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FRENCH- AMERICAN RELATIONS

Presentation of the Insignia of Knights of the Legion of Honor to seven CAT pilots at Dien Bien Phu. Remarks by Jean-David Levitte Ambassador of France to the United States.

Washington , February 24, 2005



From left to right: Ambassador of France Jean-David Levitte, Allen POPE, Monson SHAVER, Douglas PRICE, Roy WATTS, Nelson DUKE, Willis HOBBS

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me tell you how honored I am tonight to present seven pilots with the insignia of the Legion of Honor. And I first would like to take this opportunity to thank Erik Kirsinger who, for more than one year, worked continuously and with great perseverance to make this recognition and this event happen today. I would also like to mention Mr. Leary who, by his writings, made sure that History will never forget the accomplishments of the Civil Air Transport pilots better known as CAT pilots.

But before going back to the events of 1954, let me explain you the significance of the Legion of Honor.

The Legion of Honor was created by Emperor Napoleon in 1802 to recognize services rendered to France, on the basis of personal merit.

It is therefore appropriate that we are all standing in this living room dedicated to the French Emperor Napoleon.

Tonight, we are going to celebrate the courage of these pilots who accomplished numerous missions over Dien Bien Phu with their Flying Boxcars which were C-119s mistakably called "Packets" by the

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French, as well as the crucial contribution of the United States at a difficult period of the French history, the siege of Dien Bien Phu which lasted 57 days from March 13 to May 7, 1954.

I would like to go back to the Indochina era when France had established a colonial presence during the 1860s which was interrupted by Japan's occupation in 1941. At the end of World War II, France sought to reestablish its control but the Viet Minh communists headed by Ho Chi Minh decided to challenge the French presence basing their fight both on nationalistic feeling and the spread of communism. Initially the French forces were successful, but after 1949 when the People's Republic of China decided to back the Viet Minh, the balance of military power changed. The United States following their strategy of containment of communism in Asia, but reluctant to commit forces, chose to help financially the French struggle in Indochina.

In 1953, General NAVARRE, Chief for Indochina, decided to strike a big blow at the Vietminh by cutting off its way to Laos. Navarre had a great principle: "One cannot vainquish without attacking". And he decided to attack at Dien Bien Phu, to establish an air-land base there, to bar the Vietminh from going to Laos.

He wanted to attract there the hard to catch Vietminh forces and control an essential way of passage for the enemy.

NAVARRE launched operation "Castor" on November 20, 1953 but due to shortage in French airlift, reinforcements were needed and consequently, he asked the US to loan several C-119. General McCarty made available twelve C-119 flown by French crews for the short-term use.

The air transport situation took a turn for the worse early in the New Year when Dien Bien Phu alone required 20 C-119 and 50 C-47. French airlift capabilities were strained to the limit. On January 2, Navarre's Deputy asked for additional aircraft and crews. The Eisenhower administration wanted to help the French but US officials feared the domestic and international repercussions. Thus, the US Air Force loaned aircraft with French markings and flown by CAT Crews. CAT was a commercial airline started in 1946 by Retired Major General Claire Lee CHENNAULT, the famous commander of the Flying Tigers during WWII, and purchased by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in 1950.

Finally after long and delicate negotiations, on March 3, 1954 the contract with CAT was signed for 24 pilots to operate 12 C-119 loaned and maintained by the US Air Force but flown under France's colors and insignia. The attack of Dien Bien Phu took place on the evening of Saturday March 13, 1954. General Giap, the Viet Minh commander, set about accomplishing a methodical asphyxiation of the camp by digging a network of trenches which surrounded the strong points like tentacles and surrounded the French garrison of 10,000 with 40,000 troops. The Viet Minh had in place almost 300 guns and tens of thousands of coolies waiting to carry the shells to advanced positions. From the beginning, the French forces were outnumbered and outgunned.

The two airstrips could no longer be used, and defense was thus dependent upon airdrops from C-119s. Under these circumstances, restrictions against using American airmen in combat were ignored, and CAT pilots joined the French in airlifting personnel, food, ammunition, artillery pieces as well as tons of barbed wire and other supplies.

Of course, not everything was going always smoothly between the American Crews and the French. At one point, the French commander of Dien Bien Phu complained that CAT crews were not following instructions but, it was due to a misunderstanding problem as CAT Crews did not speak French and the French air control personnel spoke no English.

The language barrier was overcome by employing British Legionnaires. It was reported that CAT crews were participating in the airlift with much spirit thus getting respect from the French crews flying the airdrop missions.

With every passing day, the anti-aircraft fire increased in intensity and accuracy and, just in the month of April, 8 aircraft were gunned down and 47 damaged.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We will never praise enough the Cat pilots who performed extraordinary feats at Dien Bien Phu. They risked their lives and managed to complete a total of 682 airdrops under heavy enemy fire between March 13 and May 6, 1954.

I would like to say a few words about each one of these brave pilots:

Of the 37 CAT pilots who flew over Dien Bien Phu, two gave their life the day before the fall of Dien Bien Phu.

James McGOVERN was a character and his death shook the CAT pilots. He was a fighter pilot in Chennault's Air Force in World War II and shot down at least two enemy aircraft. He gave his life in the defense of Dien Bien Phu. His cousin, Mr. Gary McKENNA, a U.S. Navy Vietnam veteran, honors James and his fellow pilots with his presence tonight.

Wallace BUFORD was a veteran of World War II and Korea, a recipient of two Distinguished Flying Crosses and the Purple Heart who flew with McGovern's fellow pilot on that last mission. On a previous flight, his fellow pilot, Paul HOLDEN, was seriously wounded. BUFORD stopped the bleeding while maneuvering the airplane back to the safety of Haiphong. Here to honor him, his brother, Roger BUFORD.

Now, I would like to turn to the surviving pilots who are standing here tonight.

Allen POPE is a veteran of Korea, the recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross and several other Air Medals. He survived, with great honor, more than four years in Communist prisons. He flew 57 missions over Dien Bien Phu.

Monson SHAVER is a veteran of World War II and remained in Asia for 30 years fighting communism. His fellow pilots respect him for being long on devotion and short on words. He flew 48 missions over Dien Bien Phu.

Douglas PRICE is a former US Navy fighter pilot who flew "Bearcats" off the deck of the USS LEYTE. A precision pilot, he dedicated his skills in fighting Communism for many years. He flew 39 missions over Dien Bien Phu.

Roy WATTS is a World War II veteran and was an expert at navigating bad weather via radio beacons. He did not worry when

enemy fire destroyed Dien Bien Phu's beacon. He headed towards its emergency substitute, but it escaped him moments before he reached it. Until, in the mist of the clouds, he saw a French Air Force DC-3 circling the drop zone, carrying the beacon, guiding the pilots. He flew 33 missions over Dien Bien Phu.

Nelson DUKE became a US Navy pilot at age 19 and flew numerous types of planes all over the US, Europe and the Pacific. He received the Air Medal as Aircraft Commander during the Berlin Airlift and also flew the Korean Airlift. In 1954, he evacuated refugees out of Hanoi to Haiphong. He flew 12 missions over Dien Bien Phu.

Willis (Bill) HOBBS is a US Navy World War II veteran and was the pilot of an airliner hijacked to North Korea years before hijacking became popular. He flew 6 missions over Dien Bien Phu.

Robert BRONGERSMA, who could not be here tonight, is represented by Jim GLERUM. Dutch, as everybody calls him, is a former World War II US Marine Corps fighter pilot who joined the Civil Air Transport in 1947. After the evacuation from the China mainland, he was based in Japan and flew on contracts for the US Air Force. Following Dien Bien Phu, he remained in Southeast Asia – first with Bird and Sons and then Continental Air Services, where, as a pilot and aviation manager, he was a major asset in the US Government's fight against Communist inroads. He flew 39 missions over Dien Bien Phu.

Gentlemen, in recognition of your extraordinary achievements and tireless efforts in the performance of duty, the President of the French Republic has decided to confer you the Legion of Honor with the rank of knight. It is with a distinct pleasure that I am about to present you with this distinguished award.

Allen POPE “, au nom du Président de la République nous vous faisons chevalier de la légion d'honneur.”

Monson SHAVER “, au nom du Président de la République nous vous faisons chevalier de la légion d'honneur.”

Douglas PRICE “, au nom du Président de la République nous vous faisons chevalier de la légion d'honneur.”

Roy WATTS “, au nom du Président de la République nous vous faisons chevalier de la légion d'honneur.”

Nelson DUKE “, au nom du Président de la République nous vous faisons chevalier de la légion d'honneur.”

Willis HOBBS “, au nom du Président de la République nous vous faisons chevalier de la légion d'honneur.”

Congratulations.

Finally, I am very honored and pleased to hand over to Jim GLERUM the medal awarded to **Robert BRONGERSMA** who unfortunately could not be in attendance tonight.

Embassy of France in the United States - February 25, 2005

