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My Caribou Flight Mechanic Instructor

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For 7 months, I took C-119 basic Flight Mechanic (FM) training, then I started working with the 415th Cargo Squadron (CS) stationed at the South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) 5th Air Division, Tan Son Nhat AB. I retrained in the C-47. One year, I flew 600 flight hours in the C-47. In September 1971, half of the FM in the 415th CS (Blue Dragon) went to Phan Rang AB for training in the C-7A Caribou. MSgt. Howard was our Caribou FM ground training instructor for two months, then we started flight training in the Caribou.

Early one morning, I met my Instructor Flight Mechanic. He was not a very large person like most Americans. I was impressed with his smooth, shining, combed hair. He look smart, like rock singer Elvis Presley with a nice voice, a pistol swinging from a belt hanging around his waist. He looked like a Texas cowboy in movies I often watched in the theaters. He introduced himself as SSgt. Lott and asked my name. I answered, “Sgt. Le.”

He shook my hand and said, “Le, on our first training mission today, we will fly to an outpost. Follow me to get your equipment. He talked as we walked to the Supply Shop like a pair of old friends. He chose a medium flight helmet from a rack. Handing it to me, he said, “Try this one.” He guessed my helmet fit exactly. Standing in front of the Supply section, he asked: “What do you like for your flight lunch?” Fried chicken was a favorite food for the Vietnamese. I answered without thinking, “Fried chicken, please.” We got along with each other so well right from the first moment we met.

On my first two training flights, SSgt. Lott was very busy training me. At each step of the Exterior Inspection of the aircraft, he stood for a moment to explain how each part worked and the limits to fly safely. We walked slowly around the Exterior Inspection. I noted in my own Vietnamese notebook, not all, but a part of what he was saying.

In the same way, he taught me the Interior and Top Aircraft Inspections. He showed me what a Flight Mechanic does during flight. I tried hard to understand, but I received only a small part of his teaching due to my limited English.

For many months I worked on my own. I fell in love with C-7A Caribou Technical Order-2. It became my pillow and I used an English-Vietnamese dictionary, noting the Vietnamese meaning of each English letter on all the -2 pages on systems, where I discovered all of the Caribou's secrets. It helped to save my life flying and my survival after the Vietnam War. It helped me be confident as I became a valuable Caribou Flight Mechanic. I thought I might become a VNAF C-7A Caribou FM instructor in the future, which was my bigger dream. If I had a chance to work for the civilian Air Vietnam, I would earn three times the salary that the VNAF paid me. My life would change for the better, like our senior, experienced FM who was working for Air Vietnam.

As we flew back to the base from the outpost, I was tired and lay on the passenger seat to take a little nap. SSgt. Lott did not allow me to take a nap. He sat on my belly to wake me up to study. He taught me to identify the aircraft radios on the right console behind the copilot seat. He pointed the VHF, the UHF, the HF, and the FM and told me to repeat after him. Then he explained the hydraulic reservoir on the left hand side, how to check and how to refill it. "Better you remember them, okay?" he said. He was a very responsible FM Instructor. He did not allow me to take a nap, though, even when I was tired with nothing to do during the flight back to home base.

On a third training flight, SSgt. Lott told me, "Today is your turn; you do your own aircraft inspection like I showed you." He walked behind and watched my Exterior Inspection, starting from the left wing tip. I pointed my finger to the objects that we needed to inspect more than just talking. I tried to remember what he did, but I forgot many parts. He stopped and explained which parts were important and where we had to pay special attention. He pointed his flashlight to several landing gear parts. He said, "Le, look at the strut. If it shows less than 6 inches, it is not acceptable. Check all the landing gear hydraulic lines. The hydraulic line connecting nut must not be loose, no oil leaks. Look at the brake disk, too." SSgt. Lott was very thorough.

On my first training flight as the primary FM, our C-7A Caribou moved onto the Phan Rang runway to take off. Our crew was a USAF Major as Instructor Pilot (I don't remember his name), 1st Lieutenant. Do Cu Ba, VNAF (Pilot trainee), SSgt. Lott (Instructor Flight Mechanic), Sgt. Le (myself, as VNAF Flight Mechanic trainee), and Khu Hung as loadmaster trainee.

The pilot requested takeoff permission from the Phan Rang tower and SSgt. Lott allowed me to do the Flight Mechanic job. He sat in a passenger seat next to me, filling out the daily in-flight information form. The pilot released the brakes, pushing the throttles to maximum power for takeoff. Our aircraft started rolling, gaining speed as it went down the runway. I carefully observed all the engine indicators at the center of the pilot's panel. Suddenly, I saw something wrong with the RPM indicator. The two RPM indicators showed different speeds. Number one RPM showed less than 2450 RPM, but number two showed 2700 RPM (maximum power for takeoff). I quickly made up my mind to stop the airplane before it lifted off. I pressed the intercom button and called, "Abort! Abort! Abort!" just before we lifted off the ground.

SSgt. Lott looked at me strangely, shouting, "What was wrong? What was wrong?" as the pilot pulled the throttles back and turned the aircraft onto the taxiway. I took off my seat belt and explained to SSgt. Lott, "The left propeller RPM didn't reach 2700 RPM for takeoff." The pilots parked the aircraft, set the parking brake, and rechecked the left RPM. They tested it twice, full throttle and propeller full increase. The RPM indicator# 1 showed less than 2500 RPM.

The Pilot contacted Base Operations to change the airplane. We took almost 30 minutes checking the new aircraft and we took off later.

We made a safe landing at Plateau Gi, a remote Montagnard village with mountains and a beautiful waterfall. When we got back to Phan Rang AB, before we returned our borrowed equipment to the Personal Equipment shop, SSgt. Lott said, "Come with me!" He led me to a large shop with several USAF maintenance personnel there. He shook hands with an older maintenance man and introduced me to him. SSgt. Lott told me the man was the USAF supervisor of the Propeller Shop and proudly talked a little about me and that I aborted the takeoff that morning on the runway and why. Then, we went to the Engine Shop and met another chief. We returned our equipment and we went back to the Caribou squadron where he talked with MSgt. Howard, our ground instructor trainer, about our abort.

It was a good day.

My 3rd VNAF article: "Farewell To Tonle Cham Outpost" My 7th impossible mission in Vietnam War. It should be post on C-7A Caribou Association Newsletter on Fall 2017 issue.

Great thank you to editor Ron Lester former USAF C-7A Caribou pilot, who edited my two VNAF articles: My Caribou Flight Mechanic Instructor and Farewell To Tonle Cham Outpost. I also thank you to Colonel Pat Hanavan, former USAF Caribou pilot who edited my article "A Terrified Evacuation Flight".

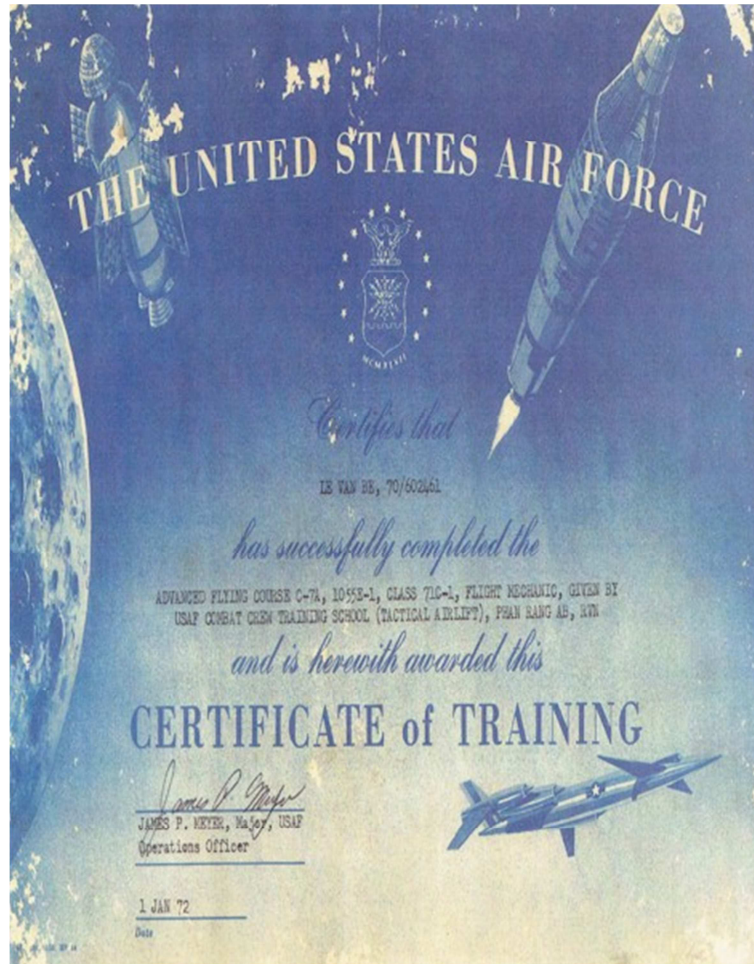


Photo: C-7A Caribou Flight Mechanic Certificate of Training, issued by USAF, 1972.

Hình ảnh: Bằng Cơ phi C-7A Caribou do Không Lực Hoa Kỳ cấp phát sau khóa học. Khóa 1/71 Cơ Phi C-7A Caribou do Không Quân Hoa Kỳ huấn luyện cho Không Quân VNCH tại Căn cứ Phan Rang, Miền nam Việt nam, năm 1972.

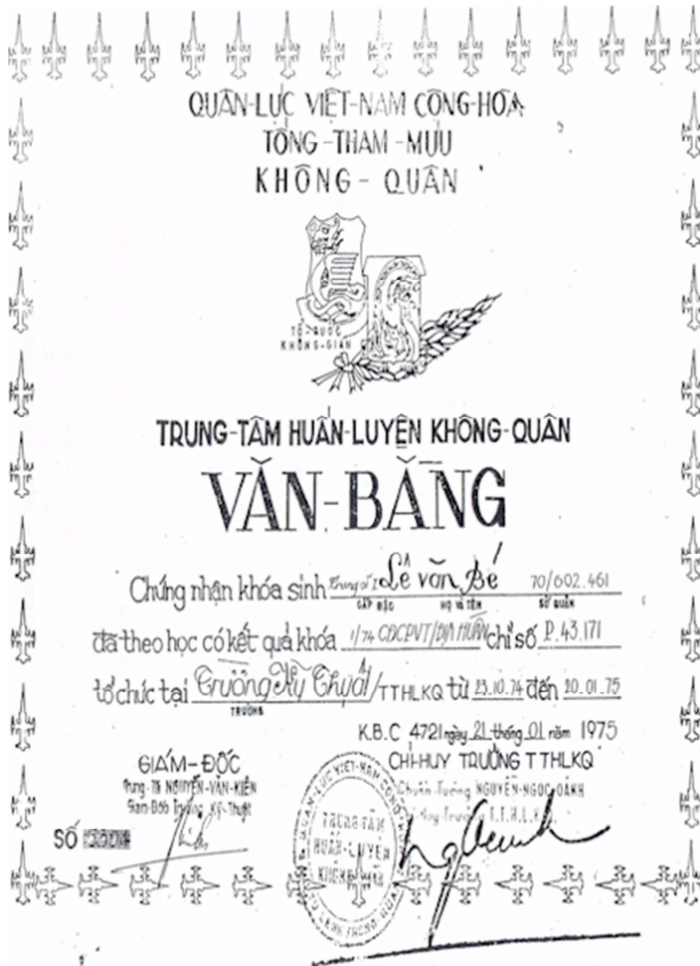


Photo: High Degree of VNAF Cargo Aircraft Flight Mechanic Certificate of Training, issued by VNAF Mechanical School of Vietnam Air Force Training Center at Nha Trang, 1975.

Hình ảnh: Bằng Cao Đẳng Cơ Phi Vận Tải, khóa 1/74 do Trường Kỹ Thuật của Trung Tâm Huấn Luyện Không Quân Nha Trang cấp phát năm 1975.



Nguồn: Internet E-mail by Le Phuong Long chuyển

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