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# THE CHINA LAKER

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Newsletter of the China Lake Museum Foundation

Summer 2006

## A FIRST HAND LOOK AT THE BERLIN AIRLIFT

by Bernald S. Smith

*The following excerpt about the Berlin Airlift, in conversational style with minimum editing, is taken from an oral history made for the United States Soaring Hall of Fame. Bernald Smith is a retired United Airlines Captain who served 31 years in the Navy (both active and reserve). He is an active member of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, The Soaring Society of America, the Organisation Scientifique et Technique du Vol à Voile and other organizations. The Fédération Aéronautique Internationale awarded him the FAI Bronze Medal in 2003. His other awards include the Lilienthal Medal (highest World Gliding Award) and the Eaton Trophy twice (highest American Soaring Award). Items in parentheses were inserted by the editor.*

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I flew transports. I'll never forget, after I got my wings (as a Naval Aviator) and went out to Honolulu, which was my first assignment after I'd flown the N2Ss, SNJs, PB4Ys, and PB4Y2s -- and so, here I was going out to fly DC-4s which was the biggest four engine transport around, I guess, at the time.

I remember going to Honolulu -- it was called John Rogers Airport -- it's now Honolulu International -- and seeing this nose hangar -- which is a nose bay. We didn't have hangars out in the Pacific there. We just had nose bays which would cover the front part of the airplane so they could work on the engines. It was raining, which it did a lot of the time. And here's a guy up on the nacelle on this big four engine airplane -- and it's not very big today in today's airplane world -- but it was at the time. (He had) a great big, huge mallet hammering away on the engine on this airplane on a piece of the cowling to try to get it to fit. I thought -- Well, that's good introduction to transport flying! Have a big hammer with you to get your airplane to work right. That always impressed me!

Then in 1948, the pressure increased over in Germany such that the Russians cut off all access to Berlin. All the rail traffic and all of the canal traffic and all of the highway traffic was closed. The Russians wouldn't let any train from the West go to Berlin. So the iron curtain was the iron curtain in those days. It later became a wall but it wasn't a wall -- there was no real wall like happened years and years later. It was just an imposition of access.

Well, how are they going to shut off the air space? The dividing line between West and East Germany was just east of Braunschweig, Germany. From there into Berlin, there were these corridors to go across the part of Germany that was under the control of the Russians and/or East Germans. These air corridors were not being (closed) -- what were they going to do? How are they going to cut 'em off?

So they (Americans, British, French) decided to set up what ended up to be the Berlin Airlift by carrying -- they couldn't get anything over land; they didn't want to start a war. They decided -- well, let's fly airplanes over. Are they going to shoot down our airplanes? So, we'll see what will happen.

They started off with a bunch of DC-3s. Well, right away they realized -- Man, we gotta get some more stuff going in there. General (William H.) Tunnel of the Air Force set up a marvelous, fantastic operation. It turned out -- the Berlin Air Lift had airplanes flying at incredibly close spacing because you needed to get a lot of stuff in there to support all those people.

The Air Force -- Those guys had converted from DC-3s -- in the Air Force, (it) was called a C-47 -- in the Navy, we called it an R4D. They converted to C-54s which was the DC-4 -- the military version of the DC-4 -- and in the Navy we called it the R5Ds -- they were all the same airplane. So we had a squadron of R5Ds in Honolulu (Navy Transport Squadron 8) VR-8, which was where I was based ... and another squadron out in Guam (Navy Transport Squadron 6) VR-6. They said -- We gotta have more help over here -- we're not keeping up with things. So they called the Navy to send 12 airplanes from each of their squadrons over there.

I remember I was with Art Flanagan -- I was co-pilot for Art Flanagan on Johnston Island -- we'd lost an engine on Johnston Island. So there we were -- we were authorized to make a three engine journey -- 738 nautical miles -- from Johnston Island to Honolulu. Well, that was kinda exciting at the time. Not too many people had done something like that. Although these days they fly twin engine airplanes all over the world. But, anyway, we ferried that thing in and got a hero's welcome -- and I got to participate in taking the first Navy plane into the Berlin Airlift.

I think we left in October and, by the time we got there it was November -- the end of the month; the beginning of the month. I think we left in October and, by the time we got there it was November -- the end of the month. These days you can fly non-stop from San Francisco to London -- or San Francisco to Frankfurt, non-stop, depending upon the winds, in anywhere from 10 1/2 to 11 1/2 hours. In those days, it took longer than that just to



### R5D2

was a Navy base, and then you had to go down to Lajes, which is an (Air Force) base in the Azores and then you had to go -- we had to stop in Paris, of course. Well, you're not going to not stop in Paris certainly! If you have to go there -- and our excuse was -- we needed to check in with the U.S. Embassy. So we all went to the Follies Bergere that night, which is a show of some note.

Then we went on to Frankfurt. They were having the foggiest winter in history in Europe. When we landed there at Frankfurt, at Rhein/Main Air Force Base -- we'd just come from Honolulu -- we were all in Aloha shirts -- not really -- we were in uniform -- we had nothing like winter gear at all. We landed there -- first Navy airplane. (They said), "What are you guys doing here? This isn't a Navy base -- Oh, yeah, we've got a spot over there, down there for you." So do this and do that.

Well, you couldn't see -- it was so bad I remember Dick Gerszeuski was flying the airplane at the time. Dick was a Lieutenant JG and I was an Ensign. He said, "Ensign Smith, go down and check it out and see what it looks like there." So we had a little portable ladder and I went down the ladder and went out. And, I'm kinda fighting my way through the fog, following the airplane -- and I get out to the left wing tip and our left wing tip was seven feet from the nose of a C-74. If we'd kept moving, our wing tip would have hit that. So we had to get a tractor out to move us around.

It was really foggy. And it stayed that way until April. It was really a foggy, foggy, foggy time. There was a 1500 foot (mountain) there and I never saw (the mountain) until April. It was an interesting way to learn to fly for a young guy that was pretty new to that sort of stuff -- I'd been in the South Pacific where bad weather was having to fly through a cloud at 6000 feet. Then getting over there where every single landing was an instrument landing, seemingly bare minimums. It wasn't always zero-zero but it always seemed like it was getting close to it. Our minimums then -- it's interesting -- our minimums then with GCA were lower than the minimums on a lot of ILS approaches today that aircraft have.

You needed to get coal in there. — coal, coal, coal. Because they had to cook; they had to heat their houses; they had to keep people alive. They had to have food. We carried dried potatoes, dried ... I can't remember. We carried big, big boxes of chocolate. It was really weird carrying Christmas -- if you fill an airplane with Christmas ornaments, it wouldn't weigh anything at all because

it's all air.

Mainly what we carried was coal. The coal would be in 80 pound knapsack type of things -- they weren't really knapsacks -- they were the bags that soldiers put their goods in -- can't remember the names of what they were -- but it was a bag about 14 inches in diameter maybe, and maybe three feet long -- and they'd fill that with coal. They had these heavy duty straps on 'em. So it made it easy.

We used displaced persons -- DPs we called 'em -- these were indigenous people to Europe that had been displaced and this gave them something to do. They loaded and unloaded the airplanes. A big, huge truck would roll up to the back of the airplane. It'd be filled with these bags of coal. Some of the DPs could only carry one because they were so frail from the life they'd led before they finally got out to the West that they didn't have the strength to carry two. Other more burly guys could pick up one 80 pound bag in each hand.

They'd load the airplane and then we'd take off and fly up to Berlin. Then the DPs up there would unload us and then we'd fly back. I flew 163 trips into Berlin on the Berlin Airlift and got an Air Medal like everybody else did. I don't know why but they decided we deserved an Air Medal for at least 100 trips.

I got checked out as plane commander. We had a lot of Ensigns in our squadron.

Continued on page 4

## The Marines, Mojave, ADM Moorer

### And Tiny Tim

Doing some Web searching on Tiny Tim rockets, Jack Latimer came across the following Web page that describes some history of the Mojave airport.. The Mojave airport was expanded and commissioned in 1943 as a Marine Corps Air Station. In 1944 a couple of Marine squadrons equipped with Corsairs trained at Cherry Point on Project Danny, which was to use Marine Corsairs equipped with 11.75-inch Tiny Tim rockets to attack German V-1 Buzz Bomb launch sites.

<http://www.militarymuseum.org/MCASMojave.html>

The Tiny Tim was developed at NOTS—China Lake, and the Museum has one on display on the Rocket Wall.

Related to Project Danny Jack also found the following:

**"In their book Carrier Air War in Original WWII Color, authors Robert Lawson and Barrett Tillman quote Adm. Thomas Moorer (later chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Nixon) who was staff in Naval Air Forces Atlantic during the war. "Our plan was to put six Marine squadrons on jeep carriers, and launch the F4Us from the North Sea to make a series of massive attacks on the Nazi targets. After all the planning was done, the training was in progress, and the logistics were in order, I was sent to Washington...to brief the highest civilian and military authorities including General George C. Marshall. ....General Marshall listened, but on hearing that US Marine aviators would make the planned attacks....said something to the effect, 'That's the end of this briefing. As long as I'm in charge of our armed forces, there will never be a Marine in Europe'. And there never was during World War II." Needless to say, Project Danny was canceled. The Marines took their Tiny Tims to Mojave and into the Pacific Theater.**

The Marines decommissioned MCAS Mojave in 1946 and the same day the airfield was base commissioned as Naval Air Station, Mojave. The Navy used NAS, Mojave for launching drones until Jan 1947. It stood in caretaker status for four years and was activated again in 1951 as an auxiliary landing base for El Toro, and was reactivated again as an Auxiliary Marine Corps air Station in 1953. The Marines left in 1959 and Mojave airport became a commercial Kern County airport, and has since blossomed into the Space Port role.

### Thomas H. Moorer

Commander Thomas Moorer was a NOTS Experimental Officer from 1950 — 1952. He later became Admiral Moorer. From 1967 — 1970, Admiral Moorer was Chief of Naval Operations, and from 1970 — 1974, Moorer was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, making him the highest ranking of China Lake's military alumni. In addition to the JCS and CNO positions, was the first person to have commanded both the Pacific Fleets and the Atlantic Fleet.

**China Lake Museum Foundation**

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**The President's Report by Paul Homer**

The Sixth Annual Dinner & Auction held 3 June 2006 was a great success, and special thanks go to Beth Sumners and her team that planned and executed the event. Over \$60,000 was accounted for the Building Fund, and more thanks go to the Foundation membership, local businesses, and other supporters donating items for auction and sponsorships. All in attendance conducted spirited bidding for the items auctioned, and the auctioneer, Jim Sumners of Five Star Auctioneers did a masterful job of entertaining the crowd, a sell out, and keeping a rapid pace for a large number of quality items. If you missed the event, you missed a really good party, so plan now to attend next year's function, which is scheduled for 2 June 2007.

The China Lake Museum Foundation is pleased to welcome three new members to the Board of Directors, all representing China Lake area defense industry partners. They are Jim Seaman, former NAWS CO, now the local representative of Booz, Allen, & Hamilton; Chuck Roulund, a Burroughs High graduate and a local manager for the Lockheed Martin Co.; and Karl Ficenc, a former China Laker who served as the Big-

eye Project Manager, who is now the local representative of the CACI International Co. Welcome aboard to all!

Foundation members are encouraged to visit the Gift Shop in the Museum and sample the new items that Dotsy Cronin has supplied. New items are coming in daily, including new T-shirts, caps, and other China Lake related items. Just in is a new supply of Sidewinder caps, an item the shop had for many months during and after the Sidewinder 50th Anniversary held in 2002, but the stocks sold out a few months ago. We have flight-style jackets in Navy, Marine, Air Force, Army, and USA patriotic emblems—the best bargain for a leather jacket anywhere. Also for your consideration are several Zabel prints, framed and poster style, along with other artwork. The air conditioning works well in the Museum, so come over and enjoy a tour with one of our expert docents, spend an hour or two in the Museum, and visit the Gift shop. Of course, bring your summer visitors to experience China Lake!

Continued from page 2



**R5D2s (C-54s) line up to fly to Berlin**

We had more Ensigns than everything else put together because they built the squadron up and a bunch of the older guys got out. Suddenly they're inundated with all these Ensigns. We were -- so when we got some new people in -- the ones that were the most qualified in these airplanes are Ensigns. What are we going to do, you know? Are we gonna let an Ensign be a plane commander and have a Lt. Commander as his co-pilot? Well, yeah, that's what we ended up doing because we were the most experienced guys. So a bunch of us got checked out as plane commanders. And they said -- Well, we'll just let the Ensigns fly together and, in case they crash, we won't have lost much.

They finally decided we were safe enough. I remember our

squadron operations guy -- he was a new guy -- he was a Lt. Commander and I was an Ensign. I said -- hello, what do you want to know? We got along fine. They treated us well. We thought we knew everything. We were absolutely convinced we were the best pilots in the world. Of course, as you fly and the longer you fly, the more time you get, the more you realize that you haven't begun to learn everything there is to learn. But the younger you are, the more of a hot shot you are; the more you think you're the best pilot in the world.

*Editor note: From [www.history.navy.mil](http://www.history.navy.mil):*

*By the end of December 1948, VR-8 was leading all squadrons in the airlift in every measurable phase of air transport operation, including aircraft utilization, total cargo carried, payload efficiency, and tons per plane.*

*During the months that VR-6 and VR-8 operated in Germany, their aircraft flew 45,990 hours, carrying 129,989 tons of cargo into Berlin and averaging 10.1 flight hours per plane per day for the entire period. Even though the twenty-four aircraft of the two squadrons had not been involved during the first three months of the Berlin airlift, by the end of Operation Vittles they had managed to deliver some 7.3 percent of the total tonnage flown into the besieged city by U.S. aircraft. It was a masterful achievement.*

## NOMINATION AND ELECTION OF DIRECTORS

In 2005, the China Lake Museum Foundation adopted updated by-laws which include a provision for electing Directors of the Foundation to three-year overlapping terms of office. This year, up to eight Directors may be elected to three year terms of office. Bob Campbell is leading a nominating committee, and Foundation members in good standing interested in being nominated should contact him. At this writing, the following have indicated their willingness in serving as a Director: 1. Alice Campbell 2. Wayne Doucette 3. Karl Ficenc 4. Paul Homer 5. Ruth Hornibrook 6. Chuck Roulund.

**Publicity of Nominations:** The Board of Directors shall publish the list of nominees and the procedure for nomination by petition to the membership within 15 days of the nominating committee meeting but no later than the August Board Meeting. Distribution can be via electronic or USPS mail.

**Nomination by Petition:** Additional names of Candidates for Directors can be nominated by petition bearing the signatures of at least twenty-five (25) members in good standing of the Foundation. The Candidate has ten days from the date the nomination list was published to submit a nomination petition.

**Election:** The Board of Directors shall produce and mail a ballot of the names of all candidates for Director to the membership. The names shall be listed in random order on the ballot. Distribution can be via electronic means or USPS mail. The ballot mailing shall contain a clear statement concerning the voting procedure, date, place, and time of poll closing. The election shall be conducted at the Annual Membership Meeting held in September.

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[www.chinalakemuseum.org](http://www.chinalakemuseum.org)

## THE BATTLE OF PALMDALE

By

Peter W. Merlin

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#### A Startling Discovery

While researching aircraft accidents in the Periodicals section of the California State University, Northridge, library, I stumbled across one I had never heard of. The Los Angeles Times headline read, "208 Rockets Fired at Runaway Plane." A subhead continued, "Missiles Spray Southland Area in Effort to Halt Wild Drone." The story described terrified residents, property damage and forest fires caused by rocket bombardment of a wide area of northern Los Angeles County as Air Force jet crews attempted to shoot down a runaway Navy drone airplane.

#### Retired Warhorse

The Grumman F6F *Hellcat* was one of the most successful fighter aircraft of the Second World War. Simple and rugged, it was built to absorb a great deal of punishment. It was easy to fly and well armed. The Grumman factory produced over 12,000 *Hellcats* between 1942 and 1945. After the war, *Hellcats* were sold to France and Uruguay. Some remained in service with U.S. Naval Reserve and training units. In 1946, a drone version designated F6F-5K participated in Operation Crossroads atomic weapons tests at Bikini atoll. Other *Hellcats* served as targets for missile tests at Naval Air Station Point Mugu, California.

#### Runaway

But one *Hellcat* drone was slated to end its career in a blaze of unintended glory over California's Mojave Desert. On the morning of August 16, 1956, Navy personnel at Point Mugu prepared an F6F-5K for its final mission. The aircraft had been painted red for high-visibility. Red and yellow camera pods were mounted on the wingtips. Radio remote control systems were checked, and the *Hellcat* took off at 11:34 a.m., climbing out over the Pacific Ocean. As ground controllers attempted to

maneuver the drone toward the target area, it became apparent that it was not responding to radio commands. They had a runaway. Ahead of the unguided drone lay thousands of square miles of ocean into which it could crash. Instead, the old *Hellcat* made a graceful climbing turn to the southeast, toward the city of Los Angeles. With the threat of a runaway aircraft approaching a major metropolitan area, imminent the Navy called for help.

Five miles north of NAS Point Mugu, two F-89D *Scorpion* twinjet interceptors of the 437th Fighter Interceptor Squadron were scrambled from Oxnard Air Force Base. The crews were ordered to shoot down the rogue drone before it could do any damage.

Armed with wingtip-mounted rocket pods and no cannon, the *Scorpion* embodied the typical U.S. approach to countering the "Red Menace" of the Cold War era. Each pod contained 52 *Mighty Mouse* 2.75-inch rockets. Salvo-launched, the *Mighty Mouse* did not require precision guidance capabilities. Large numbers of rockets would be fired into approaching Soviet bomber formations to overwhelm them through sheer numbers. Today, however, they would be used against an altogether different kind of red menace.

At Oxnard Air Force Base, 1st Lt. Hans Einstein and his radar observer, 1st Lt. C. D. Murray, leapt into their sleek F-89D. Simultaneously, 1st Lt. Richard Hurliman and 1st Lt. Walter Hale climbed into a second aircraft. The interceptors roared south after their target. The hunt was on.

#### Intercept

Einstein and Hurliman caught up with the *Hellcat* at 30,000 feet, northeast of Los Angeles. It first turned southwest, crossing over the city, then

headed northwest. As the Hellcat circled lazily over the quiet Ventura County hamlet of Santa Paula, the interceptor crews waited impatiently. As soon as it passed over an unpopulated area, they would fire their rockets.

The interceptor crews discussed their options. There were two methods of attack using the fire control system, either from a wings-level attitude or while in a turn. Since the drone was turning almost continuously, they opted for the latter. But in repeated attempts, the rockets failed to fire during these maneuvers, a malfunction later traced to a design flaw. The drone then turned northeast, passing over Fillmore and Frazier Park. It appeared to be heading toward the Antelope Valley's sparsely populated western end when suddenly, it again turned southeast toward Los Angeles. Time seemed to be running out. Einstein and Hurliman decided to abandon the automatic modes, and fire manually. Although the aircraft had been delivered with gun sights, these had been removed a month earlier. After all, why would a pilot need a gun sight to fire unguided rockets with an automatic fire control system?

**Rocket Attack**

The interceptors made their first attack run as the *Hellcat* crossed the mountains near Castaic. Murray and Hale set their intervalometers to "ripple fire" the rockets in three salvos. The first crew lined up their target and fired, missing it completely. The second interceptor unleashed a salvo that passed just below the drone. Rockets blazed through the sky and then plunged earthward to spark brush fires seven miles north of Castaic. The fires decimated 150 acres above the old Ridge Route, near Bouquet Canyon.

A second salvo from the two jets also missed the drone, raining rockets near the town of Newhall. One bounced across the ground, leaving a string of fires in its wake between the Oak of the Golden Dream Park and the Placerita Canyon oilfield. The fires ignited several oil sumps and burned 100 acres of brush. The blazes raged out of control, threatening the nearby Bermite Powder Company explosives plant. The rockets also ignited a fire in the vicinity of Soledad Canyon, west of Mt. Gleason, burning over 350 acres of heavy brush.

Meanwhile, the errant drone meandered north toward Palmdale. The *Scorpion* crews readjusted their intervalometers and each fired a final salvo, expending their remaining rockets. Again, the obsolete, unpiloted, unguided, unarmed, propeller-driven drone evaded the state-of-the-art jet interceptors. In all, the jet crews fired 208 rockets without scoring a single hit.

The afternoon calm was shattered as *Mighty Mouse* rockets fell on downtown Palmdale. Edna Carlson was at home with her six-year-old son William when a chunk of shrapnel burst through her front window, bounced off the ceiling, pierced a wall, and finally came to rest in a pantry cupboard. Another fragment passed through J.

R. Hingle's garage and home, nearly hitting Mrs. Lilly Willingham as she sat on the couch. A Leona Valley teenager, Larry Kempton, was driving west on Palmdale Boulevard with his mother in the passenger seat when a rocket exploded on the street in front of him. Fragments blew out his left front tire, and put numerous holes in the radiator, hood, windshield and even the firewall. Miraculously, no one was injured by any of the falling rockets. Explosive Ordnance Disposal teams from nearby Edwards Air Force Base later recovered 13 duds in the vicinity of Palmdale. It took 500 firefighters two days to bring the various brushfires under control.

**An Ignominious End**

Oblivious to the destruction in its wake, the drone passed over the town. Its engine sputtered and died as the fuel supply dwindled. The red *Hellcat* descended in a loose spiral toward an unpopulated patch of desert eight miles east of Palmdale Airport. Just before impact, the drone sliced through a set of three Southern California Edison power lines along an unpaved section of Avenue P. The camera pod on the airplane's right wingtip dug into the sand and the *Hellcat* cartwheeled and disintegrated. There was no fire.

**Finding the Site**

On July 5, 1997, I searched for the crash site with a colleague, Tony Moore. Using information from old newspaper articles, we identified our search area. When we arrived, we followed the power lines to the location that had been described and immediately spotted aircraft debris.

It soon became apparent that the pieces belonged to a relatively small, propeller-driven airplane. Some of the pieces had part numbers and Grumman inspection stamps. Fragments of exterior skin were painted red, just as the drone *Hellcat* had been. There were numerous data plates from various components. We also found items from the cockpit and parts of the right camera pod. There was no question that we had found the crash site of the F6F-5K.

The wreckage is all that remains to commemorate the day that an unarmed, unmanned, and obsolete prop-driven plane eluded two of America's most advanced jet interceptors. Looking at wreckage scattered in this as yet undeveloped section of the Antelope Valley, I couldn't help but wonder how the incident affected the careers of the various participants of the "Battle of Palmdale." Navy officials at Point Mugu must have initially felt embarrassed, having to ask the Air Force for help in shooting down the runaway drone. Later, they may have felt relief that Navy pilots were not to blame for the ensuing debacle. The interceptor pilots, on the other hand, must have watched their egos deflate as fast as their rockets were ineffectively expended over the communities of southern California. Bombing taxpayers doesn't foster community support or win promotions for junior officers. Only the fact that no lives were lost prevented this comedy of errors from becoming a

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**MAILBAG**

Long-time China Lake Museum Foundation member Paul Rivette, also a long-time China Laker, writes:

*Merle and I enjoy "The China Laker". She misses the Desert Art League and Maturango Museum.*

*I retired in August 1980 and returned to my home neighborhood. Most of my career was spent in Code 45 in the China Lake and Salt Wells Pilot Plants. During my time at China Lake, I was known as Paul. After retirement, it was either revert to P. G. or be ostracized for putting on airs.*

*I'd like to donate the enclosed coins for the June 2006 Auction and Dinner program. Good Luck with the fund raiser.*

*Sincerely, P. G. Rivette*

**Thanks, P. G. (aka Paul). Your donation of the silver proof coins raised over \$1,000 at the auction!**