

How The O-2s Really Got There

It's 1967 or maybe early 1968, I forget, and the Air Force has bought a mess of Cessna Super Skymasters and called them O-2s. The Cessna factory at Wichita, Kansas is pumping them out at a pretty good clip and your problem is to figure out how to get them to Vietnam where they are needed. Your choices are:

1. Fly them to the West coast and turn them over to the Army for transport by cargo ship.
2. Take the wings off them and stuff them three at a time into the belly of C-124s and fly them over.
3. Fly them over under their own power with no C-124 attached.

Question: Which method was used? Right! Every single one of those puppies was hand-flown across the Big P to Vietnam. That sounds like it might have been a Mickey Mouse operation. Believe me, it wasn't that good.

Air Force Systems Command (AFSC) was running that show and their knowledge stopped somewhat short of knowing anything about ferrying airplanes. The Air Force had a perfectly good organization called the 44th Aircraft Delivery Group which operated world wide and managed the ferrying of all aircraft; except the O-2s.

AFSC contracted with some outfit in San Francisco to deliver the planes to Saigon. The contractor hired a bunch of civilian pilots who couldn't find honest work elsewhere. Since the O-2s were technically "public" aircraft (as opposed to civil aircraft) no pilot's license was necessary to fly one and I'm not sure that all of the pilots had licenses. Some of them were pretty good, but the rest of them were the most god-awful collection of unqualified scruffy-looking alcoholics you ever saw. The dregs of the flying profession.

The deal worked like this. The pilots were given a plane ticket to Wichita where they got a quickie checkout in the O-2 if they needed one. Then they launched in bunches of four and headed for Hamilton AFB on the west coast of California. Enroute, they were instructed to carefully monitor and record their oil consumption, which, of course, they did not do. That type of pilot does not monitor and record oil consumption.

At Hamilton, the Air Force removed all the seats except the left front one. The seats were shipped to Vietnam by air, which is what should have happened to the rest of the plane, too. Extra fuel tanks were installed in the vacant floor space followed by

the 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 a 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.

Takeoff must have been something to watch. With all that fuel, the planes were way over max gross weight. They had no single engine capability at all for about the first five hours of flight. If either engine hiccupped, the pilot went swimming.

<!--The route was Hawaii (Hickam), Midway, Wake Island, Guam (Anderson), Philippines (Clark) and Saigon (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 flew out their ETA hoping to be lost within range of a Hawaiian radio station. They had no long range navigation equipment.

The fuel tanks were disposable and were dropped off as they were no longer needed. The fuel pumps were not disposable and the pilots were instructed to bring them back along with their dirty underwear and the HF radio. The trip was supposed to take about a week and each pilot carried an airline ticket from Saigon to Wichita to go back and pick up another plane. For this, the pilots were paid \$800 per trip with the flight leader getting \$1,000. They planned on averaging three trips a month and getting rich doing it.

How come I know so much about this? Well, I was the Director of Safety at Hickam AFB and every single one of over 300 O-2s passed through my domain and created almost constant headaches. Before this all started, I had no idea what an O-2 even looked like much less any knowledge of the overall ferrying scheme.

The trouble started with the very first flight and began with the extra oil tank. The reason for determining oil consumption on the Wichita-Hamilton leg was to know how much oil to add during the really long legs. There were no oil quantity gages. Shortly after takeoff from Hamilton, boredom set in and the pilots would give the oil tank wobble pump a jab or two and squirt some more oil into the engines.

The O-2 didn't need that much oil. All this did was overservice the engines which resulted in fluctuating oil pressure. The pilots didn't like that at all, so they added

more oil which led to more pressure fluctuation. Meanwhile, they were totally lost and not getting much closer to Hawaii. Time for the old MAYDAY call on the HF radio.

When that call came in, the Coast Guard in Hawaii was running a very interesting seminar on sea rescue in downtown Honolulu. I was attending which is how I found out that we had an O-2 problem. The Coast Guard shut down the seminar and launched their C-130 and a pair of cutters to find the O-2s; which they did.

They herded them to the nearest runway which happened to be the Marine Corps Air Station at Kanehoe on the Northeast side of Oahu. I drove over the mountains to Kanehoe to find out what the hell this was all about. That's when I saw my first O-2; actually my first four O-2s. Aside from being ugly, they were all soaked with oil overflowing from both engines and they didn't have ten gallons of gas among them. One had flamed out taxiing in from landing. They had been airborne for 14 hours and 45 minutes. The Coast Guard was really pissed when they learned the full story and was making noises about sending someone a bill for the rescue effort. I must say, I agreed with them.

That silliness continued for three or four weeks with every single flight of O-2s getting into some sort of trouble. At Hickam, the O-2 pilots were fairly easy to find. Most of the time they were draped over the bar at the O-Club; a situation which was attracting the attention of the Officers Wives Club; always a dangerous thing to do.

I went to PACAF Headquarters and told them what was going on and they were absolutely appalled. Civilian misfits ferrying Air Force airplanes across the Pacific to a combat zone? No way!

Between us, we began firing off messages to get this idiocy stopped. AFSC couldn't understand what the problem was and probably still doesn't. Hamilton AFB was taking a lot of heat for participating and allowing them to launch at all. I was agitating about the stupidity of this through all the safety channels. I think I may have mentioned that when the inevitable accident occurred, they better hope it was out of my area. If I had to investigate it, they were definitely not going to like the report. I was prepared to write most of the report right then before the accident even happened.

AFSC backed down and agreed to let the 44th Aircraft Delivery Group run the operation. The 44th wasn't too happy about that because the civilian pilots didn't seem to take instructions very well. Nevertheless, that brought some organization to

the festivities which included things like 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.

That procedure eliminated most of my problems and things settled down to a routine. The delivery rate to Vietnam was slowed somewhat, but I think more total planes actually got there because of it. During the entire process, only two planes were lost. One ditched due to engine failure on the Wake-Guam leg. The pilot managed to get out of the plane and 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.

We had, of course, the occasional problem at Hickam. I remember one pilot who landed nose gear first and managed to snap the gear off completely and ding the front propeller. I went out to see what had happened and got a load of bullshit and a strong whiff of gin from the pilot. The plane (he claimed) was nose heavy on landing and the elevator trim was inoperative. He couldn't get the nose up. Furthermore, his transmitter was out and he couldn't tell anyone about his problems. I checked the plane and found the elevator trimmed full nose down, but the trim switch and trim tab worked just fine. Just to the left of the trim switch, I noticed that the microphone toggle switch was actually bent backwards. After several hours of martinis, the pilot was trying to trim using the mic switch. He trimmed the plane full nose down while trying to talk to the control tower on the trim switch. Case closed.

None of these accidents consumed any of my time. I had learned another quirk in the AFSC way of doing business. Appearances aside, the aircraft were not Air Force aircraft and wouldn't be until they arrived in Saigon and were formally delivered and accepted. Since they weren't, technically, Air Force aircraft; they couldn't have an Air Force accident. The planes weren't registered as civil aircraft, so they couldn't have a civil accident either. They were in regulatory limbo and any accidents were non-events. Nobody cared.

That suited me just fine. I had other things to do and I couldn't see how an investigation of stupidity would contribute anything to the Air Force safety program.

Incidentally, how do you suppose they got the O-2s out of Vietnam and back to the United States? They took the wings off, stuffed them three at a time into the belly of

C-124s and flew them back. AFSC was not involved which, I later learned, tended to improve almost any operation.