

GRAND COMMANDERY of OHIO

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THE LAST SUNRISE SERVICE

Located on Midway Atoll, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, is a white cross made of metal pipe. On the concrete base is a plaque. That plaque reads, "On this site, 140 miles from the International Dateline, the World's last Easter morning sunrise service is traditionally held---He is risen, He is risen indeed".

I spent many early mornings standing at the foot of that cross and reading those words of hope. In the 1980's the USAF flew a Joint Chiefs of Staff directed Special Reconnaissance mission called "Pony Express". The mission was to monitor and gather photographic and physical intelligence information on Soviet strategic missile tests being conducted in the Mid-Pacific Ocean. Only one squadron in the USAF was tasked to perform this mission and only a handful of pilots in the entire Air Force were qualified in this mission. I was one of those pilots.

When I sit in the bleachers or in the cathedral for the Grand Encampment Easter Sunrise Service in Arlington, VA and listen to the words of the Grand Prelate, I am always struck by the incredible view from the George Washington Masonic Memorial. It is breathtaking to look down the hill on Alexandria in the foreground and Washington DC in the distance. No matter how many times that I am privileged to participate in this moving ceremony in its spectacular setting, I always seem to find my mind wandering and taking me back to a cross made of pipes and a small, sparsely decorated chapel located on a virtual speck of land, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

My squadron, the 33rd ARRS was based out of Kadena Air base, Okinawa, Japan. We flew the Lockheed HC-130. Our mission was Combat Rescue and Special Operations. Neither of these were the safest missions in the world. When the Soviet Union decided to test one of their Strategic Ballistic missiles, my squadron would get a tasking order from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. We would pack up our deployment kits and lumber off for the 11- or 12-hour flight to Midway Atoll. Once we got settled into our facilities and set up operations there, we would launch into our Special Reconnaissance missions of collecting data and samples from the impact area of the missiles. This was a fairly dangerous mission. The HC-130 is a big airplane and we were asked to fly it very low and make airdrops and sample recoveries from 150 feet above the ocean. When you consider that the wingspan of the aircraft is 133 feet, that does not leave much room for error. In addition to the inherent dangers of low-level flying, we also had to deal with several very real threats from the Soviet Navy. There were always a number of Soviet ships deployed to the test area. Each of these ships carried a KA-25 "Hormone" helicopter. The job of the ships and the helicopters was to harass us and do whatever they could to disrupt us from collecting samples to return to US intelligence analysts. There were plenty of "beak to beak" confrontations between our HC-130's and the Soviet KA-25's. It was a very dangerous game of chicken and unlike in baseball, a tie does not go to the runner. A tie results

in two dead crews. During my second year of flying these missions, the Soviets raised the stakes when they began firing very powerful laser weapons directly into the cockpits of our aircraft, in an effort to blind the pilots. That led to some fairly heated discussions on the international "Guard" radio frequency! I learned a lot of pretty good insults and curse words in Russian.

For these missions, the HC-130 had a crew of 9 or 10. As a relatively young Aircraft Commander, I always felt a tremendous burden of responsibility for the lives of those men assigned to my crew. I knew that it was always my job to get them home safely. I looked at it this way, if they get home, I get home.

Whenever my crew would get alerted for a mission, I would get excited. I loved the Pony Express mission. I was aggressive and I was very good at getting samples and completing my mission. I was also very nervous and very anxious. I would not go as far as to say that I was scared, but I was certainly concerned about the safety of my aircraft and my crew. I knew that I could not let my nervousness or anxiety affect my flying so, I developed a routine to help me get through these missions.

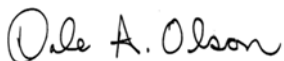
Before I flew, I would get up early, put on my flight suit and walk down the sand path to the end of the island. There was a tiny chapel and the cross with its plaque located there. The chapel was very small and could probably only accommodate 25 or 30 people. It did have a beautiful stained-glass window that faced due East so that the rays of the rising sun would burst through and illuminate the entire chapel with a beautiful light. On most of my missions, it would still be dark when I arrived at the chapel. I would sit in the front pew and just try to think of what I had to do and try to settle my nerves. Eventually, the sun would start to rise, and I would kneel in front of the Altar and pray for God to give me the skill and the knowledge to complete my mission. I would ask him to watch over my crew and help us to get back safely from our mission. I would then go outside, stand by the cross and read the plaque. I would read out loud, "He is risen, He is risen indeed". With that, I would head back to the operations area confident that I had made the transition from a nervous young man to a competent and aggressive aircraft commander.

Some of the best times that I ever had in the USAF were on Midway. I learned a great deal about leadership, but I learned much more about myself. I still feel a great sense of responsibility for the people that I have been elected to lead. I am still nervous and anxious every time that I know that members of the Grand Commandery of Ohio are traveling to an inspection, a conference, a dinner, a Grand Officers meeting or any of a hundred other functions. I worry about your welfare, and I still ask God to watch over you, to protect you and bring you safely home to your loved ones. I know that it's a tall order to ask God to protect you all but, I also know that if the worst happens, that God has given us all his promise of resurrection and of life everlasting. He has given us hope, even in the face of death, that he will never abandon us and will always be with us.

As we sit together in Arlington this Easter morning, know that I am honored and proud to be with each of you. I will cherish the early morning view and I will bask in the company of my friends, fraters, and their ladies. Know also, that a small part of me will be a very nervous 28-year-old kneeling at an altar in an empty chapel and standing at the foot of a cross made of pipes reflecting on these words, "He is risen, He is risen indeed".

Happy Easter and may God bless you all.

Sincerely and fraternally,



Right Eminent Grand Commander
Grand Commandery of Ohio