

Flying into History: Wallace Buford's Final Flight © *By J. Arron Small*

You've probably never heard of Wally Buford of Kansas City, Kansas, though you should have, since he was one of the first two American combat deaths in Vietnam. He died years before the United States was even officially involved in the complicated Vietnamese conflict and before most Americans had even heard of Vietnam or could find it on a map. But he died doing what he loved most – flying for his country. Wally Buford particularly loved flying in dangerous situations. On his final visit home to see his parents before leaving on his fateful trip to French Indochina, he had a conversation with his mother. "I love flying, Mom. Flying *is* my work," he told her after she asked why he wanted to do something so dangerous.

Wallace "Wally" Abbott Buford was born on 11 June 1925, in Ogden, Utah, to George and Lillian Buford. When he was ten years old, George and Lillian brought their family back to Kansas City, Kansas, where Wally went on to graduate from Wyandotte High School in 1943. A gifted athlete, he was a standout guard on the Wyandotte Bulldogs' football team, as well as on the Kansas City Kansas Junior College football team. Not long after his graduation from KCKJC, he enlisted in the U. S. Army Air Corps and was trained at Scott Field (now Scott Air Force Base) near Belleville, Illinois. Commissioned as a second lieutenant, during World War II, Wally piloted B-24 heavy bombers in Europe with the U. S. Eighth Air Force.

Discharged from the Army in 1946, Wally returned home to Kansas City and eventually enrolled in the University of Kansas in Lawrence, where he pursued a degree in engineering. Unable to shake his love of flying and adventure, he also joined the U. S. Air Force Reserve's 442nd Troop Carrier Wing then stationed in Olathe, Kansas at the former Naval Air Station (NAS). His college career was cut short in 1950 when he was recalled to active duty by what had become the U. S. Air Force and sent to Korea.

During his 29 months serving in Korea, Wally performed his most courageous acts as a pilot to date. He was an artillery spotter flying the AT-6. Flying over 100 missions as a pilot observer, his sole job was to draw Communist anti-aircraft fire so that every pilot who followed him knew where each of the enemy anti-aircraft batteries was located. His dangerous flights earned him the U. S. Air Force's Distinguished Flying Cross. In what would play a big role later in his life, Wally also learned to fly the Fairchild C-119 "Flying Boxcar" while in Korea.

Not too long after returning home from his second war and while on duty at the Olathe NAS, Wally saw a rather plain notice tacked to a bulletin board. The notice that would change his life's trajectory and put Wally in the history books was from a little-known company called Civil Air Transport (CAT). Headquartered in Taipei, Taiwan, CAT was looking for experienced pilots to help them in the Far East. Without hesitation or even a second thought, and in keeping with his great love of adventure, Wally took the job. He just wasn't cut out to be an engineer.

Civil Air Transport was founded in 1946 by the world-famous former commander of the Flying Tigers (14th Air Force, USAAF), General Claire Chennault. The airline's first mission was helping supply the anti-communist forces of Chiang Kai-shek who were at that time fighting a losing battle against the Chinese Red Army during the Chinese Civil War. After Chiang's defeat and retreat to Taiwan, CAT became a subsidiary of the Central Intelligence Agency's Airdale Corporation. While maintaining the appearance of an ordinary airline that flew regularly scheduled passenger flights around Asia, simultaneously CAT was also being used in a variety of covert operations for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), during the Chinese Civil War, the Korean War, and eventually the First Indochina War that saw the French defeated and ultimately expelled from Vietnam.

Wally's new job as a CAT pilot took him to a very remote and dangerous corner of Vietnam as the First Indochina War was coming to its dramatic and bloody conclusion. The communist Viet Minh forces—fighting to sever Vietnam from colonial French rule once and for all—had surrounded the last French army on the peninsula at Dien Bien Phu and were close to overwhelming it. Determined to stop yet another communist victory in Asia, the CIA with John Foster Dulles at the helm, engaged in secretly supporting the beleaguered French forces. 37 CAT pilots, between 13 March 1954 and 7 May 1954, flew 682 combat missions to resupply the desperate French troops trapped in the valley.

On 24 April 1954, about two weeks after he arrived at the air base in Cat Bi, located near Haiphong, Wally was piloting a “loaned” C-119 over Dien Bien Phu when a 37 mm anti-aircraft shell hit his plane and exploded on the flight deck. The explosion severely wounded his companion, a veteran pilot, and fellow Kansan, Paul Holden from the small town of Greenleaf, Kansas. Despite the shock and the damage to the plane and his own serious injuries, Wally was able to stabilize the aircraft, tie a tourniquet around Holden’s bloody arm, drop the seven tons of vital supplies carried on board to the waiting French, and return to the airbase at Cat Bi. That’s when the other CAT pilots learned that, when it mattered most, Wally Buford was the real deal. They were impressed with his flying skills and his unflappable demeanor in the damaged cockpit.

A photo taken not long after Wally brought the damaged plane and the injured Holden back to base shows Wally standing relaxed with his heavily bandaged hands hidden behind his back and a shy, boyish grin on his face in front of the clearly damaged C-119, as if what he had just done really was no big deal. The hole in the side of the plane was bigger than a beach ball. Wally deliberately hid his hands so that when he sent the photo to his parents they would not be alarmed.

Wally’s skills that day made headlines around Asia. In his last letter home, he wrote, trying to reassure his parents in his usual understatement mixed with bravado, that his clandestine flights weren’t really *that* dangerous: “My name was [all] over the news broadcast from Hong Kong several days ago; you may never hear about what happened but there is nothing to worry about anyway.”

Despite that harrowing flight, CAT continued its supply missions over Dien Bien Phu. On 6 May 1954, Wally was the co-pilot in C-119, No. 149. That morning the China-Burma Theater veteran, James B. McGovern, Jr. (famously known all over the Far East as “Earthquake McGoon” of the Flying Tigers) piloted the ill-fated aircraft that was trying to drop a howitzer and ammunition to the surrounded French forces. The anti-aircraft fire over the drop zone was thick; Viet Minh gunners had plenty of time to zero in on the first aircraft, and Wally and McGovern were in the second plane in a flight of six. Their plane took a direct hit to its left engine and moments later another anti-aircraft round hit No. 149’s horizontal stabilizer. The damaged stabilizer made it very difficult to keep the aircraft level.

Despite the damage, McGovern kept the plane flying for nearly forty minutes, out of the valley filled with anti-aircraft guns and Viet Minh. With only one working engine, C-119 No. 149 flew seventy-five miles into Laos while slowly losing altitude. Their goal was to reach a remote small landing strip that had been created for such emergencies as theirs. Finally, just a few hundred yards short of their goal, No. 149 was so low that a wing clipped a tree and it spun into the ground near the village of Muang Et in Houaphan Province and very near the Nam Ma River.

Wally and McGovern were killed instantly as their aircraft was ripped in half. Two of the French aircrew were also killed; one more died shortly after, and just one, 1st. Lt. Jean Arloux, survived to tell the heroic tale of Wally and McGovern’s final flight to Dien Bien Phu. Due to an unfortunate clerical error, Wally’s parents learned of his death from a news bulletin on the radio as they were sitting down to breakfast back home in Kansas City.

The very next day, 7 May 1954, after a punishing siege of 57 days, the French army of almost 12,000 soldiers surrendered. Although the United States eventually recovered McGovern’s remains in 2002 and interred them in Arlington National Cemetery in 2007, Wally’s remains have yet to be found. He is still in Laos waiting to return home.

Very few people get to follow their life’s passions as determinedly as Wallace Abbott Buford—and that’s why everyone needs to remember Wally’s passion and bravery as a patriotic American pilot who flew into history. “He would have done it again without hesitation,” Roger Buford said of his older brother. “He loved being up in the clouds.” ***This whole article © By J. Arron Small***

[Ed. Note: J. Arron Small is a published author, a dealer in used and rare books, as well as a freelance writer and editor. He currently teaches in the English Department of Johnson County Community College. He earned a bachelor’s and master’s degree from Kansas State University, as well as a Master of Fine Arts from Purdue University.]