-235
18. "A Code to Keep," Brace, Ernests C., pages 228-229



Lockheed C-141, 66-0177, flying over its future home at the National Museum of the USAF was painted by Lockheed Mart employee K. Price Randel.