

FIRST HELICOPTER AIRLIFT IN A C-54

The below text is a copy (slightly edited) of a US Army Air Forces document that was declassified on May 29, 1945. This document, and the attached photo, was obtained from the National Air & Space Museum in Washington, DC. They give a detailed accounting of this significant episode in the helicopter's evolution as a tool for mankind.

On January 17, 1945, a priority radio stating that a helicopter was urgently needed to rescue a group of American fliers who had been forced down in Burma was sent from Eastern Air Command Headquarters in India to Army Air Forces Headquarters in Washington, D.C. It reached Washington the same day.

On January 26th, only 9 days later, the helicopter had completed the rescue of a wounded enlisted man from the top of an isolated mountain in North Burma. In the interim, the aircraft had been dismantled at Wright Field, Dayton, Ohio; loaded, together with trained helicopter personnel, into a C-54 of the Air Transport Command; carried half way around the world to Myitkyina, Burma; reassembled and flown over jungles and 5,000-foot Peaks to accomplish its mission.

The dismantling of the helicopter at Wright Field began at 2000 hours on January 17th under the supervision of 1st Lt. Paul E. Shoemaker, 27, of Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan. Lt. Shoemaker had had more than a year's experience as a helicopter engineering officer.

A YR-4 helicopter was selected for the mission, since later models had not been tested sufficiently to warrant their use in an operational theater. The helicopter was dismantled and made ready to load by 0600 hours the next morning.

Meanwhile, during the afternoon, 1st Lt. Irwin C. Steiner, 29, of Chicago, Illinois, a veteran helicopter pilot, assembled the latest type of jungle rescue equipment available at Wright Field including jungle vests, light mountain sleeping bags and rations. Captain Frank Peterson, 21, Houston, Texas, a Wright Field Test Pilot with more than 2 years of helicopter experience, was called at Quonsett Point, Rhode Island, and ordered to proceed at once to LaGuardia Field, New York, to join the others as they came through. None of the team had any previous overseas experience.

A C-54 of the Air Transport Command, with a civilian crew, arrived at Wright Field at 1800 the same day and the dismantled helicopter, with the supplies, was loaded by midnight. It was the first time that a helicopter had been loaded into a C-54. Take-off from Wright Field was at 0140 on January 19th. Captain Peterson joined the party three hours later when the transport arrived at LaGuardia Field.

It was 1545 (Indian War Time) on January 22nd when the C-54 arrived at Myitkyina. American Air Lines crews had taken it as far as Casablanca and from there on it was flown by crews of the Air Transport Command. The pilot in charge on arrival at Myitkyina, who had taken over the airplane at Karachi, was Captain Anthony Story of Troy, Missouri. The total elapsed time from Wright Field to Myitkyina was 74 hours 35 minutes. Actual flying time from Wright Field to Myitkyina was 53 hours 10 minutes. The trip was uneventful.

The helicopter was unloaded from the C-54 immediately after its arrival at Myitkyina. It took about two hours to complete the unloading and the parts were then trucked to a parking apron occupied by aircraft of the Tenth Air Force Air Jungle Rescue Units

The members of the expedition, who were all extremely tired as a result of their trip, were disappointed to learn that the men they had been sent over to rescue had been evacuated from the spot where they had been forced down.

It was decided, however, to go ahead with the assembly of the helicopter as rapidly as possible in the event that another emergency should arise. Accordingly, on the morning of January 23rd the engineering personnel, assisted by ground crews of the Air Jungle Rescue Unit, began to assemble the helicopter under Lt. Shoemaker's direction. By nightfall the tail rotor had been installed, the nose section has been bolted to the fuselage, and it was expected that the helicopter would be ready to fly about noon the next day.

Late that night, Captain Peterson, Lt. Steiner, and Lt. Shoemaker were waked by 1st Lt. Leo J. Kenney, Commanding Officer of the Air Jungle Rescue Unit of the Tenth Air Force, who told them that an enlisted man had accidentally shot himself through the hand with a 30 caliber machine gun while on duty at a weather station located on a 4700 foot mountain in the Naga hills, 160 miles northwest of Myitkyina. The soldier's hand was rapidly becoming infected and no experienced medical personnel were available to treat it. It would have taken approximately ten days for the man to walk from the station to a location where he could have medical care. The possibility of parachuting, a medical officer to the mountaintop had been considered but the nature of the terrain would have made it virtually impossible him to get down alive.

After going over maps of the territory, the helicopter personnel told Lt. Kenney they thought they could accomplish the mission. Accordingly, the assembly of the helicopter was rushed to completion on the morning of January 24th. The helicopter made

its test flight at noon, and the remainder of the afternoon was passed making short practice hops in readiness for the mission the next day.

The helicopter had no radio and, since Captain Peterson and Lt. Steiner were unfamiliar with the country, it was decided that the aircraft would be escorted by two L-5's of the Air Jungle Rescue Unit. At 0800 on January 25th the helicopter party received their final briefing from Lt. Kenney. The plan was for the L-5's to lead the helicopter to Sinkaling Hkamti, a strip on the west bank of the Chindwin River approximately 120 miles northwest of Myitkyina. At Sinkaling, all aircraft were to refuel and proceed to the mountain that lay between two areas of unsurveyed territory about 60 miles to the northwest. All aircraft, including an L-5 photo plane, took off from Myitkyian between 0900 and 0915.

The helicopter flew at tree top level and was extremely difficult to see against the jungle background. The average air speed of the helicopter was about 60 miles an hour while that of the L-5's was 30 to 40 miles faster. Consequently, the L-5 pilots were forced to circle continuously to keep the helicopter in sight.

For the first half-hour the flight was over fairly level country, and the helicopter became visible for a little while when it came out of a low lying cloud bank. The terrain grew increasingly rugged, with a succession of ridges covered by impenetrable jungle along the line of flight. Because of the helicopter's limited ceiling, It was necessary to fly slightly south of the direct line between Myitkyina and Sinkaling to avoid mountains.

The helicopter lost the escorting L-5's four times, but in each case Captain Peterson and Lt. Steiner, who were alternating as pilots, were able to disclose their position by "hitting" the L-5's

with the flash of a mirror. The reflection from this type of mirror is visible for at least ten miles.

The helicopter had considerable difficulty in getting over one 5,000-foot mountain, but was able to surmount it on the third attempt. After topping this mountain, the field at Sinkaling was in sight. The helicopter was running short of gas, however, and the pilots landed it on a sandbank on the Chindwin River.



Peterson's YR-4, with escorting L-5, refueling enroute to mountain rescue Chindwin River, Burma

1/26/45 AAF photo from National Air & Space Museum archives
(camera copied 1/84)

The L-5's then flew on to Sinkaling, where they picked up two 5-gallon tins of fuel, took off again and dropped them to the helicopter on the sand bank. The helicopter took off again and landed at Sinkaling without Incident. There the party was welcomed by four surprised British airmen who had been at the strip for ten weeks repairing three fighters that had belly-landed

in bad weather. The RAF personnel were extremely cooperative, inviting the helicopter party to share their mess and helping them to refuel the aircraft. A large group of Burmese also came out on the strip to see the helicopter and it was with considerable difficulty that they were kept away from the aircraft.

After lunch on K rations and coffee, Captain Peterson took off alone for the mountaintop, preceded by a L-5. The flight to the mountain took approximately one hour. Small sandbanks in the narrow valleys between the ranges were the only possible landing places for the helicopter. Except for rocky peaks, all of the terrain was covered by thick jungle.

The weather station where Captain Peterson landed was in the midst of a circle of high peaks and was located on a razorback mountain on which a rough strip about 250 feet long had been built. It was impossible for an L-5 to land on this strip. On both sides of the razorback the mountain fell off steeply to narrow valleys 2500 feet below.

By this time there was considerable turbulence and the helicopter had run short of gasoline. Captain Peterson therefore decided to stay on the mountain for the night. Lt. Steiner, who had flown as an observer in the L-5, returned to Sinkaling.

The next morning the two L-5's took off from Sinkaling, flew to the mountain and circled it for an hour while they dropped fuel and messages to Capt. Peterson. There was obviously some difficulty, since Captain Peterson did not take off at once. Finally the Nagas on the mountain secured some white cloth, with which Captain Peterson spelled out OIL. The liaison aircraft then returned to Sinkaling, loaded up with oil, and flew back to the mountain, where they dropped the fuel to Captain Peterson.

Immediately after refueling he took off from the mountain in the helicopter with his patient aboard and flew him to the Sinkaling strip. The patient was Pvt. Howard Ross, 21, of North Tonawanda, New York. After he had shot himself accidentally in the hand on January 19th, his party had received a radio message that help was on the way but had absolutely no idea in what form it would arrive. Ross was a ground observer at the weather station.

The helicopter landed at Sinkaling at 1645 on January 26 and a L-5 immediately took Ross aboard and flew him to Myitkina, where he was hospitalized. His hand was considerably swollen, but he was highly excited at his rescue. His recovery, was uneventful.

Captain Peterson and 1st Lt. Steiner found that the helicopter needed mechanical attention and stayed overnight at Sinkaling. Peterson was full of his experiences on the mountain top, where the Nagas had presented a spear to him and had embarrassed him by offering other gifts, which he felt forced to refuse.

Captain Peterson and Lt. Steiner flew the helicopter back to Myitkyina on the 27th after repairs had been made. Subsequently they began to instruct the Air Jungle Rescue Unit personnel in the operation and maintenance of the helicopter. The helicopter subsequently was used to locate aircraft which had been forced down in Tenth Air Force territory. Lt. Steiner flew the helicopter on these missions, removing valuable instruments from the crashed aircraft and painting the wrecks so they could be identified from the air.