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Home > Fact Sheets > Fairchild C-123K Provider

Fairchild C-123K Provider

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The Provider was a short-range assault transport used for airlifting troops and cargo to and from small, unprepared airstrips. The rugged C-123 became an essential part of U.S. Air Force airlift during the Southeast Asia War, where it flew primarily as an in-theater airlifter and a Ranch Hand sprayer.

Development

Designed by the Chase Aircraft Co. just after World War II, the C-123 evolved from earlier large assault glider designs. The prototype XC-123, basically a glider powered by two piston engines, made its initial flight in 1949. A second prototype was built as the unpowered XG-20 glider. Chase began manufacturing the C-123B in 1953, but the contract was transferred to Fairchild, which built about 300 C-123Bs.

Between 1966 and 1969, 184 C-123Bs were converted to C-123Ks with the addition of two J85 jet engines. These jet engines increased the C-123's payload weight by a third, shortened its takeoff distance, improved its climb rate, and gave a much greater margin of safety should one of the piston engines fail.

Service

Providers entered service with the USAF's 309th Troop Carrier Group (Assault) in 1955, and this unit conducted several practice combat landings with U.S. Army troops. Other C-123Bs and C-123Js supplied USAF sites in arctic regions from the late 1950s into the mid-1970s.

The C-123's most important service, however, was during the Southeast Asia War. In January 1962, the first of many Providers were sent to South Vietnam to start the Ranch Hand defoliant program. Shortly after, a squadron of standard C-123Bs arrived to provide mobility to the South Vietnamese Army. By the fall of 1964, there were four USAF C-123B squadrons in Vietnam flying airlift and airdrop missions.

Providers constantly flew troops and supplies to small, dirt airstrips at isolated bases in South Vietnam. Their relatively large cargo hold and excellent short field performance made them essential to holding these widely-scattered bases. The CIA's Air America also operated about 35 C-123s in Laos.

C-123s sometimes flew other types of missions. Standard Providers flew night flare dropping missions to expose enemy attacks. Specially-modified C-123s flew night operations with floodlights, radar, and night-vision equipment.

As the war in Southeast Asia wound down, the U.S. transferred some of its Providers to the South Vietnamese Air Force and the Royal Thai Air Force. The remaining USAF C-123s were transferred to the Air Force Reserve, which flew them into the mid-1980s. Other operators of the Provider included the U.S. Coast Guard, the Philippines, South Korea and Venezuela.

The Museum's Aircraft: *Patches*

The C-123K on display saw extensive service during the Southeast Asia War as a sprayer, and Ranch Hand personnel developed a strong symbolic attachment to this aircraft. The aircraft took almost 600 hits in combat, and it was named *Patches* for the damage repairs that covered it. Moreover, seven of its crew received the Purple Heart for wounds received in battle.

Patches was accepted by the USAF in 1957 as a C-123B, and it went to Vietnam in 1961 to fly as a low-level defoliant sprayer. In 1965, it was redesignated to UC-123B. At about the same time, *Patches* became a dedicated insecticide sprayer to control malaria-carrying mosquitoes, and in 1968, Fairchild converted it to a UC-123K.

Patches came back to the U.S. in 1972, and served in the Air Force Reserve as a C-123K until it was retired to the museum in 1980.

TECHNICAL NOTES (C-123K):

Engines: Two Pratt & Whitney R-2800s of 2,500 hp each and two General Electric J85s of 2,850 lbs. thrust each

Load: 60 fully-equipped troops, 50 stretcher patients or 24,000 lbs. of cargo

Maximum speed: 240 mph

Range: 1,825 miles

Ceiling: 28,000 ft.

Click here to learn more about the [Down in the Weeds: Ranch Hand](#) exhibit.

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Photos



DAYTON, Ohio -- Fairchild C-123K Provider at the National Museum of the United States Air Force. (U.S. Air Force photo)

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