

OPERATION TIGHT REIGN

The Story of the Strategic Loran C Chain In Southeast Asia 1965 – 1966



Publication Notes:

This unofficial publication is the product of (then) Captain Tom Sargent, LCDR Ron Stenzel and LT Don Aites. The documents and images are from the files and memories of the above officers.

VADM Sargent recently updated and edited his written synopsis and Captain Don Aites provided the incentive to supply all the information to the USCG Aviation History Repository in response to a solicitation in the recent Pterogram published by the Ancient Order of the Pterodactyl.

I have simply formatted the information into a historical scenario for your edification and enjoyment.

This story is really a study in "getting things done" if you don't worry about all of the latent possibilities of failure and just say "Sorry About That" and get on with it!

The AOP USCG Aviation History Committee hopes that you enjoy this short publication about a special event in Coast Guard Aviation.

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Since publishing this Tight Reign publication, I have been contacted by Chuck Zanti, a former Coast Guard Electronics Technician, who had been stationed at Con Son Loran station. He created the document and supplied the photographs contained therein. I have opted to add his document to the story so that you, the reader, may better understand the conditions of the time in the 1965-1966 time frame.

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BY

Vice Admiral Tom Sargent

LORAN-C VIET NAM

A Model of Cooperation, Dedication and Teamwork

It was March 1965 and I was Chief, Civil Engineering Division, Coast Guard Headquarters, anticipating being transferred within the year. I had been wearing two hats – Chief, Civil Engineering Division and Civil Engineering Liaison for Loran-C. RADM John Oren, Chief, Office of Engineering, called a meeting in his office, closed the door and emphatically stated that this meeting was top secret. It seems that, at a meeting in the Pentagon, the Air Force had asked the Coast Guard whether Loran-C could be used over land and, if so, what accuracy could be attained. The electronic engineers had investigated and had informed the Air Force that a short based Loran-C system could be installed in Southeast Asia for use in bombing and search and rescue sorties. As usual, the engineers had done such a great job in describing the capabilities of the system that the Air Force enthusiastically requested the system be installed. The only problems were the funding, the availability of the personnel to do the job and the timetable for on-air operation. The Air Force had no funds and the operational on-air time was August 1966! When I asked who the lucky officer would be to lead such a project, RADM Oren just said, "Guess who – you!!".

Back in my office, I called a strategy meeting with Captain James Moreau (my deputy) and with my counterpart in Electronics Engineering Division and we set up a preliminary site survey group consisting of CDR William Fearn (Ops) and CDR Carl S. Mathews, electronics, to be on call with passports and shots completed. We also selected CDR Harold Brock, civil engineer, and CDR Maynard Fontaine, electronics engineer, to be the designers and on-site developers of the stations. Due to the importance and short time frame, both of these engineers spent all of their spare time (including weekends) on the project. To assure success, pick the best people!

At an April meeting at the Pentagon, I requested the status of funding and I was told that the Air Force had no funds. It was then that I suggested that the Navy be approached on transferring funds (already be appropriated for a European Loran chain which was now not required) to the Tight Reign Project. The Air Force jumped at the prospect and started the necessary paperwork.

However, the wheels of fund management turn very slowly and summer passed with no action. We again asked the Air Force at another meeting about the funding and we were told that they were close to agreement and the Loran installation was essential ... but the on-air time could not be changed. I took a deep breath and stated that the Coast Guard had available some unused Loran administrative funds for a preliminary site survey to obtain sites if the Coast Guard Commandant concurred. Our Comptroller agreed as long as it was being used for a Loran project. Therefore, I gathered our preliminary survey group (which was augmented by an Air Force liaison officer by the name of LCOL Harper) and we departed the USA the week after Thanksgiving. We stopped in Honolulu to brief RADM Theodore Fabik and a selected few officers on the project and then proceeded to Bangkok, Thailand, since two of the stations would be in that country.

Commander, Military Assistance Command, Thailand, (COMUSMACTHAI) did a masterful job of arranging for our arrival – we had transportation and hotel accommodations. Having arrived on Sunday, we cased the city of Bangkok, lined up possible transportation systems and checked the availability of other means

of transportation. On Monday we went to the offices of COMUSMACTHAI where I met with BrigGen Richard Stillwell, we outlined our project and requested assistance which was quickly given. I split the group with Fern and Mathews to find sites in Thailand and Col Harper and I went to Saigon, called on the resident Naval Civil Engineer and the Army Engineers and then got a flight to Con Son Island where we found a site near the airstrip. We called on the island commander who stated that he could provide interpreters and laborers at a minimum wage. We accepted his offer. I released Col Harper in Saigon and traveled to Bangkok. Upon arrival, I had a message that the funds for construction were just about cleared – I replied that we were leaving for the USA on 13 December and to start assembling personnel for possible departure in early January. Thus the stage was set for the execution of the project and it was evident, from what had transpired up to this time, that the Coast Guard would have to be innovative, inventive and have maximum cooperation to get this project done on time!

Just a word about people – as Commander, Tight Reign Project, I required a good finance officer. The first to apply was CWO Baker Herbert who came to my office in Headquarters for interview. From the outset, he was impressive and when I stated that people were known to be hurt in Vietnam and he was a father and a husband, he stated "If you go, I go." I told him to get an appointment as a contracting officer and certifying officer and to get \$25,000 in five thousand dollar checks and report back. Within two hours he was back in my office with a brief case handcuffed to his wrist saying "When do we depart"! Commanders Harold Brock and Ned Fontaine were the spark plugs and were always fired up and ready. They did design work on their own time, they were determined and inspired all those associated with the project to do the same.

The organization was set up as follows:

Commander, Tight Reign Project - Captain Thomas R. Sargent, III
Commander, Coast Guard Construction Detachment – CDR. Harold R. Brock
Executive Officer (Electronics) – LCDR Maynard J. Fontaine
Contracting Officer (Officer Manager) CHSPCK Baker W. Herbert

On Site Civil Engineers:

LCDR Arthur E. Gerken
LCDR Daniel E. Olson
LCDR Raymond E. Womack
LCDR Gilbert L. Aumon
LT Everett L. Cromwell
LT William M. Devereau
Lt(jg) Algie Pulley

Enlisted Personnel:

Irving Goldstein
George Purdy
D. G. Fentzlaff
M. R. Niles
R. T. Truex
F. P. Jones

I departed USA on 11 January with Baker Herbert and all the civil engineers for Bangkok. Upon arrival, we reported to COMUSMACTHAI to obtain office space but we were told that none would be available for one year. I looked at Baker Herbert with his briefcase full of American checks and said –"Baker, get us a couple of offices with, for starters, two desks, three chairs and a telephone." The real estate officer, LCOL Whitten actually laughed and said "Impossible"!!! Baker departed and three hours later called on the telephone stating – "I'm using our telephone at our offices at the Bangkok Bank Building – fifth floor – the desks and chairs will be in tomorrow. From then on, we had the Army's total support.

Later we opened a checking account at the bank (paid our lease from that account) and awaited the arrival of Harold Brock, Ned Fontaine and our enlisted personnel. In the interim, we established liaison with the Embassy (they had a Navy C-47 with a Navy pilot who was a gungho type and ready to fly anywhere). All the Armed Forces were very supportive. I discovered that BrigGen Stillwell graduated from West Point the same year I graduated from the Coast Guard Academy and, in addition, he had an airplane which he generously let me use from time to time.

We obtained land in Sattahip and in Lampang and everyone worked seven days per week on surveys and site development. At one time, Baker Herbert made a trip to Lampang on 27 February but had not returned by 1600. Lt(jg) Algie Pulley and I went to JUSMAG and discovered that the plane was overdue. It finally landed at 2000 having been lost, landed at an unauthorized field for fuel which Baker purchased with a Coast Guard credit card, and finally found their way back to Bangkok.

On 13 March, I left Thailand to push the transportation of construction and electronics material from the USA. We leased a ship (S.S. MAYO LYKES) for the transportation of our material just to be sure that there would be no delays on the way to SE Asia. I requested of the Master that he use Amvers to report his position each day so we could coordinate his arrival with our lease of the railroad from

Bangkok to Sattahip and Lampang. I also discovered that our checking account was illegal and could only be authorized by Secretary of the Treasury – we obtained that authority. CDR Brock could see a great transportation problem occurring. In country suitable aircraft were not available at an “on call” basis.



As material started to arrive and the site developments progressed, the transportation of civilian workers became a great problem and of great concern. Any delays could jeopardize the completion date and the Air Force was still insistent that the on air date remain firm. As always, the best people to call are other Coast Guard personnel. Consequently, we asked for Coast Guard assistance from our ever-reliable aviation organization. Through the magnificent performance of LCDR Ronald D. Stenzel and outstanding crew and the “flying rock”, known as a C-123B, the stations were on the air on time!! Without the assistance of this intrepid group, the “on-air” time would not have been possible. Their performance was crucial to the success of the project!!!!

Crew: L to R Back—AD2 D. D. Martin, AO1 R. A. Murphy, AT3 O. O’Neil, LCDR Ron Stenzel, LT Don Aites Front—AM1 R. L. Powers, Mr. Chom, AE2 J. R. Ryan, AD1 R. M. Adams

In July 1965, I was transferred to 11th Coast Guard District in Long Beach, California. I was happy to leave Headquarters but I was disappointed in not being able to finish the Tight Reign job. However, prior to leaving Washington, I was required to give Jim Moreau my itinerary. At my niece’s home in Alabama, Jim called me with the news that, upon arrival in Long Beach, I was to immediately depart for Bangkok. I departed Long Beach about 3 August and, after arrival in Bangkok, discovered that a few transfer difficulties had occurred between the Construction Detachment and Commander, SE Asia Section which was about to be formed. Those difficulties were resolved and I departed on about 30 August after visiting all the stations. Prior to my departure, RADM George Synon, Commander 14th Coast Guard District visited and I briefed him on all facets of the project.

All stations went on-air on time!!

This dissertation is a part of the outstanding review of the C-123 support given to the Tight Reign Project by CDR Ronald D. Stenzel. All those involved in this project should be justly proud – it demonstrated what can be done by dedicated, enthusiastic, cooperative people. The Loran-C system saved many lives and facilitated navigation over wild and dangerous country.