

FAIRCHILD C-123K PROVIDER

S/N 55-4512

The Provider was a short-range assault transport used for airlifting troops, paratroopers, litter patients, passengers, and cargo to and from small, isolated, runways. The robust C-123 became a vital part of the United States Air Force airlift during the Southeast Asia War, where it flew principally as an in-theater airlifter, gunship and a “Ranch Hand” sprayer.

Initially designed by the *Chase Aircraft Company* after the closing of World War Two, the C-123 evolved in design from a large, all-metal, high-wing, glider with retractable tricycle landing gear and reinforced nose section for maximum crash protection and a strong tow connection into a powered aircraft. Since it was originally designed as a glider, no provision had been made for fuel, so the rear segment of each engine nacelle was used as a fuel tank. These external fuel tanks could be jettisoned in a crisis. The *Chase* manufactured C-123B made its initial flight in 1949, but the production contract was subsequently transferred to *Fairchild Engine and Airplane Corporation* in 1953.

The Provider was constructed and developed through several different specialty categories with the addition of a dorsal fin attachment to the front of the vertical stabilizer, which became a standard production and recognition feature on the Fairchild C-123B. Approximately 184 C-123Bs were converted to C-123Ks with the addition of two J-85 jet engines, which improved the payload weight by a third, shortened takeoff distance, and improved the climb rate. The C-123 was an extremely robust and adaptable airframe, providing the U.S. Air Force the capability of bundling special operations equipment, personnel, and gunship assignments. 311 C-123s were eventually produced.

The C-123's most important service was during the Southeast Asia War. In 1962 Providers were sent to South Vietnam to start Operations “Ranch Hand” and “Flyswatter” applying various aerial sprays ranging from defoliant to mosquito killer. On February 2, 1962 the USAF lost its first C-123, and its crew of three, in Vietnam. It marked the first of fifty-four C-123s lost in both combat and routine operations.

On May 12, 1968, Lt. Col Joe Jackson, and his crew, flying a C-123, rescued three Americans at the Special Forces Camp at Kham Duc, South Vietnam, while the base was being besieged and overrun. He was subsequently awarded the Medal of Honor, the only transport pilot decorated with Americas highest honor during the Vietnam War.

In 1966, a single C-123B was fitted with numerous high intensity lamps carried on the lower tailgate, providing a long-lasting constant light source capable of lighting a two mile diameter from 12,000' altitude. This had the disadvantage of making the aircraft easy to track by enemy anti-aircraft gunners. A number of C-123s were involved in “Ant-Trail” operations and had a radome installed above the cockpit and infrared sensors mounted under the fuselage. These aircraft were used over the Ho Chi Minh Trail to detect enemy activities and then to direct strikes on them from fighter-bombers. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operated it's own airline known as Air America. It's fleet

of transport aircraft included a number of C-123B Providers that transported support to forces loyal to the United States all over Southeast Asia.

The United State Coast Guard placed search radar and radome in the nose of HC-123Bs and utilized them in a search and rescue role.

Castle Air Museum's C123 Provider S/N 55-4512 was modified into a "K" model in 1967. One of her early assignments was transporting President John F. Kennedy's personal effects from Cape Canaveral to Washington D.C. It was later assigned to First Flight Detachment MACV/SOG, Nha Trang, Vietnam from November 1965 to September 1969. She flew medivac, resupply, and clandestine missions over North Vietnam. On one mission in particular she was assigned to evacuate Vietnamese citizens subsequent to heavy combat in their village. On the passenger list were five water buffalo that were essential to the villager's economy and livelihood.

C-123K S/N 55-4512 Provider "Hog Hauler" was dropped from the USAF inventory and transferred to Castle Air Museum in 1981. She was restored by museum volunteers and is presented in her Vietnam War configuration with the tail code WX, which denotes the 731st Tactical Airlift Squadron of the 901st Tactical Airlift Group. She continues to be devotedly maintained by her knowledgeable and skilled Castle Air Museum crew chief, former Captain, and USAF Vietnam War C-123 pilot, Larry McFarland.