

Farewell Tribute to The First Lady

TO: C-130A aircraft registration # 53-3129

"The First Lady"

FROM: John Cahoon

DATE: 15 December 2025

Dear First Lady,

As the world's first production model C-130 and the oldest C-130 aircraft in existence, you have most certainly earned the title of "First Lady". With the utmost respect, I am pleased and honored to address you in that manner. When I frequently drive past your retirement home at the USAF Armament Museum, I mentally render a salute in your direction and silently say "Thanks" for your service to our country and in recognition of your many years of faithful dedication to a variety of Air Force missions.

You might not remember me even though you and I share a long history of togetherness. Shortly after your birth at the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation factory in Marietta, Georgia, you were adopted by your first real parents, the 314th Troop Carrier Wing at Sewart AFB, Tennessee. You quickly learned about dropping paratroopers, heavy equipment and cargo; you became skilled in making bone-shaking short-field assault landings, flying low-level night formation missions and all the other things required of a combat cargo airlifter. It was my good fortune to be there to witness the beginning of a new era of aviation when you and your sisters arrived in 1957.

In 1961 you moved to a new home and a new mission at Patrick AFB, Florida. I was there for that event also. While there, you underwent major modifications that transformed you into a technologically sophisticated electronic masterpiece. In your new role of supporting a variety of space mission tests, you performed all requirements flawlessly. You demonstrated your high degree of flexibility by easily adapting to frequently changing mission requirements.....every thing from airborne photographic coverage of missiles launched from Cape Canaveral to the collection of optical and electronic data transmitted from warheads re-entering the Earth's atmosphere thousands of miles downrange from the missile launch site. You also demonstrated your ability to adapt to changing mission demands such as physically plucking important telemetry data packages from shipboard missile-monitoring stations as well as from ground-based instrumented tracking facilities. All these accomplishments were done without flair or fanfare.

In 1964, we parted ways; I transferred to Hawaii while you remained in Florida. At that time, I mistakenly assumed we were destined to live in two separate worlds and that we would never meet again. I was wrong.

In July 1968, my flying career changed direction. After years of flying tactical airlift and test- and-evaluation missions, I began a new phase of my life in Southeast Asia flying combat missions in a newly devised weapon system....the AC-130A Gunship.

Upon my arrival at Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base in Thailand, I was surprised to find you there, along with several of your AC-130A siblings.

And so, we met again at a different time and place and under different circumstances. But there you were, ready to assume your new role as a pioneer in aerial warfare....to become an integral player in the deadly game of night combat.

You and your sister ships had shed your glamorous peacetime appearances and had assumed the persona of weapons of war. The beauty of your sleek silver countenance had given way to a formidable black and camouflage-colored livery. This new color scheme gave you a menacing look that was accented by the array of guns, sensors and other accoutrements of war projecting from your innards. It was obvious to any observer that your mission role had drastically changed; you had transformed into a highly effective machine of destruction and you were ready to enter the hazardous world of aerial combat.

During the year of our close relationship in challenging combat conditions, you never faltered. Although you suffered serious battle damage on three occasions, you courageously endured your wounds, you survived, you persevered, and you brought your crews home. You clearly proved your strength and ability as a warrior. Consequently, many aircrew-members would be elated to join me in collectively thanking you for a job well done.....for keeping them alive.

When you were later assigned to an Air Force Reserve wing, you continued your distinguished career as a gunship until your retirement in September 1995. At that time, you were awarded a place of honor among other aircraft on display at the museum where you now rest in well-earned retirement. As the undisputed grand matriarch of the vast C-130 Hercules family line, your DNA flows in countless numbers of your descendants, past and present (and all those yet to come). Your legacy lives on throughout the aviation world. You are, indeed, "The First Lady".

I take great pride in my long and rewarding relationship with you; I deeply appreciate your accomplishments; I wish you well in your retirement years.

Thanks, Ole Girl! We had a good trip; it's been a pleasure,

John C

15 December 2025

30 April 2026

This is a post script to the above:

Dear First Lady,

Today I visited your resting place at the museum and spent a few quiet moments of remembrance with you. It was 1969 again and, above the noise of the nearby roadway traffic, I mentally sensed the familiar sounds of voices of crew-mates no longer with us....voices not heard by me for more than a half-century, yet silently abiding somewhere in the depths of my mind.

There was Ward, Milt, Jim, John and Dave.....each a special person evoking special memories, each forever gone but never to be forgotten. I wish I could tell them how I feel. I wish I could talk to them.

JohnC