

Aloha to the Spirit of Aloha

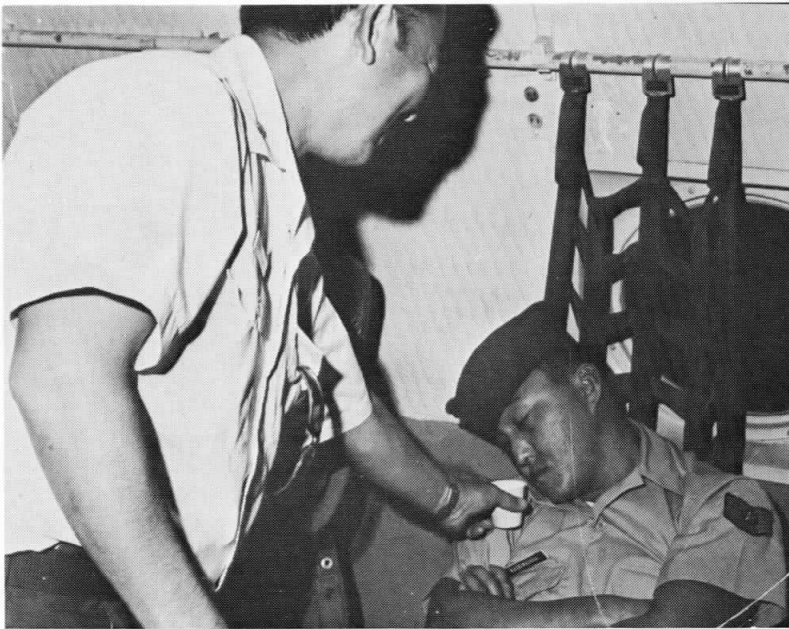
Story and Photos by PFC Ed DeYoung

I was the last to board the ol' "Spirit of Aloha" for its final flight. The sky was overcast, as though it reflected the ol' gal's feelings about this day. As I walked to my seat, I passed a dozen or so passengers on each side and a center aisle full of cargo, Christmas packages, luggage, boxes and four new tires. Within a few minutes, the engines were cranked up. One, two, three and four — without so much as a backfire. It seemed that she was trying to say "See, I've still got a lot of life."

Most of the passengers were unaware that they were on a C-54 that had come off the assembly line in 1944 and was making its final flight. As we taxied toward the runway, many planes passed by the windows, but not one could match the "Spirit of Aloha" in flight hours or age. A 747 landed in front of us, a C-130 taxied by, a couple of small Cessnas plopped onto



The last leg was flown by one of the "Spirit's" first pilots, LTC William Klopp.



The old sarge — nothing, not even the aroma of champagne, could awaken him.

the runway. Then her engines revved and down the runway we went.

Several passengers were dozing, lulled to sleep by the soothing vibration. After she leveled out and the seat belt sign went off ahead, a major emerged from the cockpit area with a bottle of champagne. The cork was popped with ceremony and each passenger shared in a toast to the "Spirit of Aloha." All the passengers but one perked up wondering what the occasion was. The exception, a sergeant, snored while a cup of champagne was passed under his nose with no effect. Later, after the champagne had been finished and chatter had increased, the ol' sarge woke up, wondered what was going on, decided he had missed something, shrugged his shoulders and did an encore of the slumber bit.

As we droned our way toward Kauai, I talked with a few members of the crew. Master Sergeant Saffery,

who was the ol' gal's first crew chief/engineer, gave me a bit of her history. She rolled off the assembly line in 1944, took part in the Berlin airlift, saw action in Korea, went around the world, shuttled VIP's from Kelley Air Force Base in Texas, came to the Pacific, and finally to HANG in 1965. One of the first pilots to fly the "Spirit" was Lieutenant Colonel William Klopp, who was on board, and soon to fly her for the last time from Kauai back to Hickam. Each related part of the C-54's story, and talked about some of the unusual trips they had made on her — like flying the Governor of Hawaii to Tonga for the king's coronation, a mercy flight to Palmyra Island, logistic support for the IGY teams on Palmyra, Midway and Johnston Island. They remembered how dependable she had been — never a major breakdown, never missed a scheduled departure and always easy to handle.

But with almost 31,000 flight hours and a major overhaul due, it was decided it would be better to replace her than repair her. Sort of a forced retirement.

Kauai loomed ahead and the clouds lifted. It was smooth sailing as we



made our approach and landed. After an hour on the ground on Kauai, we boarded her for the last time. The engines started with ease, and we were once again airborne for the last time.

As we leveled off, the conversation became nostalgic. Minutes later, the

"Spirit" taxied over to her familiar spot, and the engines were shut down. There was silence for a minute, then another bottle of champagne was brought out and popped open. Toasts were made, farewells said, and she was finished — retired to her well-deserved spot in the Hawaii Aerospace Museum.

