

# 156<sup>th</sup> LIAISON SQUADRON

## MISSION

## LINEAGE

156 Liaison Squadron constituted, 28 Jan 1944

Activated, 10 Feb 1944

Redesignated 156 Liaison Squadron (Commando), 1 May 1944

Inactivated, 15 Jan 1946

## STATIONS

Statesboro AAFld, Ga, 10 Feb 1944

Aiken AAFld, SC, 18 May 1944

Dunnellon AAFld, Fla, 12 Jun 1944

Cross City AAFld, Fla, 21 Jun 1944

Drew Field, Fla, 17 Aug 1944

Lakeland AAFld, Fla, 22 Aug - 23 Oct 1944

Kalaikunda, India, 16 Dec 1944 - 4 Aug 1945 (a detachment operated from Myitche, Burma, 8 Apr-3 May 1945, and from Magwe, Burma, 3-31 May 1945)

Okinawa, 15 Sep 1945 - 15 Jan 1946

## ASSIGNMENTS

III (later I) Tactical Air Division, 10 Feb 1944

2 Air Command Group, 1 May 1944

United States Army Forces, Pacific, 4 Aug 1945

Fifth Air Force, 15 Sep 1945

Pacific Air Command, US Army, 15 Dec 1945 - 15 Jan 1946

## WEAPON SYSTEMS

C-64, 1944-1945

L-5, 1944-1945

L-4, 1945

## **COMMANDERS**

Maj Anthony J. Maurel

## **HONORS**

### **Service Streamers**

### **Campaign Streamers**

Central Burma

### **Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers**

### **Decorations**

## **EMBLEM**

## **MOTTO**

## **NICKNAME**

## **OPERATIONS**

The 156th Liaison Squadron was activated 9 February, 1944, at Statesboro AAF, Statesborough, Georgia. It was assigned to the First Tactical Air Division. It became a Replacement Training Unit ( RTU ) for L pilots. A ground school was established. Pilots received a regular program of instruction as well as flight training. Pilots who completed training were transferred to Staging Wings for assignment overseas.

On May 12, 1944, the entire squadron received orders to move to Aiken AAF located at Aiken, South Carolina. Colonel DeBolt visited and gave the squadron information as to what its future would entail. He indicated it would be sent overseas soon. At this time the name of the squadron was changed to the 156th Liaison Squadron Commando.

By the end of May the squadron was in close con-tact with the 127th L.S. Commando, the 155th L.S. Commando and the 340th Airdrome Squadron all parts of the Second Air Commando Group. Captain Anthony J. Maurel assumed command June 2, 1944.

Orders to move the entire squadron to Dunnellen AAF, Dunnellon, Florida, were received June 6th. This was done with dispatch and all personnel were restricted to the base for intensive training. On June 28th the squadron moved to Cross City, Florida. Training continued in Florida until the group departed for overseas.

The squadron went by rail to Camp Anza, California, arriving November 2, 1944. On November 8th it traveled to the Port of Embarkation at Wilmington, boarded the U.S.S. General John Pope

with nearly all of the Second Air Commando Group and departed at 8:00 A.M. November 10th. Squadron strength was fifteen officers and eighty enlisted men.

The USS General John Pope docked at the Port of Bombay, India, December 11, 1944 after thirty-two days at sea. On the morning of December 13, after spending two days aboard ship, the squadron entrained for its new address, APO 493-B2, arriving at Kalaikunda, India December 16, 1944.

January and February were occupied receiving supplies, equipment and planes and in establishing living quarters and squadron buildings. On February 5th a policy was initiated to rotate personnel on detached service to Comilla, India. Another detached service group was sent to Palel in the Imphal Valley on February 25th. By March 1, 1945, all aircraft were in top condition and morale was high as a combat assignment was anticipated. On the 12 of March all Hell broke loose. About 1730 in the evening a terrific thunderstorm hit the field. The intensity of the storm was almost above description. A wind velocity of eighty miles an hour, plus rain and hailstones completely destroyed twenty-eight L-5 aircraft, three C-64s, four transport ships and a large amount of equipment. For a week everyone was engrossed in cleaning up the debris. On the 17th, a service group was called in to repair as many aircraft as possible. A total of four ships were salvaged and placed in serviceable condition. By the end of the month new aircraft were being assigned to replace the ones that were destroyed.

When the IV Corps Headquarters of the British-Indian Army was moved to Myitche, near the first of April, 1945, a military need arose for the 156th Liaison Squadron. Personnel had been awaiting this at Kalaikunda and were envious of the other two L-Squadrons which had seen much action.

On April 8, 1945, the 156th Liaison Squadron Commando was sent to Myitche, Burma to join the 155th Liaison Squadron Commando. The 156th LSC was attached to the 33rd Corps of the British-Indian Army. Both squadrons participated in combat operations at Meiktila, west of the Irrawaddy River, Magwe, and on south.

Realizing that the Burma show would soon be terminated, the 156th certainly made up for lost time. During their commitment in April, they flew a total of 4,232 sorties and 2,815 hours of flying time. Nothing but the highest praise was given these Liaison Squadrons, and their close association with their British friends greatly cemented inter-allied relations. Scores of compliments and commendations arrived at the home base from the British Command.

On May 3, 1945, the squadron moved from Myitche to Magwe, fifty miles closer to enemy lines. Japanese rear elements were being rounded up at this time and much enemy equipment was scattered throughout the area. Left behind were anti-aircraft guns, trucks, clothing, ammunition and food rations. Squadron members enjoyed collecting this booty.

The Magwe airstrip was much better than that at Myitche. C-64A cargo planes could use it as well as L-5s. The flying schedule for L pilots was from 0630 to 1900 hours. The planes came and went all day long. As soon as a plane landed, mechanics rushed up to perform light maintenance. Often

the pilots did not leave the plane. The ground crews deserved a great deal of credit for keeping the planes in the air. With light maintenance done during the day, heavy maintenance took place at night. A system of lights was erected. Each plane was completely overhauled nightly. This was absolutely necessary due to the dust conditions encountered during the day.

The pilots and crew chiefs of the C-64A deserved much credit. They ferried food, equipment, and personnel. The squadron could not have survived without them flying from Magwe to Kalaikunda and back, a six hour trip one way over hazardous mountains and wide stretches of the Bay of Bengal. Most of the C-64A pilots had over three hundred hours of flying time in May.

The squadron suffered the loss of two C-64A aircraft while in operation at Magwe. On May 15, 1945, a plane was caught in a storm, and after flying around for five hours, ran out of gas. A forced landing resulted in a few bruises for the pilot and two passengers. The plane was completely destroyed.

The second accident was the result of attempting to fuel the plane by means of a small power unit. When the plane had previously been refueled, some of the gasoline was spilled on the wing. When the power unit started, it sent sparks towards the wing. Immediately the gasoline caught fire and soon the entire plane was in flames. Alongside of the plane were a few drums of gasoline and a 4 x 4 vehicle. The fire caused the drums to explode and set fire to the vehicle. The fire was so intense the vehicle was abandoned.

By May 25, 1945, work at Magwe began to slow up. Few casualties were being brought in because the Japanese lines were being pushed back. Before the end of May, nearly all officer pilots and liaison pilots had been recommended for the Air Medal, First Cluster, and Distinguished Flying Cross.

Orders came to cease operations on May 31, 1945, and return to the home base at Kalaikunda. Preparations were made to transport personnel, equipment, and supplies there.

Following is the work performed by the 156th Liaison Squadron Commando:

Combat missions flown	12,642
Passengers hauled	4,305
Wounded evacuated	2,472
Weight carried by planes	2,181 tons

In June, 1945, orders came to fly thirty L-5s from Kalaikunda, India, to Kunming, China. The war in Burma had wound down, but there was still much fighting in China. The 600,000 man Japanese Army there had never been defeated. Along with the thirty planes to be delivered to the 19th Liaison Squadron, fifteen of the thirty pilots were also transferred to this unit.

John O'Keefe of the 156th LSC was one of those transferred and had many unusual flying experiences. He was one of a group of L-pilots who transported a delegation of Japanese officers to surrender negotiations with American officials. A Japanese Betty Bomber brought the group

from Hanoi. John's passenger was Major Hido Mitoshi, head of the surrender delegation. John then flew him to Kalyaux, China, for the meeting with the U.S. team.

What happened to the rest of the 156th LSC? Records are not presently available, but contacts with Ed Goodgame and Frank Gonzales indicate that the 156th was ordered to Okinawa. The squadron boarded a troop ship in Calcutta. Off the coast of Australia the ship was in a typhoon and docked at Perth, Australia. It then proceeded through the Philippines landing the 156th on Okinawa. While the ship was in transit, WWII terminated. Some of the men were transferred to other units. Some were put on troop ships and sent back to the U.S.A. The 156th LSC, as originally constituted was disbanded on Okinawa. WWII was over. Going home was what we fought for.

This flight of 10 planes from the 127th, led by Major Hawkins, with 1st Lt. Donald L. Carter as designated Flight Leader, left Kalaikunda on the 14th of June and refueled at Andal and Lalminar Hat before heading for Tezpur. About 12 miles from Tezpur a terrific rain-storm was encountered and they were forced to land on a muddy road as their gas supply was low. When they landed on the narrow road, some of the L-5s hit trees and telephone wires damaging wing tips.

Reinforced with gas from the other planes, Lt. Carter took off and flew to the base at Tezpur hoping to get some gas and help for the damaged planes. In the meanwhile, Major Hawkins attempted to obtain gas from a nearby Indian village, but was rejected because of a lack of gas ration coupons. He pleaded with the official but to no avail so he returned to the planes. It was a pleasant surprise when a gas truck appeared and a limited amount of gas was loaded in the tanks. The flight then continued to Tezpur, where the pilots would RON.

Early the following morning, the 10 planes flew to Mohanbari ( Chabua ) where the damaged wing tips were repaired or replaced and plans made for the next leg. The flight started for Myitkyina, Burma but by this time the monsoons were in full fury and the flight was forced to land on an abandoned strip of the Ledo Road. They were fortunate to land near a small detachment of Engineers who supplied the pilots with welcomed "C" rations. In the afternoon the weather cleared somewhat and with a 500 foot ceiling, the flight flew to Myitkyina where they would rendezvous with the other flights of the 155th and 156th.

The second flight of 10 planes from the 155th, led by 1st Lt. Benedict Lukacs, departed Kalaikunda on the 14th of June and after a refueling stop at Andal continued to Lalmanir Hat for an overnight stay at the excellent base facilities found there.

With poor weather forecast for the remainder of the trip, take-off was delayed until the afternoon when they flew to Tezpur for an overnight. The facilities were somewhat poor for this base but the pilots survived.

An early take-off the next morning enabled the flight to land at Mohanbari ( Chabua) for fuel and lunch and then to continue to Myitkyina, following the Ledo Road as it twisted through the Naga

Hills. When the route closed in, the flight attempted to go over the overcast but S/Sgt. Robert McGovern experienced severe carburetor icing and had a struggle to clear the 9,200 foot mountains, while his flight mates sweated him through the ordeal. The flight finally made it to the Myitkyina Base for an overnight.

The third flight of 10 L-5s, under Flight Leader 2nd Lt. John F. Nevins of the 156th, left Kalaikunda on the 15th of June and flew to Tezpur with a refueling stop at Andal and at Lalmanir Hat. Following an overnight, the flight flew to Mohanbari ( Chabua ) for a fuel stop and lunch and then on to Myitkyina experiencing little difficulty.

At this point, all 30 planes were bunched together at Myitkyina, instead of being staggered at the various bases en route to China, as had been planned.

On the morning of the 17th, Major Hawkins decided to lead the two flights of 10 planes each (127th and 156th) on the flight over "The Hump". The direct route was blanketed with severe thunderstorms so the 20 planes detoured to the south and then headed northeast struggling through the thick overcast. At 11,000 feet they broke out of the clouds and observed jagged peaks sticking up on all sides through the overcast, several of the L-5s had icing problems but managed to clear the high ridges.

After about 3 hours of flying, the planes landed at Yunnanyi, China for refueling for the last leg. The final flight of 140 miles to Kunming was routine and the 20 planes landed safely at the Kunming Air Field. The epic trip had covered over 1235 miles taking 14 hours flying time.

The 10 planes of the 155th were to experience a more difficult flight to Kunming. Soon after takeoff on the 17th, the flight headed for the field at Paoshan, China but in a thunderstorm the planes became separated and 7 of the 10 turned around and returned to Myitkyina, while the other three were reported missing. The missing pilots were M/Sgt. William Oldaker, T/Sgt. John Raynak, Jr. and S/Sgt. Lee E. East. Sgt. East had called on the radio that he was out of control in heavy weather, and then his radio went dead. As soon as word was received, the Jungle Air Rescue would begin an immediate search for the missing planes. For the next two days the 7 planes attempted to fly to Bhamo, Burma but were forced back by weather to Myitkyina. T/Sgt. Harry M. Donaldson, Jr. became separated from the returning flight but landed safely soon after the others.

Finally on June 20th, the 7 pilots made it safely to Bhamo and bedded down for the night. With improved weather the next morning, the flight headed for Paoshan but bad weather again hampered the flight and a landing was made at Mangshih ( Mengtse ) for a brief stop and then were able to continue to Paoshan and would spend the night. As luck would have it, the pilots met a pilot with the 5th Liaison Squadron who had flown to Paoshan for a supply of eggs. He agreed to lead the 7 planes on the final leg to Kunming. This trip was made in beautiful weather and the planes landed safely having flown a total of 19 hours for the mission.

The pilots were amazed and relieved to find two of the missing pilots, Oldaker, and Raynak, waiting for them in Kunming. These two had bored through the horrible weather after the others turned back to Myitkyina. Later, they learned that Sgt. East had walked out of the jungles after making a crash landing. With a walk of 50 miles, he met a detachment of Chinese Engineers who brought him to safety.

The box score for this history-making flight was the delivery of 29 out of the 30 L-5s that began the flight, with no casualties to personnel. This remarkable flight was a tribute to the "L" pilots whose discipline, determination and ability overcame the limitations of their beloved L-5 "Sentinels." This flight was a small but vital part of the great deployment of needed planes to China. In the vast regions of that part of a huge country with primitive communications, liaison pilots and particularly "good liaison pilots" were high priority items, and the liaison pilots of the 2nd Air Commando Group delivered the goods in a high priority manner.

The 15 pilots who were transferred to the 14th Air Force contributed much to the successful conclusion of the war. No medals were awarded to the courageous pilots but they deserved some reward for making such an impossible flight. They should always be rembered for completing their outstanding mission.

The following pilots participated in the flight:

127th Liaison Squadron Maj. William B. Hawkins, Jr. 1st Lt. Donald L. Carter, Jr. T/Sgt. Cyril Holliday S/Sgt. Richard P. Strickhouser S/Sgt. George M. Durner T/Sgt. William H. Branan, Jr. T/Sgt. Philip E. Ross S/Sgt. Richard C. Hillstead S/Sgt. Eapham A. Nelson S/Sgt. James A. Carey  
155th Liaison Squadron 1st Lt. Benedict Lukacs M/Sgt. John F. Kenfield, Jr. M/Sgt. William J. Klein M/Sgt. William Oldaker T/Sgt. John Raynak, Jr. M/Sgt. Joseph S. Payne, Jr. T/Sgt. Harry M. Donaldson, Jr. S/Sgt. Lee E. East S/Sgt. Cornelius Feyen S/Sgt. Robert J. McGovern  
156th Liaison Squadron 2nd Lt. John F. Nevins M/Sgt. Thomas Dooley, Jr S/Sgt. Herbert E. Fain S/Sgt. Wilfred R. Jester S/Sgt. John F. Saunders S/Sgt. Francis C. Adams S/Sgt. Melvin N. Chapman S/Sgt. John I. Krejchik S/Sgt. John T. O'Keefe S/Sgt. Cyrus W. Williams

Note: Benedict Lukacs, Robert McGovern, John O'Keefe, Joseph Payne and John Raynak contributed information that assisted W. Robert Eason in writing an account of the epic flight.

Committed in full strength was the 156th Liaison Squadron, Commando, which reinforced the 155th Squadron at Myitche on April 8, 1945.

Front line troops were lavish in their praise and stated time and time again that their spirits were raised by the certain knowledge that necessary food and medicinal supplies would arrive and that casualties would be promptly evacuated. There is no question that if all other air support were removed the work of the "L" Squadrons would still exert a powerful influence on the success of the ground troops.

The work of all three Squadrons was similar and it would not be just to emphasize unduly the achievements of any one Squadron. The 127th Liaison Squadron, Commanded by Major John Noble, from January 20 to May 18 was directly supporting the 15th Corps at Akyeb. They were in on the battles for Kangaw, Ramree Island, Ru Ywa, An, Letpan, and Taungup. The 155th Squadron, commanded by Major Jack Zeigler and the 156th Squadron commanded by Major Anthony J. Maurel were assigned to the IV Corps.

When the IV Corps Headquarters were moved to Myitche the 155th was joined by the 156th, which had suffered severe losses in the Kalaikunda storm of March 12 and was therefore late in being committed.

Both the 155th and 156th were in on the actions at Meiktila, at Letse; West of the Irrawaddy, at Kyaukpadaung, Chauk, Magwe, and points South. They were constantly coming to the relief of small patrols and landing behind the enemy lines was commonplace.

All three squadrons were adept at forward air supply, the evacuation of wounded and the flying in of reinforcements. General officers of the British ground forces relied on them almost-entirely for personal reconnaissance of their areas, for courier service, and for the transport of Very Important Persons to the front lines. Lady Mountbatten on her tour of the 14th Army fronts was safely transported by the Second Air Commando L-5's. The Liaison Squadrons were always on call for artillery spotting and air rescue. Like their big brothers in the Troop Carrier Squadron each pilot amassed a startling total of combat hours; and gallantry in action above the call of duty was an almost daily occurrence.

Liaison Planes evacuated wounded and transported fresh bread to front line troops. Three squadrons of liaison aircraft flying L-5s had in he assembled. These squadrons had one Airdrome Squadron to service their needs. It is believed the Liaison Squadrons had an excellent record considering the short field and strips from which they operated and the number of hours flown daily. Ten hours per day per pilot was not unusual.

As the month progressed, equipment and supplies arrived gradually. Airplanes were ferried in, serviced, checked out, and flown. By the first week of February, combat operations were near, and the massive airlift to Cox's Bazaar for the operation of the fighter squadrons began. The 155th Liaison Squadron moved to Central Burma, the 127th to Akyab, the 317th Troop Carrier to Palel, and later the 156th Liaison to Central Burma - all moves were efficiently carried out while the four airdrome squadrons were taken where they were needed. A concept of the work and planning involved in this short time is obtained when one considers that the Second Air Commando Group arrived in Kalaikunda, India, on December 14, 1944 and the fighter squadrons flew their first combat mission out of Cox's Bazaar February 16, 1945. From this time until the Group disbanded, elements were distributed all over parts of China, Burma, and India - a true representative of the CBI.

Meanwhile in the Arakan, on the West coast of Burma, the 127th Liaison Squadron, (Commando), was evacuating wounded, carrying cargo, and doing courier service for the 15th Indian Army



Corps in its attack on the Japanese forces from Kangaw to Taungup. Commanded by Major John Noble of Oklahoma City, the "grasshopper" pilots outdid even their big brothers of the Troop Carrier Squadron in comparative loads carried. At the same time the 155th Liaison Squadron , under Major Jack Zeigler of Florence, South Carolina, and the 156th Liaison Squadron, commanded by Major Anthony Maurel of Phoenix Arizona, were doing equally hazardous work for the IV Corps at Myitche, Meiktila, and Magwe. Day after day the little planes went into jungle clearings behind the Jap lines bringing hope to wounded who a year before would have been without hope. During February, March, and April, those three squadrons flew over 25,000 combat hours, evacuated 5,000 wounded, carried 15,000 passengers, and 1,200,000 pounds of cargo, all without the loss of a single man.

From January to June, 1945, the three Liaison Squadrons of the Second Air Commando Group distinguished themselves by the variety as well as the unfailingly excellent execution of their missions. As in the case of the 317th Troop Carrier Squadron, the total effect of their efforts was out of all proportion to the small number of planes involved.

Statistical reports cannot show the great morale support that the Liaison planes gave to the 14th Army. Front line troops were lavish in their praise and stated time and time again that their spirits were raised by the certain knowledge that necessary food and medicinal supplies would arrive and that casualties would be promptly evacuated. There is no question that if all other air support were removed, the work of the "L" Squadrons would still exert a powerful influence on the success of the ground troops.

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USAF Unit Histories  
Created: 7 Mar 2012  
Updated:

Sources  
Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.