

# Interview with Tom Wilson

(Loadmaster, Airlift Control Element)

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Interviewer: Christopher Knight-Griffin

Lightly edited by Preston Jones

## **When did you join the Air Force and how long did you serve?**

I joined the Air Force in June 1965. I had just graduated from high school and the Vietnam War was ramping up. At that period of time one could join the military voluntarily or wait to be drafted. One way or the other you were going. I stayed a little over twenty years getting out in September 1985.

## **What was your MOS and/or AFSC [i.e. military job]?**

I was an aircraft Loadmaster serving on C-141A/B, C-130E/H, and C-123K aircraft. While assigned to the 437<sup>th</sup> ALCE, I also worked with numerous civilian and other military cargo airplanes.

## **Where were you stationed and what unit were you in back in November of 1978?**

I was stationed with the 437<sup>th</sup> Military Airlift Wing at Charleston AFB, SC. I was assigned to the 20<sup>th</sup> Military Airlift Squadron and the 437<sup>th</sup> Airlift Control Element (ALCE). As part of the ALCE, my job was to support Military Airlift Command (MAC) aircraft at other than MAC bases during any wartime contingency, humanitarian operation, military wartime exercises, and any other reason that was needed. In other words, if you were part of the ALCE, you did not have a job at your home base. Your job was to be "on the road". (NOTE: The Military Airlift Command was changed to the Air Mobility Command.)

## **How did you first hear about the murder of congressional representative Lee Ryan and of Jonestown?**

If I remember correctly, I first heard of Congressman Ryan's murder on TV through a news bulletin either on the Saturday it happened or early Sunday morning. I want to say, it was Saturday evening. Up until that particular time, I do not remember ever hearing of a country named Guyana. As the news of what had happened became more available, I found it difficult to comprehend what I was hearing. The particulars of what had happened in Jonestown, as they it became known, were scratchy at best and the number of people that were killed kept moving upward. It was difficult to understand how over 900 people could commit suicide. Of course, as it turned out, some, including Jim Jones, were murdered.

## **How and when did you find out you were going to go to Guyana?**

I had gone to the ALCE office at the base on that following Monday morning. Of course, Guyana was the talk and would the ALCE be involved? It was at that time that I found out that Lt Col. Bob Wells, who was one of the Operations Officers with the ALCE, had been tasked to go to Guyana and determine the needs to dispose of or recover the bodies from an Air Force point. Depending on how the bodies would be disposed of would determine what assets would be needed. Lt.Col. Wells would help to determine that. If I remember correctly, there were a number of solutions being offered at the time as to what to do with all the bodies; one was to bury them on site at Jonestown. That solution did not sit well with the Guyanese government, so it was scrapped. Another was to load them on airdrop pallets and using C-141s, "bury" them at sea via airdropping them. This idea did not get much of a vote either. I think the relatives of those

that were at Jonestown were against that idea. The final solution was to recover the bodies and return them to the United States and, as you are aware, is the one that happened.

By the end of the day on Monday, there was still no talk as to what was going to happen, or if anyone else from the ALCE would be going down to support the cleanup. On Tuesday, the ALCE staff continued to operate as normal waiting on an assessment from Lt. Col Wells. To me, Tuesday was just another day at work.

I went home that evening and told my wife that Lt Col Wells had gone to Guyana. She asked for what and I tried to tell her what I could. One of her questions to me was *would I have to go down there?* I told her I didn't see why, since a decision had not been made at that point as to what was going to be done. She wanted to know if I was going to be home for Thanksgiving and could she go ahead and take the turkey out of the freezer to cook on Thursday for Thanksgiving. I told her I didn't see why not.

However, early Wednesday morning what I had told my wife the night before changed. At approximately 0500 hrs the phone rang at my home and it is my supervisor, Msgt Skip Mayberry. He starts out with "what am I doing?" My response was "why are you asking?" To make a long story short, he responded that he and I would be going to Guyana and to be at the base by not-later-than 0800 hrs. Obviously, my wife wanted to know what that call was about. So much for Thanksgiving; she put the turkey back in the freezer. (I did have a frozen turkey dinner in Georgetown. I will explain as I go along.)

Having no schedule and leaving on short-notice was routine and part of being in an ALCE. You learned to accept it, or move on to something else. Candidly, while the pace of being part of an ALCE could be stressful, the job was most rewarding.

#### **Did they tell you your mission ahead of time and if so what?**

Again, I was informed by Msgt Mayberry that we would be going to Guyana. Certainly, by this time, the decision had been made to bring the bodies back to the states. I do not remember how I learned that.

#### **How many days were you there and how long did you stay?**

It is hard to believe what can be accomplished in what would be a very short time-frame. I felt as though I had been there for weeks, when in reality it was only about two and a half days. After being notified on early Wednesday morning, it was really a very short period of time before I was landing in Guyana. I think it may have been somewhere between noon and 1400hrs. After leaving Charleston AFB, the aircraft was sent to McGuire AFB in New Jersey to pick up a cargo pallet of frozen turkey dinners so those of us that would be in Guyana for Thanksgiving would at least have a Thanksgiving dinner. This had been directed by Major General Sadler, who at that time was the commander for 21<sup>st</sup> Air Force. Obviously, not everyone down there got a meal. Unfortunately, those that were still at Jonestown missed out.

As a side note, MG Sadler had been the Wing Commander at Charleston AFB when I first arrived there in February, 1974. He did have some other assignments after leaving Charleston and before becoming the Commanding General for 21<sup>st</sup> AF. MG Sadler was always thought of an officer that took care of and was concerned with his people. He was that way at Charleston and, in my view, continued to be that way when he took over 21<sup>st</sup> AF.

I was in Georgetown, Guyana from about Wednesday noon until late Friday afternoon, when I departed about 1800 heading back to Charleston AFB.

### **What day did you land in Guyana and where did you stay?**

As mentioned previously, I arrived in Georgetown, Guyana on the Wednesday following the Saturday that Congressman Ryan was murdered; or the day before Thanksgiving. As an ALCE loadmaster, my job was not to stay with the aircraft that brought me to Guyana, but to function as a ground coordinator handling the proper preparing of the "freight" for shipment and to ensure proper documentation. In short, the aircraft that brought me to Guyana left after a few hours and I wasn't on it. I got to stay.

Any ALCE basically acts as a miniature MAC AFB by handling all the functions in the field that would normally be handled (maintenance, flight planning, dealing with the aircrew, planning loads for the aircraft, preparing the freight for shipment, documentation, loading/unloading the aircraft, etc.) at a major MAC base. In general, ALCE personnel will come in on the first aircraft, stay until all is accomplished and then leave on the last aircraft.

### **Describe your first impression when you arrived**

There was no real impression that left a mark upon my arrival at the Georgetown airport. Working in a bare-base environment was basically routine for an ALCE operation. We had landed at the airport and taxied to one side of the airport from which the operation would be handled. (One of the pictures will show the one building that was available for all of the personnel to try to stay in, along with all the equipment and such. There was another small building available that housed some showers and toilets, but the authorities had turned the water off while we were there, so that facility was not available for use at that time.)

We had brought a water trailer in with us and filled it with water from the passenger side of the airport. That was our drinking water, so "bathing" was not an option at that point. One would use small amounts of water to field bath. However, the water was turned on in the shower building for a very short period of time on Friday afternoon just before we were getting ready to leave. I did manage to get wet with cold water and clean up some before the authorities shut the water off again.

### **What time of the day was it and where did you go?**

As mentioned before, I arrived at Georgetown somewhere around noon or a little after. I came off the airplane ready to go to work. I never left the confines of the operations area for the entire two and a half days I was there.

On Friday, the last day I was there, Msgt Mayberry and I were going to try to go to Jonestown on one of the helicopters, but by the time we made up our minds to go, the helicopters had made their last trip. I had trouble making up my mind to go, since I was not a fan of viewing dead bodies. As it turned out, I would not have seen very much anyway.

### **What was your typical day like?**

As I have mentioned before, I came off the airplane ready to go to work. The airplane that brought me and others in had to be unloaded. There were numerous others from different jobs (maintenance, aerial port, etc) on the airplane along with cargo pallets, ground power equipment, and a forklift. All of that had to be taken off the airplane and positioned. I do not remember what we did with that airplane after it got empty.

If I remember correctly, I think the helicopters were starting to bring some bodies back from Jonestown later Wednesday afternoon. (I am not sure when the helicopters and C-130s arrived in Georgetown.) Apparently, there was a team of Graves and Registration personnel already at Jonestown. I am not sure when they got there or how they got there. They must have gone in on the first flights into Jonestown by the helicopters. (A Graves and Registration unit is handled through the Army and made up of personnel

from other units to assist the Graves and Registration cadre.) These are the people that were doing the physical “bagging” of the bodies at Jonestown. It is my understanding that this type team consists of medical personnel along with the general laborer.

If I remember correctly, there were four HH-53 helicopters and four CH-130s from a rescue outfit from Elgin AFB in Florida. The helicopters were used to ferry the bodies from Jonestown to Georgetown, and the HC-130s were used to refuel the helicopters in flight as they would return to Jonestown. All of these aircraft would take off in the morning around 0700 when the airport would open and it was daylight. The HC-130s would “anchor” and wait for the helicopters to come to them for fuel throughout the day. These aircraft and crews were putting in a twelve to fourteen-hour day. All of the aircraft would return in the evening around 1900hrs which is when it would be getting dark and the airport would shut down. This pace continued from Wednesday afternoon until Friday afternoon when the helicopters brought in the last of the bodies. There were some maintenance issues that occurred with both the helicopters and the 130s so that towards the end of the mission. I think there was only two helicopters and two HC-130s flying. I think before these aircraft went back to the states, additional maintenance personnel had to be brought in, along with parts, to get the airplanes flyable to go back to Elgin. These aircraft and their crew flew a hard pace for the time I was there.

In the meantime, the pace was starting to pick up at Georgetown. There were C-141s coming in on a regular basis bringing in body transfer cases and taking loaded cases back out. The helicopters would bring the bodies to us, they would be unloaded and put on the ramp, the helicopters would be washed out by a fire truck, they would take off, the bodies would be loaded on a truck and transported to the staging area to be put in transfer cases as they became available and then loaded on the C-141 and sent to Dover AFB. As a side note, the reason for the washout of the helicopters after they would deliver bodies to Georgetown was because the bodies would be stacked on the aircraft like cordwood. They were just in body bags and the bags leaked. Enough said.

Sometime during the first part of the operation, I think it was maybe Thursday morning, it became apparent that there were not enough transfer cases within the military system to handle the needs. It was my understanding that there were no available transfer cases in the Pacific or the European theater and we were in one heck of a situation on how to move these bodies. At one time there were close to two hundred bodies laying in the staging area with nothing to put them in. The Air Force is very particular and respectful in how it handles human remains when transferring them on military aircraft. The procedure is for one body per case with the head pointing towards the front of the aircraft and men are not loaded on top of women when putting numerous transfer cases on cargo pallets for shipment. However, we needed to do something with these bodies that we had on our hands. It was suggested to Lt Col Wells, that we try to put as many bodies per transfer case as we could get. That suggestion was forwarded onto 21<sup>st</sup> Air Force, which was our higher command, and onto Major General Sadler. He gave the authority for us to do what we needed to do. We then started to put as many bodies per case as we could get. On a few occasions we had as many as five children in one case. On two occasions, we sent out loaded C-141s with as many as 185 bodies in 82 transfer cases. This did generate some issues with the aircrew loadmaster wanting to accept the load since we were not following standard Air Force procedure for transporting human remains. Once the reasons and the authority for why and what we were doing were explained, the issues went away.

In the meantime, the helicopters were still bringing in bodies and we were running out of transfer cases. The decision was made at a higher level to send aircraft through Knoxville, TN, and pick up caskets from a casket manufacturer in that area. One of the pictures shows us unloading a pallet of new caskets. [See the Tom Wilson photo collection.] If I remember correctly, the caskets came in with the lining removed. This allowed us to get more bodies per casket.

The pace of the operation was extremely fast, so I do not remember the exact timeline that all of this was going on throughout the entire ordeal. There were no scheduled breaks and one took a break when one could get a break. When I talk about a break, it may be for fifteen minutes to a half-hour or so. The entire two and a half days I was there was fast-paced with very little time to stop. The first night in Georgetown, actually it was Thursday morning, I got to lay down about 0200 hrs and was back up at 0500 hrs getting ready for the inbound aircraft that was already on the way. Thursday night, which was actually Friday

morning, I got to lay down somewhere around 0100 and got back up around 0400 hrs to start all over again. That was pretty much the pace for me, Msgt Mayberry, and Lt Col Wells. Things had to get done.

You asked about my responsibilities. My responsibilities, along with Msgt Mayberry, were to handle the C-141's as they came in to get them unloaded with any freight that was onboard and to get the next load ready to go out. That included putting bodies in cases, putting the cases on cargo pallets, proper documentation and manifesting, supervise the loading of the aircraft, and what ever else needed to be done. These C-141s had to be turned as quickly as possible since the parking ramp area was very limited. I think we did not want more than one C-141 on the ground at one time. If there were two C-141s on the ground together, one would be leaving and getting ready for takeoff while the other was positioning to the parking spot.

**What was the weather like?**

The weather was typical tropical weather. Hot and very humid during the day, and to me, hot and very humid at night. I did not notice much of a difference, although about 0200 in the morning it would cool off some until the sun came back up.

**How much help did you have from any other services and what type of interaction did you have with them?**

The only other service people that I had any dealings with were the personnel from the Army. They were pretty much responsible for handling the bodies as they were brought to the Georgetown airport via the helicopters and getting them to the staging area. Any interaction after that point was putting the bodies in the transfer cases, putting them on the cargo pallets and getting them to the aircraft. Again, it was mostly Army personnel that were at Jonestown, so I did not interact with them. I did interact with the helicopter people on a limited basis when they would come to Georgetown.

**What was morale like?**

As I was thinking of this question, my thought was that I didn't have time to notice the morale. Once again, I mention the pace; no one had time to sit and think what kind of a mess we were dealing with. One did what needed to be done and moved on. I may be getting the need-to-perform by the people that were there confused with high morale. From the time I arrived in Guyana until I left, the pace was fast. From the time I got notified (0500 hrs on Wednesday morning) until I returned to Charleston AFB (approximately 2200 hrs on Friday) there was really no time to notice the morale of the people; there was work to be done. Over 900 bodies were recovered at Jonestown, brought to Georgetown, and shipped back to Dover AFB in roughly seventy-two hours. The adrenalin was flowing, so I didn't notice. I guess it was good.

**Can you describe the working conditions?**

The area that the team at Georgetown worked in would be described as a "bare-base" environment. There was really no shelter to speak of, water was brought in by a water trailer, and our food was C-rations at meal times and the boxes were used as chairs at all other times. If you could get a C-ration box, you had something to sit on, plus something to eat. What else would one need?

As mentioned before, it was extremely hot and humid. You had to keep the water flowing through your system. We all needed to watch one another to check for dehydration. Basically, there was something going on in the operating area from the time I got there on Wednesday until I left on Friday. The entire operating area including where the aircraft parked and were unloaded and reloaded was very confined. One had to be constantly aware of what was going on around him. You will notice in one of the pictures that one slept on Army cots that were brought in. Couple "your" cot with the C-ration box chair, and you could consider your living quarters to be fully furnished. One had something to lie on, something to sit on, and

something to eat on; hard to beat that. When I finally did get to lie down at night for a few hours of sleep, I had to make sure I was not in the way of any moving traffic, since the forklift and any other equipment were moving around all the time. I do remember the first night I was there almost having my cot run over by a forklift. I put that experience down as a lesson learned. After that ordeal, I moved out into a grassy area where the forklifts and any other equipment did not operate. If you were off the concrete, you were pretty safe. The bugs were great, but I did not pay any attention to them since by the time I would get to lie down, I was totally exhausted. I did not get much sleep, and neither did anyone else, while I was there.

When the term “field conditions” is used, it properly describes what the conditions were like. There was no place to wash up, I did the basic hygiene things: brush my teeth, splash water in my face and tried to make myself as presentable as possible. I will say that by Thursday night, early Friday morning, you didn’t have people hanging around you for very long.

The basic working condition was very fast, hot, humid, and noisy from the helicopters and aircraft moving about, and above all, the smell of decaying bodies was very heavy in the air. As I remember back, that is probably what sticks out the most. That smell permeated everything.

As a side story, maybe six months later, I was on a flying mission and in Germany waiting for the next aircraft to come through for my crew to pick up. We were alerted for the next airplane and the sequence of events upon getting to the aircraft was to put the crew’s personal bags in the aircraft. As I climbed up the crew entrance ladder and entered the cargo compartment of the airplane, I smelled that distinct smell of decaying flesh. I said something to the flight engineer about this aircraft being in Guyana. He wanted to know how I know. I told him I could smell it. I told him to check the aircraft forms and see where the airplane had been. He did come back and tell me that the aircraft forms did show that it had been to Guyana. I can still smell that dead body smell in my mind. On occasion, still today, I will smell something that will trigger me back to Georgetown.

### **How did the duty assignment affect you then?**

As I look back and think about that operation, at the time, I just looked at it as another mission. That mentality was just part of being a loadmaster in an ALCE. I would get a task, go do the assignment, and when it was finished come back to where I started and wait to do it again. The general pace on most ALCE assignments was one that was fast and busy. One really did not have time to dwell on the environment. One did what had to be done and moved on. The primary objective was to get the aircraft in and out on time. Everything that was done was focused on that objective.

After being notified on Wednesday morning by Msgt Mayberry that we would both be going to Guyana, to me, the normal sequence of events kicked in: get your bags, go to the base, get on an airplane, and land at the other end, do what needed to be done to accomplish the mission, and leave. As I mentioned before, upon arriving at Georgetown, the work day started when I got there and finished when I left on Friday. The days were long with very little sleep and no breaks. The work wasn’t backbreaking, but it was stressful. I will say that as the days seemed to get longer and the sleep was short, I really had to think about some of the things I was doing to ensure I did not make a mistake.

I didn’t really understand the affects of this mission until I came back home and was able to sit down and think about what had happened over the past 60 to 70 hours. My wife was asking me questions about what I did and what I saw, plus it was still being covered on the news. It was still, somewhat, in front of me all the time. Over the years, I have often thought how quickly calloused I got in regards to handling so many dead bodies. They just became more “freight” that had to be crated up, prepared for shipment, put on airplanes and moved. I try to relate that feeling in dealing with these people from Jonestown against moving plane loads of brave men that were killed in Vietnam back to the United States. I am sure there is no comparison.

I do remember at some point that around 400 plus bodies had been recovered at Jonestown and brought to Georgetown. We were all thinking that this should be coming to a close. After a helicopter would land and unload the bodies, word would come back to Lt Col Wells via the radio, that the recovery team had found

more bodies. It was during that particular period that we understood we did not have enough transfer cases to do what we needed to do. The continued word of finding more bodies did have an affect on morale, since one thought when a helicopter would land that maybe it was the last trip. In fact, when the word came back to ALCE operations on Friday around noontime that all the bodies had been recovered and the recovery team would be coming back, I didn't believe it until the first helicopter to come to Georgetown after that announcement, unloaded its load of bodies, got washed out, and taxied over to the ramp area where they were being parked. What really added credibility to getting close to the end was the fact that the helicopter shut down and the crew got off. The recovery team came in on the last helicopter. By this time, they were the only two helicopters still flying.

### **Did the events in Guyana change your outlook on life or religion?**

Probably the best approach to answering this question would be to give my testimony. On 2 April 1981, on a Thursday evening while attending an evangelistic meeting at a local church, I heard the true Gospel preached and accepted what Jesus had done on the cross for me. He became my Lord and Savior. It was at that moment of acceptance, that I became a born-again Christian. Certainly, that was a turning point in my life and my view of "religion" has not been the same since. The message was from I Kings, chapter 18. The question was "How long halt ye between two opinions?"

As a side note, please allow me to just make a point that I believe explains the difference between Christianity and the term "religion". Religion is man trying to go to God; but Christianity is God coming to down to man through His son, the Lord Jesus Christ. So, did Guyana change my outlook on religion, the answer is yes, although it was some years later.

As I ponder your question, I look back and see people who were involved in "religion" and not looking or following what Jesus can still do today for anyone and could have offered to the people of Jonestown. That is the ability to have a personal relationship with God and to become a child of God's. Obviously, Jim Jones, who at times is said to have stated that he was Jesus Christ, did not meet what was being sought by his followers. I believe that a lot of lives could have been saved and this tragedy never have happened had the people known the Truth just by looking in and following God's Word, the Bible. Man can never offer what Jesus can. I want people to know that the experience and tragedy of Jonestown can still happen today. There is still news events that come to light were people are following a cult and usually at the head of that cult is a man that claims to be Jesus Christ or he is sent by Jesus Christ.

I had mentioned earlier in answering one of your questions that Msgt Mayberry and I were going to take a trip up to Jonestown on one of the helicopters. Msgt Mayberry's probing to go had actually started on Thursday, if I remember correctly. I did not tell him, but I was hesitant to go because in the back of my mind, I was afraid of the dead. Certainly, at that time I was not ready to die and meet God. I wasn't interested in seeing a large amount of dead bodies, even though I was dealing with them at Georgetown. I think at the time Msgt Mayberry was talking about wanting to go, there were still a large number of bodies that needed to be recovered, bagged, and shipped to Georgetown.

As a side note, I grew up in a family that went to church every Sunday and have a step-mother who is a born-again Christian. I am sure she prayed for me on a regular basis that I would come to know Jesus as my Savior.

Can something like the tragedy of Jonestown happen again? I think so. There are religions all over the world and cults that are man-centered and /or "works" centered. There is only one belief that is Christ-centered. In the Book of John chapter 14:6, Jesus says that 'I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man comes to the Father (God), but by me.'

You asked," did the events of Guyana change my outlook on religion"? It certainly helped. Religion offers death and separation from God forever; Jesus Christ offers eternal life with God.

### **Additional points**

1. When Msgt. Mayberry called to tell me I was going down to Guyana, he stated that I needed to wear civilian clothes, which when you look at the pictures is what he and I are wearing. I never thought about it until now, but we were the only ones there in civilian clothes. I am not sure what that was about.
2. Some years later I was assigned to the US Army Transportation School at Fort Eustis, VA. A major had come through one of the classes and recognized me as having been at Georgetown. In the course of us talking back and forth, he did ask me if I had any trouble dealing with the aftermath of that operation. I told him I didn't think so. But he did relate a situation to me about one of the doctors that was at Jonestown helping to determine if any of the people were alive. I think he was from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. Apparently, he was a surgeon and when he returned to Fort Bragg he was never able to perform surgery again. The major told me that this doctor would stand at the scrubbing sink for hours trying to "clean" his hands. He had literally scrubbed the skin off his hands. He was sent off for treatment. As far as I know, he never was able to operate again. I do not know if this is true or not; I only know what the major told me.
3. Related to the helicopters and HC-130s.

As the pace continued for the helicopters and the HC-130s, the aircraft started to have maintenance problems. Parts would be taken off one of the aircraft and used to repair another. If I remember correctly, by the end of the operation, only two helicopters and two HC-130s were flying. A maintenance recovery team had to be brought in to repair the aircraft before they could return to the States. It is also my understanding that when the helicopters returned to the States, they were put in quarantine and sprayed with something and then the floors were taken up so the belly of the helicopter could be cleaned. I also understand that all the insulation was removed from the aircraft and burned. I am sure the underfloor of the helicopters were a mess.