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Leo J. Sullivan in cockpit of Lockheed C-130 Hercules at Pope Air Force Base

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C-130 Hercules Pilot Feels 'Respect' For Plane He Tested

By JASON BRADY Staff Writer

Unlike some Air Force pilots, Leo J. Sullivan doesn't have a love affair with the Lockheed C-130 Hercules cargo and transport airplane that hauls much of the U.S. military's men and supplies.

Sullivan, among the first Lockheed test pilots to fly the C-130 prototype in 1954, said during a recent interview with The Fayetteville Observer that he merely respects the airplane for what it can do.

"I thought it was the greatest airplane ever built," Sullivan said of his first encounter with the "Herky Bird." The airplane has been earning that kind of praise for three decades, and Sullivan said it is still being built and is flown in 57 nations for a variety of missions.

In August 1954, Lockheed's Stan Beltz lifted off the company's Burbank, Calif., runway in the first C-130 prototype. The aircraft was destined to become the most functional airlifter ever built with a cargo level at truckbed height, full opening rear doors, soft-field retractable landing gear, efficient high-lift wing, turpo-prop engines and full pressurization.

The C-130 project was eventually moved to Lockheed's Georgia facility where the first production version, the C-130A, took to the air in April 1955.

"I thought I had gone to heaven. It was just such a leap forward," Sullivan said of his first flight in the turpo-propeller driven airplane. Sullivan also was among the first to fly the B27, B47, and the Air Force's super airlifters, the C-141 Starlifter in December 1964 and the C-5 Galaxay in June 1968.

"It looks kind of ugly, but it's designed to do what it does," Sullivan said of the C-130's odd and clumsy-looking design.

With four Allison T56 turpoprops, the first C-130s had 3,750 horsepower engines and weighed about 64,000 pounds empty, he said. The airplane was "ahead of its time," Sullivan said.

At a flying altitude of 36,000 to 38,000 feet, it could fly higher than many fighter planes of the day, he said.

"I saw that it could become a development tool for many nations," he said. Along with its military role of being a tactical airlift aircraft designed to ferry men and equipment in a battle zone, the airplane also has been adapted to provide close-air support for ground troops, rescue and recovery, weather reconnaissance, special operations and mercy missions.

More than 900 C-130s have been delivered to the Air Force in the past 25 years. The workhorse saw extensive combat in Vietnam where its maneuverability, payload of more than 42,000 pounds, and ability to land and take off on a 3,000-foot dirt runway made it the mainstay in resupplying beleaguered troops on the battlefield, such as the U.S. Marines at Khe Sahn.

Sullivan, 68, no longer flies, having retired at age 60.

He now is assistant chief designer, a job he calls a "good place for an old pilot." In that job he is part of Lockheed's safety briefing team which travels throughout the world giving safety presentations to people who fly the C-130.

Sullivan, a batchelor, last year traveled to South America, Europe and Africa as part of the safety team. So far this year, he's been to Hawaii, Southeast Asia and more recently, Pope Air Force Base. He spends four to six months a year traveling, he said.

"We've always had a safety program, but we saw a need to more closely work with customers, get feedback and overcome some of the accidents," Sullivan said.

The safety team gives seminars on the characteristics and limitations of the engines, propeller and basic handling of the aircraft, he said.

The biggest difference between the early "A" models and the current "H" models, said Sullivan, is the horsepower of the engines, which increased from 3,750 to 4,200.

The newer models also have an improved structure and better materials to prevent corrosion. Some models, such as the C-130-30 H, have been lengthened by as much as 180 inches, Sullivan said. Although Lockheed sold some of its "stretch" models to foreign military buyers, the U.S. Air Force does not have any of the longer versions, he said.

Improvements still to come include increasing the power of the engines to allow short runway take-offs and landings while carrying heavier loads and a new landing gear that can take more "bumbs and thumps" characteristic to battlefield runways.

"We still will build C-130s for some time yet. No other aircraft can do what it can do," Sullivan said.