

The Da Nang Glider - the Back End Crew Functions

By Brock Estes - April 28, 2015

I (Robert "Brock" Estes) was a CIM on Crew 31 from August 1968 to July 1969, and I was in the back on the "DaNang Glider" on June 4, 1969 when (I later found out) Lt. Ezzell was initially left seat at the time that we lost all 4 engines and then he was co-pilot for the remainder of the flight. Exciting mission! And yet, for a short time, one of the quietest missions anyone could possibly imagine!!

The Air Crew on board 67-21487 June 4, 1969

The following is a listing of the Crew 31 "Da Nang Glider" mission that day, based on TDY order that confirmed verbal order for diversion from orbit to DaNang 6/21/69:

Lt Col Barney Clary
Lt Col Jack January
Maj Edward Baumann
Capt. David Hall
Capt. Charles Larrison
Capt. Garry Anderson
1st Lt. Mason Ezzell
1st Lt. James Hardee
TSgt Francis Welch
TSgt Richard Perrott
SSgt James Sutterfield
TSgt James Mallen
SSgt John Bright
SSgt Billy Smith
SSgt Alf Larson
Sgt Robert Estes (yours truly)
Sgt Charles Peterson
A1C Jim Pinales
A1C Darryl Fields
A1C Robert Finley

A1C Bob Finley was the acting "jump master" who was banged in the head by the rear door when he tried to open it in flight after we had received the initial "prepare to bailout" bell from the cockpit. Probably due to the aircraft's still being pressurized at the time of the "prepare to bailout" bell, the door jammed only partway open when it slammed in on its track, hitting Bob in the head, and giving him a cut. He was temporarily a bit stunned but quickly recovered and did a great job of engaging with needed duties, (including trying to work with the door, which was partially slid backwards and jammed), as the rest of us worked on destroying classified. (And, I'm

pretty sure Bob was the youngest crew member on the flight at the time, so he showed great courage and maturity in his first time actual duty as "jump master"!!) But there was no way that we were going to get 20 people --- or even one person, for that matter --- to bail out of that partially opened jammed rear door, as Bob was not able to open it fully.

Fortunately, within a short time, the plan had apparently transitioned from "bailout" to "ditching," as we next received the "prepare to ditch" bell (since our great crew in the cockpit had regained control and was presumably headed for the Gulf of Tonkin --- though things were still definitely not normal!!) So all of us took off the then-useless parachutes and donned the water wings plus survival vests again after getting the "prepare to ditch" bell.

Unfortunately, not only would the rear door not open for bailout, but it was at that point that Bob realized that the door wouldn't close for ditching either. There were 20 on our crew that mission (an unusual number), and even with 2 over-wing hatches, my guess is that ditching would not have resulted in a very successful outcome, as even a perfect water landing would have meant that a good deal of water would be coming in quickly through the partially opened and jammed rear door while the crew would be trying to scramble out the over-wing hatches. And, in the back, we still thought for a good while that ditching was going to be the only option. It is my recollection that Bob was not able to get the door closed subsequently, but things were happening so fast that I am not positive about that one point. Fortunately, between Col January, Lt Ezzell, and TSgt Welch (Flight Engineer), we were able to make Da Nang, where the door did indeed get opened on the ground, since we ended up using that for a normal exit.