

# **First to Arrive in Jonestown Guyana (November 1978)**

By David B. Netterville

Additions by Wayne Dalton

This is my [David Netterville's] view of the experiences I encountered on the events leading up to and during the Guyana rescue and recovery operation the week of 19 Nov-26 Nov 1978. I was stationed at Howard AFB, Canal Zone from Sep 1977- Aug 1979 as a Combat Controller with the 1300 Military Airlift Squadron. The Combat Control team was made up of the following controllers during the major time I was there.

- SMSGT Al Huddleston, NCOIC (deceased)
- MSGT Tom Allen (deceased)
- TSGT Wayne Dalton
- TSGT Walter Kilby (deceased)
- SSGTs Leonard Whitten, Randy Cook, John McReynolds (Mac),
- SGTs David Netterville and Ray Bricker
- A1C Larry Perez

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of Nov SMSGT Huddleston called the barracks and informed me to pack a bag for at least a 24 hour deployment, I asked where we were going and he politely told me he could not answer over the phone and to get my butt in gear, pack my stuff, and get to the work section asap. So, I complied and upon arriving, met with TSGT Dalton and gathered the communications equipment, helped prepare the MRC 107/108, and checked out the weapons/ammo we may need.

As we had been on alert several times for deploying to Nicaragua to help with the evacuation of several embassies from Managua, I thought this was the most likely destination. Still not knowing where we were headed to, the group of Captain Mike Massengale (TALO), SMGT Huddleston, TSGT Dalton, and SGT Netterville loaded a C-130 about 1300 or so. Once airborne, Captain Massengale briefed us on the mission. We were enroute to Georgetown, Guyana to do a recon of a religious commune, Jonestown, where a Congressman Ryan had been killed by members of the cult. We were originally tasked to enter the area and find out what was really happening. This was to change drastically over the next few days. The cult had a suspected number of 800/900 people. Our team had only 3, but I liked the odds. Support was unknown and no further information was available. Totally blind, but willing.

On the flight over, the aircraft landed at Caracas, Venezuela to pick up an additional five (5) personnel and refuel. Captain Mike informed us not to talk to the individuals or ask any question. They were to be avoided. We never did learn their purpose, but were probably CIA. The team arrived at Georgetown late in the evening and unloaded our jeep and equipment on the main ramp. A C-141 with a Medical Evacuation team was parked on the ramp and was there to pick up the bodies of Congressman Ryan and members of his party that had been killed in the shooting. CMSGT John Smith and another CCT member (can't remember his name)

from Charleston AFB, SC was on that aircraft. They did not have any information on the events.

Shortly thereafter, the C-141 departed to Charleston AFB, SC and we were on the ramp trying to find out any information available. Later one of the American embassy folks in Georgetown approached us and asked what we were tasked to accomplish and what we needed. (Might mention the Guyanese Defense Force (GDF) also greeted us and secured our weapons and Jeep for the night. In fact, Massengale still has a hand receipt he used to account for the stuff we turned over to the GDF). He offered us a place to stay, so the team spent the night at his home. The next morning (early) the team met with the embassy guy and he arranged transportation via a civilian aircraft (a Cessna 340 twin) to fly to a small dirt airstrip (Port Kaituma), where the Congressman had been killed. (We actually went to the Embassy that morning and Massengale met with the ambassador and between his meeting and talking with officials we got a little insight into what was going on, but very little insight, as they really had no idea at that time exactly what had happened, and our job was to find out.)

This airfield was close to the Jonestown area and we were to meet with the Guyana Armed Forces for support and transportation into Jonestown on a Guyanese army UH-1. After loading the aircraft, the pilot stated we were overloaded and the takeoff run would be long. It was. The takeoff roll extended into the dirt overrun and getting airborne did not look good, but we made it. I thought TSGT Dalton was going to have a heart attack. The flight took approximately 2 hours to arrive at Port Kaituma. We unloaded the aircraft did a quick recon of the area (the GDF had secured the airfield) and the Guyana Airlines twin otter, that had one of the tires shot out and numerous bullet holes in the fuselage, of course being the low man on the totem pole, SMSGT Huddleston told me to recon the aircraft and see what was inside. All I saw was blood covering the floor and brain matter on the ceiling. The stench was unbearable and I had to depart the area for some fresh air and of course up chuck breakfast. Yep, the two senior NCOs got a chuckle about this, since I was a rookie. Later, after meeting the local authorities and Guyana Armed Forces, SMSGT Huddleston flew to Jonestown on the UH-1 and did a quick aerial recon of the area. It appeared that a large number of the members of the cult were dead and any survivors could not be located. Authorities thought that several hundred were dead and the rest were in the jungle somewhere. Helicopters were brought in to search for any survivors. It wasn't until a day or two later that after body removal started that they realized the full scope of the number of dead, Command staff kept upgrading the numbers from 400 to 500 to 700.

*Wayne Dalton: Dave, the survivor who you talk about below was named Odell Rhodes. He was not from the aircraft shooting incident that took the Congressman's life. He was in Jonestown during the suicide ritual and when Jim Jones asked one of the nurses to go get a stethoscope from the infirmary so they could check folks out to make sure they were dying, he said I'll go with you. When they entered the infirmary the nurse went one way and he went the other, climbed out a window and headed to the jungle. He followed a railroad track into Port Kaituma and was one of the first if not the first to alert the Guyanese as to what was going on. Of this, I (Wayne Dalton) am certain because was up almost all night talking to him. I was fascinated by the stories he was telling about Jonestown.*

Later that afternoon, we moved to a local school and spent the night there. Also, at the same time one of the survivors from Jonestown, came into the village from the jungle, as he had been hiding from the group that had shot up the aircraft. There was also a man and his two daughters that had also escaped, but we did not have time to speak with them. TSGT Dalton talked most of the night with Odell Rhoades, the next (Tuesday) morning, this group of survivors were flown out to Georgetown with members of the CIA that had accompanied us from Caracas. The team (CCT) then loaded on the Guyanese UH-1 and flew to Jonestown to do a thorough recon of the area. An initial count was made of approximately 400 bodies and no survivors. The count increased daily since many were stacked on top of each other, including adults and children. We continued to recon the area and set up a control point in a tower on the SE side of the compound. This was to be our home for the next 4 days and nights. Portable radios were set up and we used one of the local ATC frequencies to communicate with aircraft in the area. This was also our Command and Control center and the PRC 47 HF was used to pass information to Georgetown and Quarry Heights, HQ for the Southern Command in Panama.

*Wayne Dalton: You might mention how we gathered info on such things as water supply, electrical power, remember they had at least two humongous generators providing power, their medical facility, we sent all this info back to SOUTHCOM. I also went through each house and counted the beds and mattresses to get a good idea of how many people were living there, I remember very clearly a Col who showed up and talked to us about it. I told him what I had found and he blew me off as no way that many people here. After a day or two of body recovery I saw him again and mentioned the count, he was not very pleased with that....*

The next day several groups arrived to start evacuating the bodies. An U.S. Army graves registration team arrived, along with 3 USAF CH-53 helicopters and a HC-130 refueling aircraft to shuttle the bodies from Jonestown to Georgetown. Additional aircraft ( 3 UH-1s and OH-58) were flown from Panama via C-141s, reconfigured and also assisted with moving additional personnel and equipment to and from the area. The aircraft also brought in C Rats, batteries, and fresh water daily. Of course, numerous news reporters arrived to send info back to the various news agencies. AFCC Combat Communications deployed and set up a SATCOM radio system that did not work until the last day.

MSGT Tom Allen and SSGT Leonard Whitten arrived in country to assist. MSGT Allen went to Matthews Ridge, a small dirt airstrip located half way from Jonestown to Georgetown. A FARP was set up for refueling purposes, and MSGT Allen provided ATC support for this area. SSGT Whitten helped set up and operated communication gear at Georgetown. Mostly C2 operations via the HF radio. Additional people arrived from Charleston AFB, SC to help. That included Sgt Doug Cohee and SSgt Whip Wilson.

The next few days the operational folks started placing bodies in body bags and transferring them onto the helicopters for transfer to Georgetown, the bodies were then placed in aluminum coffins and flown to Dover AFB, Delaware mortuary via C-141 aircraft.

Thursday was Thanksgiving and everyone was happy that command sent out hot turkey dinners to the guys in the field. At least we had a hot meal and enjoyed the turkey. Work continued and everyone wanted to get it finished since the bodies were in a terrible state of decomposition. The smell was horrible and most everyone wore some type of facial mask or made one from sheets or pillow in the hooches.

The team continued to recon the local area, provide ATC and C2 services with the various agencies. Our tower controlled all the military and civilian air traffic in the entire northwest area of the country.

There were a few survivors that walked back into the commune, they were quickly debriefed and flown out by the same CIA guys. Never did get a chance to chat with those people. Friday most of the bodies had been recovered and plans were made to head back to Georgetown the next day. A recovery plan was established and slowly small groups of personnel were shuttled back to the airfield at Georgetown.

Saturday morning our CCT team loaded one of the CH-53s for the shuttle to the capitol with a load of bodies. Upon arrival at the airfield we proceeded to the CCT control point to visit with some other combat controllers that had arrived from Charleston AFB, SC to provide additional comm support. I visited with SSGT Whitten and SGT Doug Cohee. We were scheduled to depart late that evening or early Sunday morning on a C-141 for Panama. We had time to have a short rest, have a meal, and prep for the trip home. About 2300 or so, we loaded a C-141 with a OH-58 on board, departed Guyana for Panama, arriving approximately 0200 or so. Glad to be home. Later, in the spring of 1979 CCT was tasked with evacuating the American and other allied embassies from Nicaragua. More on that later.

*Wayne Dalton: Couple more things off top of my head. The extra helo's that were brought in at least 2 if not more were Psychological Ops, if you remember they had the loudspeakers and were flying all around the Jungle telling people to come out. For a day or two no one was convinced that everyone was dead. Escape plans were found in Jim Jones house that laid out routes into Venezuela in case the US came after them as per Jones teaching. The choppers were flying these routes looking for survivors.*

*One of the things I found most disturbing about the whole thing was that everything was dead, as I am sure you remember, the parrots hanging from their perches, the gorilla they had, dogs, etc.*