



Some 129th History



Through the eyes of an old Flight Engineer and charter member of the 129th
Chief Master Sergeant James F. Badgrow

From its inception, flying the venerable World War II C-46, to the present, flying first line HC/MC-130 and HH-60 aircraft, the 129th has come a very long way. In the year, 2005, the organization celebrated its 50th anniversary. Here is how it all began.



Following the 1954 move of the 144th Fighter Wing to Fresno, the 129th Air Resupply Group was formed at Hayward Air National Guard Base and was federally recognized on April 3, 1955. The Air Resupply mission, dealing in unconventional warfare, would later become known as Air Commando and then Special Operations. Equipped with the C-46 and under the command of Lt Col John R. Breeden, the new unit was challenged in its first winter of existence. That winter the Sacramento valley was hit with severe flooding. The new 129th responded, flying much needed relief supplies into isolated areas. In 1956, the amphibious SA-16 (later re-designated the HU-16) was

added to the squadron's inventory. They were painted black for the night mission. The capability to operate on both land water added more mission flexibility, but also presented unique training challenges.

In November 1958, the group was reorganized as the 129th Troop Carrier Squadron (Medium). Major (later promoted to Colonel) Charles W. Koenig, a World War II P-51 Mustang fighter Ace, then assumed command. As the year 1962 arrived, the old C-46s were now sitting in the "Bone Yard" in Arizona and the HU-16 would be our sole aircraft. The 129th would also re-gain Group status. That year the 129th passed its first, of many, "Operational Readiness Inspections". Some would say, "It would be a cold day" for that to happen, and it was - it snowed in the San Francisco Bay area....



In July 1963 the beloved black HU-16 "Albatross" was replaced with the C-119. The "Flying Boxcar" gave the 129th added range and cargo capability. Another unique aircraft, the U-10 "Helio Courier", would be added to the inventory giving us a short range, short field capability. With these changes came another name change - to the 129th Air Commando Group. Although the name changed, the basic mission remained the same.

During the winter of 1964-65, northern California was again visited by heavy rains and much flooding, isolating many areas. The 129th responded by flying over half a million pounds of supplies into the stricken areas. In addition to the usual items such as food, clothing, and medical supplies, a mobile Air Traffic Control Tower was flown to Arcadia to assist the FAA in controlling air traffic in the stricken area. Also, hay and grain were flown in to feed stranded livestock. All this was accomplished without serious incident while flying in continuous bad weather. This effort did not go unnoticed, and the 129th was awarded the Air Force Outstanding Unit award. The Assembly of the State of California also passed a Resolution commending the unit.

For most of its early existence, the 129th did its annual Field Training at Gowen Field, Boise, Idaho. In 1965, for the first time the unit went outside the continental US to complete this requirement, deploying to Howard AFB in the Panama Canal zone. While there, the flight crews received Jungle Survival training. In addition to training missions, the unit flew cargo missions throughout Central America and south to Lima, Peru, in support of the USAF Southern Command. The following year, the 129th deployed to Eielson AFB at Fairbanks, Alaska. Cargo missions for the Alaska Air Command ranged north of the Arctic Circle to Bettels, Alaska. 1972 saw a deployment across the Atlantic to England, and in 1974 to Aviano, Italy, for participation in NATO exercises. Also of note during this time period, the U-10s were replaced with U-6s and the Air Commando mission became Special Operations.

The Air Force, recognizing its expertise in the Air Commando mission, in 1968 called on the 129th to train its pilots to fly the U-6 "Beaver" in the mission for operations in Viet Nam. The program was called "Lucky Tiger", and the unit was cited by the Air Force for quality and effectiveness of the training. By the 1970s, the Air Force no longer had flight crews qualified in the C-119. In 1972, the unit supplied flight crews to ferry some AC/C-119 aircraft from the US to Viet Nam. Although some maintenance problems were encountered, these were coped with and solved, and the "two-engine" C-119s were successfully delivered across the "four-engine" Pacific Ocean.



1974 would be a pivotal year for the 129th. Col Koenig, who had guided the unit for the past fifteen years, had left the group. Col Albert R. Santos now assumed command. In February, the Department of Defense announced its intention to deactivate the ANG's Special Operations units. If these units were to survive, Col Santos and the commanders of the other affected units would have to find viable missions. For the 129th that mission was Rescue, a mission with both peacetime and wartime applications, and on May 3, 1975, the 129th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group was federally recognized.

With the change of mission came a change of gaining command from TAC to MAC - and a change of aircraft. HC-130s, a long range turbine powered rescue transport, and HH-3s, a turbine powered heavy lift rescue helicopter, replaced the C-119s and U-6s, and the very large task of retraining in both aircraft and mission was begun. In-flight refueling of the HH-3s from the HC-130, which could greatly extend the range and endurance of the helicopter, became a new training challenge for the crews of both aircraft. A new crew position, Pararescue man (PJ), was added to the crews of both aircraft. Now, for the first time, we were being trained in the same equipment and to the same standards as our active duty counterparts.

Upon regaining an Operationally Ready status, the Air Force Rescue Control Center began calling on the 129th to assist in rescue operations in the western states and off the Pacific coast. While participating in a Red Flag exercise at Nellis AFB, Nevada, the unit was credited with its first "save" on March 24, 1977. An Air Force fighter pilot had ejected at low altitude and was rescued by the crew of a 129th H-3 "Jolly Green Giant". From that point forward, the word "save" would take on added significance. As a crew member, I can tell you from my own experience that it is a very gratifying feeling to know that your efforts have resulted in saving a fellow human being from an otherwise perilous fate.

As the 129th gained experience in the rescue mission, they were often called on to fly both training and operational missions in support the Air Force. In addition to providing training support for our active duty counterparts in England, the Philippines, and Korea, the unit provided rescue support for President Carter's trip to Japan and Vice President Mondale's goodwill tour of the Pacific.

Col Santos was reassigned to HQ California ANG in January 1977, and Col Grant S. Pyle III would succeed him. In September, Col Edward R. Aguiar, a home grown product who began his career as an enlisted man with the 144th at Hayward, assumed command. One of the first tasks facing Col Aguiar and his staff was to find a new home for the unit. The runways at Hayward could not accommodate the HC-130 at its maximum mission weight. A new home, still in the San Francisco Bay area, was found at Moffett Field, Sunnyvale, California. By January 1980, the move was completed and operations were started at Moffett Field. When Mount St. Helens erupted in May, the 129th provided an HC-130 and crews to operate an airborne command post to assist in the rescue effort in the area. During the winter of 1980-81, California was again hit with heavy rains and much flooding, this time in southern California. The 129th, responding to the call of the Governor, provided an HC-130 and crew for aerial survey of the affected areas, and HH-3 helicopters and crews to evacuate endangered civilians.



February 1982 saw the departure of Col Aguiar to assume command of the 144th Fighter Wing at Fresno. Col H. Robert Hall, an attorney and later a judge in civilian life, assumed command of the group. Since acquiring the Rescue mission, the 129th had worked closely with the United States Coast Guard in the prosecution of missions off the west coast. In recognition of this cooperation and support, the Coast Guard awarded the unit with the Coast Guard Meritorious Unit Commendation.



After the departure of Col Hall in February 1983, command passed to Col Allen W. Boone, who had been serving as the Director of Operations. With the 129th, he had flown both the C-119 and HC-130 as Aircraft Commander, Instructor, and Flight Examiner. Col Boone had also commanded the 129th Rescue Squadron. Under his command, the group continued to provide support for the Air Force rescue mission both locally and world-wide.

On July 16, 1983, the author retired from the 129th and the Air National Guard and that will bring my story of this outstanding organization, as I knew it and lived it, to an end.... As the 129th enters its second half century and the present members continue to pursue the Rescue mission, I sincerely wish each of them

Good Fortune and may God Speed...