



The "Hanoi Taxi," the Air Force's flying tribute to the Vietnam War's prisoners of war and missing in action, was recently repainted in the 1970s white and gray paint scheme. (Photo by Lt. Col. Philip Pierce)

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'Hanoi Taxi' returns to duty with new look

10/07/02 - **ROBINS AIR FORCE BASE, Ga. (AFPN)** -- The "Hanoi Taxi," the Air Force's flying tribute to the Vietnam War's prisoners of war and missing in action, received a makeover and a hero's sendoff here before returning home Oct. 7.

This C-141 Starlifter was the first aircraft to airlift American POWs to freedom from Gia Lam Airport in Hanoi, North Vietnam, on Feb. 12, 1973.

The 445th Airlift Wing at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, which owns the aircraft, asked Air Force Reserve Command headquarters officials for permission to repaint the aircraft in the 1970s white and gray paint scheme. AFRC officials approved and funded the work, which was done while the aircraft underwent programmed depot maintenance at the Warner Robins Air Logistics Center here.

Air Force Reserve Maj. Gen. Edward J. Mechenbier, one of the POWs repatriated aboard the Hanoi Taxi, flew the historic aircraft from Robins back to Wright-Patterson.

"It was the most beautiful thing I had seen in six years," said Mechenbier, referring to the first time he saw the Hanoi Taxi. He is currently the mobilization assistant to the commander of Air Force Materiel Command.

Mechenbier, a command pilot with more than 3,500 flying hours, was assigned to Da Nang Air Base, South Vietnam, and was on his 80th mission over North Vietnam when his F-4C Phantom II fighter was shot down in June 1967. He spent nearly six years as a POW before the Hanoi Taxi brought him home.

The Hanoi Taxi's name comes from the writing on the flight engineer's panel by the POWs aboard the plane for the freedom flight. Signatures of the freed prisoners have been preserved on the panel over the years and are the centerpiece of what is essentially a "flying museum." Plaques, documents and photographs of the homecoming are part of the on-board exhibit researched and created by the 445th AW. Etchings of the names of those who are missing in action were taken from the Vietnam Wall in Washington and are mounted on the plane.

"The Hanoi Taxi is a tribute to the men and women who serve in the Air Force," Mechenbier said. The general added that it is important for the American public to know about the airplane and what it means to the nation.

The aircraft, which has been upgraded to a C-141C with improved avionics, is used to transport troops and cargo worldwide. It is one of four C-141s flown by the 445th AW that were involved in Operation Homecoming, the repatriation of American POWs in the Vietnam War.

All C-141s are scheduled to be retired from the Air Force inventory by 2006. (Courtesy of AFRC News Service)

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Retired Brig. Gen. James E. Sehorn points to signatures of fellow prisoners of war from the Vietnam War on display in the "Hanoi Taxi." This C-141 Starlifter was the first aircraft to airlift American POWs to freedom from Gia Lam Airport in Hanoi, North Vietnam, on Feb. 12, 1973.

(Photo by Dan Doherty)

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