

ML.102.The USMA Mule Operation

For its members, the 82nd SRS experience was unique in the challenge of its mission, camaraderie, and unit cohesion. It forged lifelong relationships. That was especially the case for me entering as a young captain and meeting and serving with a “young” Lt Colonel Regis F. A. Urschler as the unit’s operations officer and subsequent commander. It is a small Air Force, as careers unfold, and that bond prevails.



Upon reassignment from the unit, I proceeded to “broaden one’s career perspective” in graduate school with subsequent assignment to the USAF Academy as an assistant professor in the Math Department. Regis went on to senior officer responsibilities and Wing Command at Rickenbacker AFB and then the 55th at Offutt.

At the Academy I reconnected with my former Air Officer Commanding, who I had encountered in Phan Rang AB, RVN. Capt “Happy Jack” Farris was Major Jack Farris, flying Ranch Hand C-123s out of Bien Hoa. I was a 1st Lieutenant aircraft commander flying C-123s, as well, in the airlift mission out of Phan Rang. At the USAF Academy, Jack Farris had returned and was now Colonel Jack Farris and the Deputy Commandant of Cadets.

Moreover, I reconnected with Cadet 4th Class Dennis Topper whom I had trained during basic training. Fondly, Denny, given his stature, was nicknamed: ‘Field Mouse.’ Dennis is being ‘corrected’ in the attached classic photo from 1965. He is the basic cadet with the glasses with retainer strap. Fast forward to 1976, Capt Topper was an instructor in the Department of Mechanics at the Academy. Denny came to me with a proposal to kidnap the Army mule ... ‘Mule-nap’ ... as a ‘cadet spirit’ mission; transport it to the USAF Academy and return it to the Cadet Corps at the halftime ceremonies for that Fall Air Force-Army Football Game.



Denny had sponsored a cadet who was now an exchange cadet at USMA. Coincidentally, that cadet was from New York state and, as luck would have it, his parents had a horse farm near that Academy. Farm had horse trailers and parents who knew how to care for larger animals and were

willing to assist in the endeavor. A CONOPs was coming together. Other exchange cadets provided support. Contacts at the USAF Academy stables were alerted and its cadets joined the conspiracy. What was needed was safe transport for the purloined domestic equine hybrid. Here's where the 82nd and C-123 experience came together. AIRLIFT!

I made the call to Rickenbacker and its commander, Colonel Regis Urschler, to enlist his guidance. Rickenbacker was, by great fortune, home to a tenant Air Guard C-123 unit, a unit whose airlifters had transported livestock, pigs, ducks and chickens in Vietnam, as I had done. With his assistance, the unit was coopted into the key element of the operation: safe airlift of the hybrid equine.

The unit found the mission as an easy training sortie for a willing aircrew. Pick up cargo at Stewart AFB, NY, a short drive from USMA and the exchange cadet's parents' farm. The reward at the destination airfield was a complimentary pallet of Coors. At this time of the 1970s Coors refrigerated transport limited its availability nationwide. As reported by Colonel Urschler, the aircraft commander exclaimed, "Damn, this 'll be the first time we get to haul ASS in a C-123!"

With the operation elements all now in place and an operations plan ready for execution, the only weakness was OPSEC! Unlike the Recon Security of the 82nd, someone leaked the plan to the military leadership of Commandant's mission element. An element staffed by Brig Gen Stan Beck, **USMA 1954**, and his deputy, Col Jack Farris, **USMA 1956**.

Mary and I were at a 'reunion dinner' at the Academy quarters of Jack Farris and his lovely wife, Nina. Over dessert, Jack got a phone call and took it in the kitchen. He then called me into the kitchen for a private conversation. "Walt, what do you know about a plan to kidnap the Army mule?"

"Oh yessir, it's all set up with C-123 support and safety for the animal on both ends! The crew says it'll be a historic first for a -123 to "haul ASS!"

"Shut it down, NOW!" "Ahhh ... Yes Sir!"

"Mary, we have to go." With thanks to Nina, we left, and I made phone calls to all the conspirators when we got home.

- *Walt Schrecker*