

SECRET OPERATION ROAD GRADER – KASHMIR by Alcide S. (Bull) Benini, CMSgt, USAF (CCT) Retired and William A. Fitzgerald, TSgt, USAF (CCT) Retired with the support of Red Ghormley, SSgt, USAF (CCT) Retired

18 December 1960 – Peshawar Air Base, Pakistan - At the request of the Pakistani Air Force, USAFE Troop Carrier forces airlifted 600 tons of cement and 64 tons of heavy construction equipment from Peshawar Air Base and airdropped them over Chilas, Kashmir to aid a road-building project in Northern Pakistan. Six C-130s of the 322nd Air Division based at Evreux, France flew a total of 55 sorties during the project, known as *Operation Road Grader*. Four USAF Combat Controllers of the 5th Aerial Port Squadron were tasked to support the 10-18 December mission.



Pictured above (L to R) Charlie Drew, Bill Fitzgerald, Alcide Benini and Buck Evans prepare for jump into Chilas, Kishmir.

On 10 December 1960, Capt. Buck Evans, MSgt. Alcide Benini, TSgt. Charlie Drew and SSgt. William A. Fitzgerald jumped at Chilas, Kashmir. Buck Evans and Charlie Drew were from the 5th Aerial Port Squadron Combat Control Team at Evreux, France while Alcide Benini and William Fitzgerald were from the Detachment of the 5th at Wiesbaden, Germany.

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*Drew and Evans are seen here after the jump into the **Chilas rock pile**. Drew carries a WWII-era, AN/PRC-6 **Handy-Talkie** VHF-FM radio. The reception committee consisted of several local nationals. The Indus River is seen in the background.*

The drop zone was a **rock pile** along the Indus River. There were no maps or photos of area for the team to study before the mission. Fitzgerald said; “*We were a few hundred feet from landing when we got our first look at the drop zone. Christ, it was a field of rocks! We were very lucky nobody broke bones. No medics, no nothing, just a lot of rocks and a few locals.*”

Buck Evans jumped with only personal gear, Benini jumped with a shot gun packed in a standard issue Griswold container; Drew had a Griswold container with a fishing pole; and Fitzgerald jumped with an oversize GP bag filled with shotgun shells. He later said, “*You’d never believe how heavy that sucker was!*” The locals, who greeted them on the drop zone, couldn't believe they had jumped from an airplane. It was beyond their primitive realm of comprehend. It was amazing how isolated they were. (Note: Fitzgerald said they were not allowed to take military weapons and decided to use “survival gear” as a cover story for the shot gun – a rudimentary form of team protection. The fishing pole was just part of the cover story.)

Most of the team’s mission equipment was dropped in an A-22 container. We had a PRC-6 VHF-FM radio; a TRC-7B portable VHF-AM radio; a hand-cranked G-3 generator and PIBAL equipment. Since the C-130's were briefed to fly in the valleys, below radar, they could not get a reliable CARP-resolution, so the team provided the winds aloft for calculating a release point. The CCT used the portable VHF gear to contact the aircraft and depended on the Pakistani Combat Engineering

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Detachment for the long-haul communications back to Peshawar. Fitz said, “*We didn't pass much information back to Peshawar because the weather was good, always cool, crisp and clear.*”

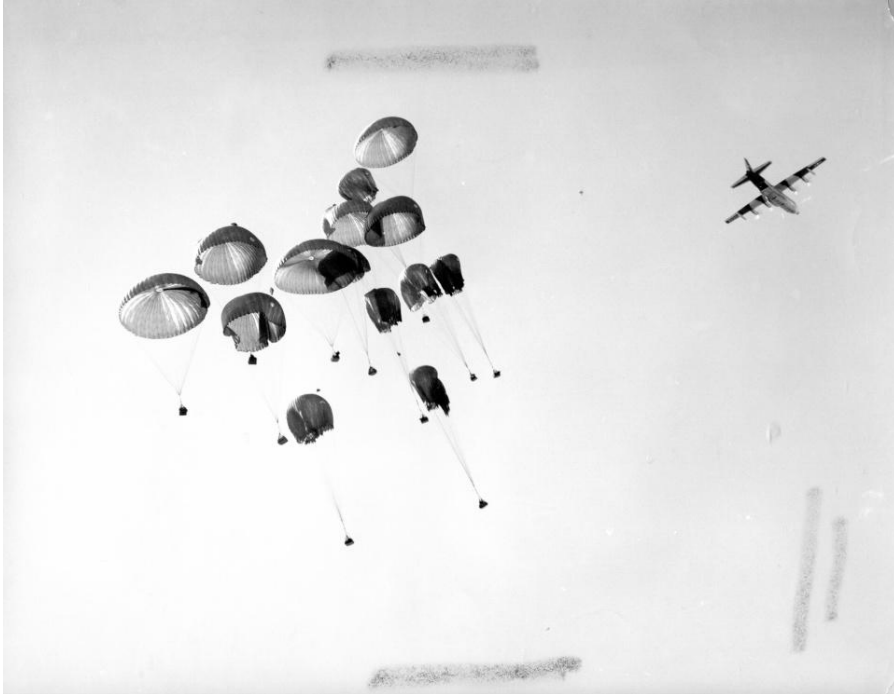
At the drop zone, winds were constantly changing, so current observations and PIBAL readings were relayed to the aircraft at ten minutes before Take-Off from Peshawar. Benini said the Pakistanis used Morse code to relay the weather information back to Peshawar.



The classified mission briefing was operationally thorough; but intentionally sketchy on the political details. (U.S. Air Force Photo)

Before the mission the team was not told the name for the operation, only that they were supporting the Pakistanis in their battle against India over the disputed rights to Kashmir; and, that the mission had been tasked by the U.S. State Department. They were also briefed that the Pakistanis were going to build a runway, not a road. They didn't know exactly what the Pakistanis built until years later because the operation was highly classified for decades.

An Air Force photographer was assigned to take pictures of the operation for historical purposes. His black and white pictures were initially classified; but, were sent to Fitzgerald eight years later with the classification marking removed. The team was told the operation was classified because of the sensitivity between a US-ally (Pakistan) fighting against a US-friend (India) in the disputed territory of Kashmir.



USAF C-130s air dropped more than 600 tons of cement and other road building supplies during Operation Road Grader. Shown here is one aircraft airdropping supplies using the container delivery system (CDS). Smudges show where classification markings were removed. (USAF Photo)

The photographer was flown into Chilas by a Pakistani light plane about five days into the mission. The pilot landed on a dirt road (the only available clear spot) discharged the photographer and then took off, telling them he wouldn't be back to pick him up since he didn't consider the road to be adequate or safe for aircraft

operations. According to Fitzgerald, *“later, they had to airdrop a sleeping bag and some clothing for the photographer as he was stuck with us. He said he enjoyed his stay as he had never experienced anything like it before.”*

Kashmir is a region claimed by both India and Pakistan for hundreds of years. It also shares a border with China, making it the epicenter of some highly contested real-estate. Circled in yellow is the mission area, with Peshawar approximately 100 miles to the south. Take note of Abbottabad – Osama Bin Laden’s – last residence.



The mission area was not far from the Chinese border which was the reason the C-130's flew a route that kept them in the valleys and under radar contact. Every evening around five or so the team would see a plane come from the direction of China, fly over at about five thousand feet then turn around and head back towards China. They assumed he was taking pictures and checking the operation.

“While at Chilas, we stayed in an old stone building; it had a fireplace and a dirt floor but otherwise, it was OK; certainly better than sleeping outside,” according to Fitzgerald. He said, *“Our diet consisted*

of C rations and partridge; the shotgun and shells came in handy.” And, according to Fitzgerald, *“The Air Attaché arranged to have booze dropped to us, every other day, if memory serves me right.”*



There are no photographs available of the heavy equipment drops; however this is a photo of the roller/compactor shown during pre-drop rigging at Peshawar. (U.S. Air Force Photo)

Over an ten day period the 322nd Air Division dropped a road grader, a roller/compactor, a D-4 Caterpillar and associated equipment, steel rebar and a whole lot of cement. It's reported that 600 tons of cement and 64 tons of heavy construction equipment was airlifted from Peshawar Air Base in Pakistan and airdropped over Chilas, Kashmir.

Mission complete, the CCT departs Chilas, Kashmir headed to Gilgit, for their first leg of the flight home. (Fitzgerald collection)

Fitzgerald Recalls the Trip Home – *“On the 21st of December we started out for our pick-up point which was Gilgit. It was approximately sixty miles from our location but took us over a day to get there. We rode some, walked some, crossed over wooden suspension bridges and over several landslides. We traveled by jeep when possible and foot when necessary. They wouldn't let us ride in*



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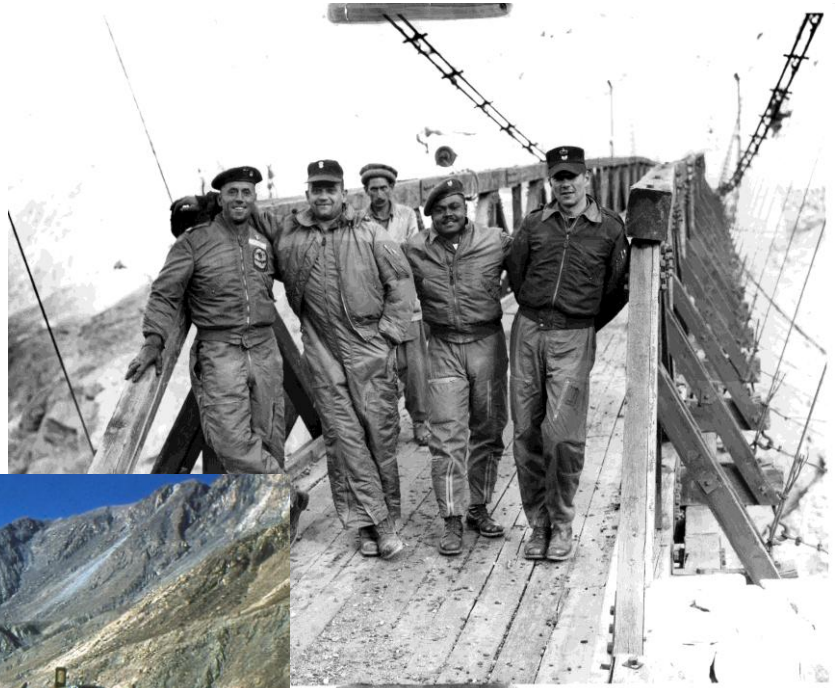


the jeeps going across the bridges as they didn't know how much weight they would bear and they only let one jeep cross at a time."

We couldn't cross the suspension bridge in the jeep, because the Pakistanis didn't know how much weight it could take. (Fitzgerald collection)

"Often you could look straight down from the side of the jeep and see the Indus River or a small valley around a thousand feet below. It was breathtaking to say the least. It was an interesting trek."

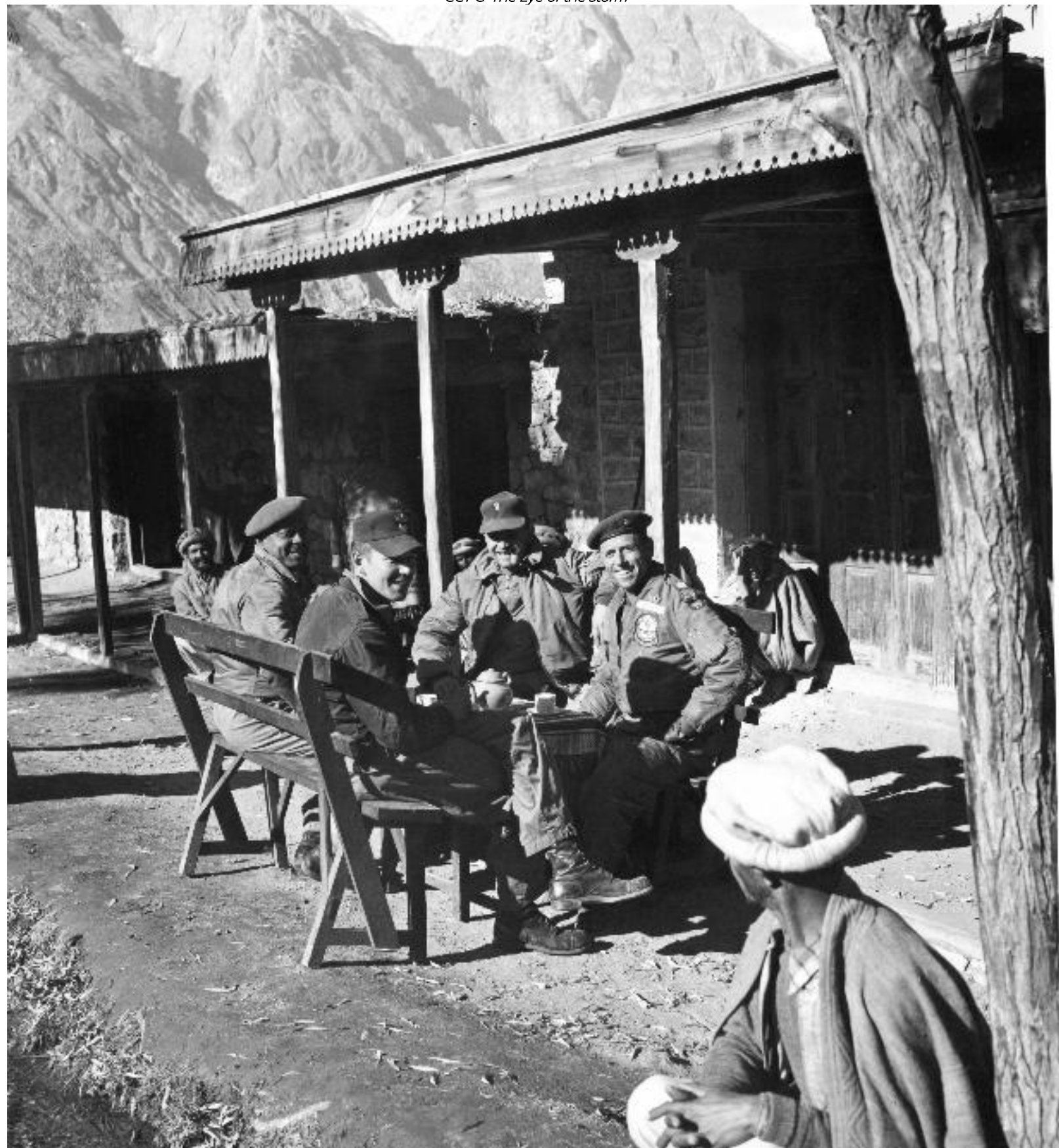
Shown here (L to R) Buck Evans, Alcide Benini, Charlie Drew and Bill Fitzgerald pose at the departure end of the suspension bridge after walking across. They couldn't cross the suspension bridge in the jeep, because the Pakistanis didn't know how much weight it could take. (U.S. Air Force Photo)



At Gilgit, the Pakistanis had an old Bristol Freighter to fly us back to Peshawar, Pakistan. Gilgit airfield had a dirt strip. (Fitzgerald collection)

Home for Christmas - On the 23rd of December we departed Peshawar and landed in France on the 24th. Benini and Fitzgerald had to get back to Wiesbaden but on the 24th of December nothing was flying. After a call to the Division Commander, a C-130 was assigned to fly them and one Christmas tree to Rhein Main. Benini and Fitzgerald made it home to Wiesbaden around midnight of the 24th. Their families had given up hope of them being there for Christmas, so they were really surprised.

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Fitzgerald called this his favorite photograph of the trip from Chilas to Gilget. He referred to it as five-star dining along the trail. Pictured (L to R) Drew, Fitzgerald, Benini and Evans.

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***Operation Road Grader – Mission Complete
Combat Control Team***



A team photo taken during their trek home, shows (L to R) Captain Buck Evans, Bill Fitzgerald, Charlie Drew and Alcide “Bull” Benini of the 5th Aerial Port Combat Control Teams. Buck Evans and Charlie Drew were from the 5th Aerial Port Squadron Combat Control Team at Evreux, France while Alcide Benini and William Fitzgerald were from the Detachment of the 5th at Wiesbaden, Germany. Note the different head gear worn two teams. Also, look closely at Benini’s cap; you will see he is wearing the “short-lived” USAF parachutist badge while Fitzgerald wears the US Army badge. (U.S. Air Force Photo)

Points of Interest

Benini is credited with being the first USAF Combat Controller and NCOIC first team formed at Donaldson AFB, SC in 1953.

The Benini Heritage Center and Museum, Pope AAF, NC proudly bears his name; it traces the distinguished history of CCT from 1953 to today.

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