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TRAVIS HERITAGE CENTER

REMEMBERING FALLEN AIR FORCE COMRADES



PHOTOS BY RICHARD BAMMER — THE REPORTER

Members of the C-7A Caribou Association got reacquainted with the aircraft many of them flew during the Vietnam War as they gathered for the association's somber and respectful memorial bench dedication to fallen comrades on Friday morning at the Travis Heritage Center on Travis Air Force Base.

Group restores aircraft, dedicates memorial bench at Travis Air Force Base

By Richard Bammer

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The last U.S. troops left South Vietnam on March 29, 1973, but, for living veterans who served in that Southeast Asian combat zone, memories, good and bad, happy and sad, linger.

That is certainly true for retired Air Force Col. Robert Whitehouse of Vacaville, a young junior officer and pilot during the Vietnam War in the late 1960s, recollections of his flying support missions for mountain-based combat troops in a clunky-looking, twin-engine plane, the C-7A Caribou, surfaced again Friday morning.

Whitehouse and his wife, Ruth, both of whom grew up in nearby Davis, helped to organize this year's gathering of

C-7A Caribou Association, which attracted more than 130 members, former officers and enlisted men, to the Travis Heritage Center on Travis Air Force Base.

With wives or other relatives in tow, they arrived mostly by bus to get reacquainted with the aircraft they flew or worked on during the war and to dedicate a memorial bench honoring 39 fallen comrades.

Shortly after 10:15 a.m., after association members toured a restored C-7A sitting on the center's parking lot — an effort started and organized by the Whitehouses and other volunteers three years ago — they passed by the dark gray marble bench, its sitting surface about 5 feet long and flanked by flags near the center entrance.

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The easily-readable names of the 39 aircrew and support members were inscribed directly below the seat, from 1st Lt. Francis Bissaillon and Tech. Sgt. Gordon Gaylord to Capt. James Gray and Maj. Thomas Moore Jr. to 2nd Lt. Charles Ross and Staff Sgt. Stanley Yurewicz. In all, the names were quiet testimony to the men's ultimate sacrifice.

Retired Air Force Col. Pat Hanavan of San Antonio, Texas, president of the Caribou Association, served as master of ceremonies for the 20-minute dedication event inside the hangar-sized center, by any other name a museum.

Among the first orders of business was his recounting of the "short history" of Air Force C-7A operations that began on Jan. 1, 1967.

Hanavan, the association's historian and author of three of a planned five-volume history of the Caribou, also noted that during 5 1/2 years of Air Force Caribou missions in South Vietnam, crews and support personnel earned an astounding number of medals: two Air Force Crosses; 35 Silver Stars; 1,182 Distinguished Flying Crosses; 43 Purple Hearts; and 14 Airman's Medals for heroism.

"During these 66 months, 14 aircraft were lost and, along with them, the lives of 39 officers and airmen," he said, standing at a lectern near a black-and-white banner that read "Welcome to Travis, Gateway to the Pacific."

Then, asking men to remove their hats to show respect for the dead, Hanavan, in a firm and earnest tone, began to read the names of the 39, with an event volunteer seated at a table striking a small bell after each name, the high ping-pong sound bracing and somber at the same time.

"Today, we remember and honor those 39 fallen aviators by dedicating this memorial bench," said Hanavan, clad in a light-blue association shirt.

A former pilot in the 535th Tactical Airlift Squadron, he noted that among those seated in chairs and listening to his remarks were 21 Caribou veterans who received the Distinguished Fly-

ing Cross for combat missions while flying in the airplane, an aircraft with a boxy fuselage, a plane's main body section, and a somewhat upturned tail section, like a Chinook helicopter's.

Others in the group received the Airman's Medal, the Air Medal and the Air Force Commendation Medals "for their contributions to our country's effort during the Vietnam War," said Hanavan, who then welcomed Rick Shea, the center's curator, to the lectern.

Hanavan presented Shea with a painting depicting a Caribou in flight.

Afterward, Shea, standing in the heart of the capacious center, said, referring to the living and dead Caribou crew members, "It's phenomenal what they did" while serving "in a very unpopular war."

"I think the big take-away" from the day's event "was the accomplishment of the young men who flew this aircraft in war," he said.

Characterizing their accomplishments as "spectacular," Shea alluded to a long list of achievements "in five short years."

"It just speaks volumes about their dedication to a very unpopular war," he said.

Raising his eyebrows at the thought of veterans dying in an overseas combat zone, he added, "All gave some and some gave all. And that's what we're here for today."

Before the dedication ceremony, walking out toward the restored Caribou, Robert Whitehouse recalled his time flying the aircraft during the Vietnam War as part of the 301st Military Airlift Squadron.

The U.S. Army originally used the plane in Vietnam, but its use was later transferred to the Air Force, with crews supplying Green Beret units stationed on flattened mountaintops, where they could monitor North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong movements, he said.

He said that, from time to time, the planes, when not dropping off food, water, weapons and ammunition, carried live farm animals, cows and pigs, to forward operating bases because, on mountain-top bases, U.S. and South Vietnamese troops did not have refrigeration to keep food from spoiling.

Standing near a sign that detailed the plane's

specifications, Whitehouse noted it had a STOL (short takeoff and landing) that allowed crews to land in zones as short as 1,000 feet, or a little more than three football fields long. Whitehouse, also a retired commercial airlines pilot, said the Caribou, built by De Havilland Aircraft, a Canadian firm, was not an attractive aircraft. It was capable of flying at more than 200 mph but usually at 150 mph with a crew of three, he noted. Its wing span is 95 feet, 7 inches; its length 72 feet, 7 inches.

The restored Caribou, sitting amid several other restored Air Force planes in the center parking lot, arrived from Seward Air Force Base, near Murfreesboro, Tenn., and never saw combat in South Vietnam, said Whitehouse. It did need a lot of work, however, he said.

Whitehouse and wife Ruth decided to get involved in its restoration after reading a newspaper account of the center's need for volunteers who wanted to "adopt" an airplane. They chose the Caribou.

"Today is its coming-out party," said Whitehouse, smiling.

A short history of Air Force C-7A operations:

Until late 1966, according to Retired Air Force Col. Pat Hanavan, historian of the C-7A Caribou Association, the U.S. Army flew the Caribou in South Vietnam. On Oct. 15, 1966, the Air Force reactivated the 483rd Troop Carrier Wing, later to become the 483rd Tactical Airlift Wing, with headquarters at Cam Ranh Bay.

The mission of the reactivated wing was to assume control of Caribou operations. Six squadrons were approved: two at Cam Ranh Bay, two at Phu Cat, and two at Vung Tau. In all, 88 aircraft in South Vietnam were transferred to Air Force control on Jan. 1, 1967.

From wing reactivation until the spring of 1972, when all American C-7A activities in South Vietnam ceased, Caribou crews flew operational combat resupply missions throughout South Vietnam. Many, if not most, flights were to remote camps with very short runways, which could not be used by larger aircraft. Enemy ground fire was a frequent hazard.