

How Did Cessna's 'Push Pull' O-2's. Literally . . Find Their Way Into Viet Nam Combat?



In early 1968, the Air Force began paying the 'bill' for 300 Cessna Super Skymasters re-named the . . O2 . . to instantly become a complicated puzzle of how to transport the 'push-pulls to Vietnam . . where needed by Forward Air Controllers to identify the enemy for the fighter bombers

Delivery choices were to : [1] send them in cargo ships at 7 knots [2] remove their wings . . stuff three . . 'push pulls' at time into gaping C-124 bellies to be flown over as air cargo [3] solo pilot each 'push pull' over with . . no C-124 attached.

SO . . what method was picked ? Right ! Every single one of those puppies would be hand-flown to Vietnam. In your mind you can visualize a 'Mickey' Mouse operation.

But it didn't start out as well as a professionally run 'Mickey Mouse' operation.

The . . ferry mission inept . . Air Force Systems Command (AFSC) . . was in charge but quickly admitted they knew very little about ferrying aircraft.

Fortunately, the U.S.A.F also had a perfectly good organization called the 44th Aircraft Delivery Group . . operating worldwide and managed the ferrying all aircraft. Except the Cessna O-2s.

AFSC had merely identified then immediately signed a contract with some San Francisco outfit to deliver the Cessna push-pulls to Saigon.

The contractor reached out and hired a bunch of civilian pilots who weren't able to hold down any honest flying work elsewhere.

Since the O-2s were technically "public" airplanes [as opposed to civil or military] only a simple pilot's license was necessary to fly one. On the other hand, I'm not sure that all of the pilots currently held a license . . . nor had any [IFR] instrument flight rules flying time . . . or LINK synthetic instrument training . . . or anything else

Some of them were pretty good, but the rest of them turned out to be a god-awful collection of unqualified scruffy-looking alcoholics you ever saw . . . among the dregs of the flying profession.

The deal worked like this : the selected pilots were each handed a plane ticket to Wichita . . . and got a quickie checkout in the O-2 if they needed one. Then launched out in bunches of four push pulls to head for Hamilton AFB on California's Pacific Coast. Enroute, they were instructed to monitor and write down each engine's cross-country oil consumption . . . which, of course, they ignored.

Scruffy type pilots don't monitor nor record the amount of engine oil consumption . . . that's a line boy's job . . . not a job for a real pilot.

At Hamilton , the Air Force took out seats except the left front. The removed seats were shipped to Vietnam by air. Extra fuel tanks were installed on the now vacant floor immediately next to the scruffy incompetent pilot himself.

He had to crawl over the co-pilot tank to get to the left seat. Next, they installed an oil tank on top of the co-pilot tank followed by small emergency HF radio on top of that. Now, the pilot was truly locked in.

To get out, he could either wait for someone to remove the radio and oil tank. Or crawl out the emergency escape window on the left side. Water, food and booze was of course packed in there . . . but their takeoff must have been something to watch.

Carrying all that extra fuel for a near 14 1/2 hour trip . . . because the push pulls were way OVER take off gross weight even with both engines at full power . . . nothing could fail on T.O. . . the climb up against significantly strong head winds . . . all the way . . .

For the first 5 hours off flight . . . they had no single engine capability at all. And if either engine lost power . . . pilot went swimming.

The route was Hickam Hawaii, Midway, Wake Island, Guam, Philippines at Clark and Saigon's Tan Son Nhut. The Hamilton-Hickam leg was by far the longest; nominally about thirteen hours. The O-2s were carrying fuel for about fourteen and a half hours of flight.

Navigation was strictly dead reckoning. The pilots took up a heading based on wind calculations and just flew out their ETA's hoping to be within range of a Hawaiian radio station. Otherwise . . . they had no other long-range navigation equipment.

The long-distance fuel tanks were to be thrown away when no longer needed. The fuel pumps were not disposable The ferry pilots were

told to bring the fuel pumps back . . along with their dirty underwear and the high frequency HF radio.

The trip was supposed to take about a week . . with each pilot carrying an airline ticket from Saigon to Wichita . . to pick up another . . ' push pull.'

For this, the pilots were paid \$800 per trip with each flight leader getting \$1,000. They planned on averaging three trips a month . . and they each planning to get rich doing it. [A college graduates starting wages were only \$ 400 a month.]

How come I know so much about this. HmMMMM . . I was the Director of Safety at Hickam AFB and every single one of over 300 ' push pulls ' passed through my domain creating anxiety and high-risk scenarios

Before this all started, I had no idea what an Cessna O-2 ' push pull ' even looked like much less knowing their overall ferrying scheme.

The trouble started with the very first Viet Nam ferry flight from the Cessna 's factory. The reason for determining oil consumption on the Wichita-Hamilton leg was to give a better idea of how much oil to add . . during the ferry missions r-e-a-l-l-y long ' leg's.

The ' push pulls ' had no gages allowing . . critical inflight measuring . . of crank case oil . . QUANTITY !

Shortly after takeoff from Hamilton, boredom set in. Every once in a while . . and also just for luck . . many pilots would give the oil tank wobble pump a jab or two . . to squirt some more ' oil into the engines . that inevitably poured more and more engine oil . . ' til it raised the level far above each engine's oil sump capacity.

All this nervous unnecessary pump wobbling ' resulted in fluctuating oil pressure.

The pilots didn't like that at all, so they added more . . leading to more pressure fluctuation. At the same time they were sometimes moved course by unexpected wind changes . . deviating around thunderstorms . . or taking a nip of vodka instead of paying attention . . on the open Pacific . . often not working their way much closer to the Hawaii .

Whoops . . time a scary MAYDAY call on the HF radio.

When the first MAYDAY came in, I was attending an interesting Coast Guard seminar on sea rescue in downtown Honolulu . . when they shut down the seminar and launched their C-130 and a pair of cutters to find their ' sorry asses.'

They found and herded the ' push pulls ' to the nearest runway at the Marines Air Base Kanehoe on Oahu's NE side. I drove over.

That's when I saw my first O-2 . . actually my first four O-2s. Aside from being ugly, they were [1] soaked with oil overflowing from all engines and [2] between them they didn't have ten gallons of gas remaining. And [3] one ' push pull ' s engines had quit . . as it ran out of gas . . on the taxiway.

They had been airborne for 14 hours and 45 minutes.

The Coast Guard was really angry when they learned the full story . . and considered sending someone a bill for the rescue effort. I must say . . I agreed with them.

This 'silly stuff' continued for another three or four weeks . . with every single flight of O-2s asking for . . perhaps demanding . . some kind of assist.

At Hickam, the O-2 pilots were fairly easy to find. Most were 'boozed up' then flopped down or draped over the whisky bar at the O-Club . . or they were 'horny' and made that fact known . . to the bored/gossiping/card playing ladies at the nearby Officers' Wives Club.



Always a dangerous scenario.

I told the PACAF HQ folks what was happening . . they were absolutely appalled. To have drunken Civilian misfits ferrying Air Force air-planes across the Pacific to a combat zone ? No way ! So all of us safety guys began firing off messages . . to get this lunacy stopped.

AFSC could not 'perceive any significant problem . . and Hamilton AFB ' brass ' were taking a lot of ' heat ' for allowing them . . to launch at all . .

I was on the long-distance phone agitating all safety sources about the stupidity of all this. AND if somebody's unnecessary death hap-pened, I planned to ' crunch ' everyone responsible after that occurred. The AFSC agreed to allow the 44th Aircraft Delivery Group to ' run everything.'

The 44th wasn't too happy about the overall assignment . . Why ? Because the civilian pilots . . did not follow instructions ' too good.'

Nevertheless, they added organizational finesse to now include : mission planning, briefings, weather analysis, flight following and escort.

The O-2s weren't allowed to fly unless accompanied by a C-47 or C-7 Caribou who could fly at their speed and handle the navigation. That wasn't much of a problem as there were two or three of those planes being ferried each week to Vietnam.

The delivery rate to Vietnam was slowed somewhat, but I think more total planes actually got there do to the altered delivery method. And during the entire process, only two planes were lost.

One ditched due to engine failure on the Wake-Guam leg. The pilot exited then ' bobbed around ' in his life jacket until picked up by a Japanese cargo ship.

The other crashed in the Philippines killing the pilot. I never knew the circumstances. There at Hickam, one pilot landed nose gear first . . snapped it off and ' got ' the front propeller. I went out and heard a load of malarkey . . and a STRONG WHIFF OF GIN from the pilot's breath.

He drunkenly claimed because it was nose heavy on landing [even though its huge gasoline weight was long gone as a forward weight problem] And he swore the elevator trim was inoperative. So . . he tried but couldn't get its heavy nose trimmed up.

Then said his radio transmitter was out . . negating any technical help.

I checked the plane . . found the elevator trimmed full nose down. But . . the airplane's elevator trim switch and its trim tab . . worked just fine.

BUT . . JUST TO THE LEFT OF THE ELEVATOR TRIM . . the microphone toggle switch was twisted and bent . . completely backward.

After many boring hours of sucking up gin martinis in the cockpit . . this pilot had ' dumbed

down' into an attempt to trim the nose with

the push-pulls' microphone switch. Case closed.

The aircraft were not recorded as Air Force aircraft until they were formally delivered in Saigon, so technically, the Air Force couldn't have an accident charged to them. On the other hand, the planes weren't registered as civil aircraft . . so they couldn't have a civil accident either.

Everything was in regulatory limbo . . any accidents were non-events . . so nobody cared.

That suited me just fine. I had other things to do.

Source : personal file