

**DON PURDY**

# The Goose Pilot from Turtle Creek

by Paul Backshall

DON Purdy gets wary when he sees a Chinese-type junk cruising the Virgin Islands waters. It brings back memories of the Gulf of Tonkin and being shot at by North Vietnamese fishermen as he picked up American pilots downed by the Communists.

Don, now a line captain for Antilles Air Boats, was piloting an Albatross at the time and his rescue mission involved landing in the junk-riddled sea and getting as close to the stricken pilot as possible with the sea plane, while a para-rescue man scooped the airman out of the water.

Meanwhile the junks would keep up a steady crackle of rifle fire as they closed in and Don's navigator and radio operator would return the fire from the sea plane to keep them at bay.

Captain Purdy picked up a total of nine pilots (one of them twice) during his year of rescue duty in Vietnam and collected the Distinguished Flying Cross for his effort.

The Gulf of Tonkin in those

ground training and then joined the Army Air Corps when he was 17. He wanted to be an airborne radio operator, but such are the ways of the military, he was put into accounting and finance for six years. It was a disappointment but, in retrospect, he feels, it was good education and an experience that took him up to 1952 when the Air Force decided they needed pilots for the Korean War.

"I guess I have the North Koreans to thank for my flying career," said Don. He had done the ground training and now it was time to go solo. It took him six weeks to do it and his first flight was nearly his last.

During training, the instructor had been in the habit of making little adjustments for Don and now, as the young pilot went roaring down the runway, he failed to notice that his throttle was slipping slowly back.

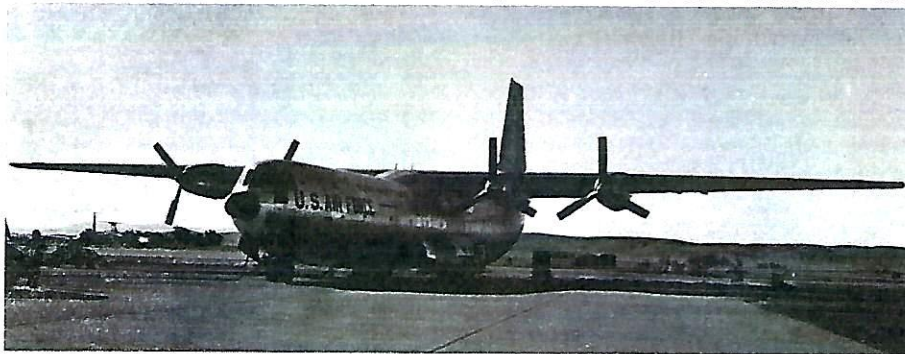
"I was losing engine revs and would never have taken off. Suddenly I realized what was happening and jammed the throttle forward. I shot



action.

"I wasn't too disappointed," he confesses. "I wasn't in a hurry to go out there and get shot at."

He had also gone to multi-engine school, followed by bomber school and was qualified to fly the big ones, C-124 cargo planes used by Strategic



Purdy piloted intercontinental ballistic missiles around the world in this giant C-133 transport.

days, must have seemed a very long way from Turtle Creek, Pennsylvania, where Don was born. His father was an Air Corps mechanic in World War I, and had a passion for building model airplanes that rubbed off on Don.

Airplanes were his thing from ever since he could remember and in 1941, at the age of 12, he joined the Civil Air Patrol and had his first ride in a real plane.

From that first flight from Philadelphia to Pittsburg in a single engined Piper, he progressed through cadet

off the ground like a rocket."

There were one or two other incidents during the early days in the cockpit, like the time when he was taking a plane up to see how it would perform at high altitude and neglected to put the carburetor heater on. It iced up and the engine cut out. Fortunately, the altitude afforded him time to think out the problem, consult his check list and switch on the heater.

Trained and ready to go, the Korean conflict came to an end and Don was robbed of his chance for

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Air Command to haul atomic bombs around the world.

"Of course they weren't armed," said Don. "We just took them where they were needed."

Six years of carrying the Big-A around, earned him a fishing trip and in 1959, he found himself assigned to Goose Bay, Labrador to fly Albatross sea planes, with Air Force personnel, government officials and V.I.P.'s aboard, bound for the lakes with their fishing poles.

After huge bombers, the smaller aircraft were a delight.

"They handle so much better. In a C-124, you move the controls and hold them there until the thing starts to turn, then you stop it. The response is so much better on a light plane. Also on those long flights, you climb in and sit there for hours. Small planes mean shorter distances and less monotony."

Nevertheless, the Air Force wasn't going to let him off that easily and after a year and a half on the lakes, it found him an even bigger aircraft to fly, the C-133. From the Albatross, which weighs in at 36,000 max. gross lbs., he was now piloting 275,000 max. gross lbs., around the skies, hauling military hardware such as guns, tanks and jeeps in support of the Army in Europe. During the next few years, he got to see places like Germany, France, England, Italy, Turkey, Greece and Yugoslavia. He even flew the President's helicopters to Rome on one occasion.

By this time the Vietnam conflict had started and he made one or two trips there before being assigned full time to the Air Rescue service, flying into the face of the enemy in his trusty Albatross.

He had hoped to go into action as a fighter pilot, but his sea plane experience was needed, so he got to tangle with the junks instead.

"When the fighter pilots got into trouble and had to bail out, they were told to ditch over water so that we could come in and pick them up. Of course the junks would try to get at them too, but we were usually quicker."

Don got his D.F.C. when he landed right in the middle of a pack of North Vietnamese junks to rescue a pilot and sat there under constant rifle fire until the mission was completed.

"Fortunately the junks did not carry machine guns, mostly just rifles. But we did lose one of our aircraft when it was hit by mortar fire while rescuing a pilot. A helicopter picked everyone up."

After a year's rescue work, Don went back to flying the C-133's once

a month to Vietnam with the military hardware. He was still shot at now and then, mostly on the final approach to Da Nang airstrip.

From the states to Vietnam and back usually took from seven to 10 days, with refuelling stops in Hawaii, Wake Island in the Pacific and the Philippines.

He got out of the Air Force in December 1971 after his C-133's had been put into the graveyard and began looking around for a flying job. There was a decline in the airline industry and offers were few and far between, but Antilles Air Boats needed sea plane pilots and invited Don to come

down and take a look at the operation.

He had got married just a year earlier and he and his wife Jane took an immediate liking to the Virgin Islands. Since moving here, they have had two children, John, 4 and Karen, 3.

At 47, with another 13 years of flying before him, Don has no hesitation in saying that he wants to spend them piloting sea planes for Antilles. And just to keep him happy, Antilles is planning to introduce the Albatross to its fleet of aircraft serving the Virgin Islands.

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