

Crew Four Memorial Remarks
By CAPT Vern Lochausen June 2017
Punchbowl National Cemetery Memorial Service

It was the last flight in a series of missions that the crew had to make during this deployment. The next stop would be home, home to families and loved ones, home to their cars, their rooms, their ground jobs, their leisure time. Home.

Over the past 7 days they had exercised the system, working as a team to monitor important messages and when flash traffic came in they could extend the long and short trailing wire antennas, bring up the 250 KiloVolt power amplifier, and send out exercise Emergency Action Messages. This was just an exercise but a vital one, monitored by ground stations, other strategic aircraft flying at the same time and most importantly by nuclear submarines in the Pacific Ocean that carried submarine launched ballistic missiles. In the event the United States was attacked and the President viewed the attack as severe and especially if it was a nuclear attack, Crew 4 would receive and then immediately transmit his orders for a nuclear counter attack. No one welcomed this possibility but everyone knew they were critical to the vital link between the President and those submarines. But today that would be behind them. No planned exercise and this leg would be the last leg home until their next assigned mission, weeks from now.

They had just flown from Hickam AFB on Oahu, just to the west of Honolulu. They had about 6 hours left to fly to get home. Everyone was pretty relaxed, some grabbed a sandwich, and some had quick game of ping pong while others fueled the aircraft. The flight engineers, engines specialist AD2 Christy Metcalfe was being trained by his first Flight Engineer electrical systems specialist AE1 Monte Nichols who that night led the work at plane side, assisted by two Reel System Operators, metal smith AMH2 Robert Bond and electrical systems specialist AE2 Dave Cofer. Also in training and on his very first deployment was Airman Andy Barker who was working his qualifications for Plane Captain, the position that cared for the aircraft when it was on the ground and directed it as it entered and departed the flight line. For the mission systems it was the communications crew leaders, Naval Flight Officers Andy Yaroschuck and Richard Eastwood and Radioman Chief Petty Officer Aubrey Russell, the most experienced man on the crew. The Chief directed a team of young airborne communicators, Radioman Second Class Bill Juergens and three Inflight avionics technicians, AT2 Dan Miner, AT2 James Faul and AT3 Dennis Mura. They brought up the circuits they could establish out there in the middle of the Pacific and set up for the others that would become available once airborne. At home in the States, Aubrey's wife Bobbi had just given birth to twins Melissa and Aubrey Junior. One of the officer's wives was expecting in the fall and one was working long distance with his fiancé on their wedding plans.

The men flying the aircraft were Jack Strunk, AC, Co-Pilot Mark Searing, Co-Pilot Dave Paige, and 3P LTJG Pete LeDoux. They check the weather, the route, the crew and the airplane and were satisfied all was tracking well for an on time departure.

As the engineers completed aircraft preparations and the comms systems were readied, the pilots met with the navigator in Base Operations for one last review of the weather and the route. They needed—to add fuel for this leg, and following the time honored TACAMO admonition, they added a few more pounds of fuel ‘for Momma and the kids’. It was 1,500 miles and about 6 hours home to Guam. Plane side the Wake Island base Executive Officer, Air Force Captain John Nelson, came out of Base Ops and checked on the crew, making sure they had all that they needed. He heard their stories of home and family, the newborn twins, the expectant mothers, the pending wedding, and for all the angst to finish this trip and just be home awhile.

In the aircraft now, they started engines as that brand new plane captain trainee Andy Barker and First Flight Engineer Monte Nichols provided outside observers and safety checks. AD2 Christy Metcalfe was in the Flight Engineer’s seat behind and between the pilots. Once all four engines were on line, they boarded and Monte reported on the Intercom to the Pilots,

Crew Aboard, Doors Closed, Ready for Taxi, Check Ground.

Wake Ops, Broom 17, Ready for Taxi, Over, called the Co-Pilot from the right seat, saying they were ready to depart.

Broom 17, Taxi and Position and Hold at Pilot’s discretion. No traffic reported in the area. Cleared for Takeoff.

Everything must have looked fine as they lined up on the end of the runway. As the Hercules aircraft do when the brakes are set and power is applied, 176 hunkered down, wait for the pilots to let her go. The Co-Pilot answered Wake Ops clearance saying,

BROOM 17 on take-off roll. Thank you Wake Ops for everything, good night.

With brakes released, 176 started her run that would end at about 110 knots, she leapt into the sky to wing Crew 4 home. XO Nelson watched as the aircraft passed his position in about mid field and noted she had lifted off. Following the runway heading initially, she drifted left and the climb out seems to stop.

Then.....BOOM.....disaster.....

176 impacted the water to the left of the runway centerline, nearly 1 mile out over the water. The water there was 2,000 feet deep. An explosion lit the otherwise black sky with no visible horizon. Within seconds, 176 came apart and all 16 crewmen of TACAMOPAC Crew 4 perished. Never before and hopefully never in the future will this Naval Aviation community lose a crew and an aircraft. Suddenly, the danger of what we do was forever planted in the minds of all who flew and will fly this mission.

XO Nelson rushed to his fire department and two boats were immediately launched with him in search of survivors. His Operations Duty Officer notified Honolulu Center of the crash and rescue starting. The seas were 8 to 10 feet in the crash site area and the only lights were those they had on their boat. After 4 hours of fighting the sea, they returned to shore. The next

morning as an Air Force cargo jet arrived, the body of one crewman was found and some aircraft parts washed ashore as well.

Back on Guam, the CO recalled all the squadron personnel for a rare late night muster. The crew list for Crew 4 had several substitutions for this deployment. One pilot had stayed home because his wife was about to deliver their first child, one of the Radiomen, one of the Reel Operators had stayed behind so others could be trained. Both Flight Engineers were also flying off crew. Most of these fellows I have talked to and understand their deep seated regrets and sadness over this tragedy. Another squadron aircraft was launched the next day to Wake to investigate. The CO started the heart breaking task of notifying the families of those lost. He ordered a memorial at the Base Chapel and insisted that he must lead it and give remarks that he wrote himself. Years later when I was CO of VQ-3 that Skipper answered my request in Naval Aviation News for VQ-3 history documents. He called me and sent the crew lists, the memorial, and his heartfelt comments, some 11 years after his worst day in the Navy.

Back home in the US, families were visited by local Navy officials and told only that their loved one had perished on a Pacific Island while flying as a crewman on a classified mission. Benefits were later extended to each but no further details other than that there were no survivors and one man's family was able to provide a proper internment for the loved one. That notification was all that was known by most of the families for the next 35 years.

The organization sponsoring this event, the TACAMO Community Veterans Association (TCVA), took up the cause of locating and contacting every Crew 4 family in 2012. Chief Aubrey Russell's daughter saw on Facebook that TCVA was sponsoring a reunion in OKC and that Crew 4 would be the first men to be inducted into the new TACAMO Hall of Fame. She brought her Mother Bobbi to that Reunion and thereafter she worked with TCVA's Crew 4 Quest team and located members of all 16 crewman's families over the next 2 years. Andy Barker's Sister Rebecca joined the Quest and found the last family, that of Monte Nichols, in her home state of Nebraska.

In 2015, Rebecca invited me to meet her and her Mom, Ruth, at a local restaurant while I was in Omaha on Navy business. As it turned out, a total of 17 family members came and we were provided a private dining room. For several hours I answered their questions about the mission, the last flight of Crew 4 and what VQ-3 and TCVA have been doing to locate the families and to honor the Crew. From the looks on their faces, that night had finally brought some closure. It was very hard to lose a son, a brother, a cousin, a foster son. It is even harder when no one can say how and why Andy was lost. Finally, some of the answers were provided. Their tears were hard to take and their handshakes and hugs were meaningful. Someone asked me why I came and I said without thinking 'because I just want to take care of Sailors and their families'. Not a bad answer and one that came from what my Chiefs taught me as an ensign. It meant the world to me to meet them.

From that event on, the Crew 4 Quest Team was determined to create a memorial for Crew 4 in Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, DC. During 2015 letters were written to officials

and members of Congress, Arlington leaders were visited and senior TACAMO veterans contacted very senior Navy officials, all to no avail. During 2015, we were successful in raising over 10,000 dollars in donations for the memorials. VQ-3 CO CDR Adam Hancock and his staff created memorial in squadron spaces at NAS OKC, a.k.a. Tinker Air Force Base. Earlier VQ-3 CO, CDR John Irish Keilty, had in the 1990s, 'retired' Crew 4's crew number in a brief memorial ceremony and today there still is no crew assigned as TACAMO PAC Crew 4. During Skipper Hancock's memorial event, several Crew 4 family members were present and treated to great squadron hospitality. An air traffic controller who was then assigned to Wake Island provided sand from the beach of the end of Runway 10 and TCVA gave each family a small bottle of that sand. Finally, we obtained permission from the Air Force to place framed memorial in Base Operations on Wake Island. Each of these events were completed in hopes of providing recognition for the sacrifice of Crew 4 and to bring closure to their loved ones.

But not until late 2016, when TCVA held a reunion here on Oahu, did the Quest Team achieve the much desired goal. The Punchbowl Director provided guidance and hope and later obtained approval to place this memorial monument here in honor of TACAMOPAC Crew 4 and all TACAMO Sailors who have perished in the line of duty. And so here we are in the most fitting of places, among the memorials to so many Americans who gave their last full measure in defense of what we hold most dear.....our freedom.

In closing, this is deeply personal for me. The members of Crew 4 were about 2 years behind me in seniority and experience. I flew in their sister squadron VQ-4 out of Patuxent River, Maryland. We hosted VQ-3 crews and individuals flew with us to learn the newest version of the communications systems. In that way, those crewmen are my brothers in arms, flying the same missions and facing the same operational and ordinary life challenges. VQ-3 during my first two tours there in the 80s we just did not talk about Crew 4. But we practiced the lessons their loss taught us and the Navy ensured that both squadrons had enough resources to ensure that practice was provided to EVERY crew. The official mishap conclusion is "cause undetermined". While that is a poor answer for families and for us, the loss of Crew 4 strengthened everyone's resolve to ensure the safety of the people flying this important mission. And that loss fueled TCVA's and hundreds of TACAMO veterans who today DEDICATE this memorial.

I can find no more fitting remarks to say in closing except to quote President Lincoln from his address at the Gettysburg battlefield memorial where 50,000 American perished in just 3 days:

"...we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."