

# AVIATION WALL OF HONOR



## **C.M. Sergeant Daniel Benstrom (Ret.)**

**Flight Engineer – Berlin Air Lift,  
Korea, and Naples, Italy  
Maintenance Chief – Thailand and  
K.I. Sawyer**

Dan Benstrom was born April 25, 1930 at Bruce Crossing, Michigan. He started his early schooling there before attending grade school at Painesville and finally high school at Ewen, graduating on May 24, 1948.

While in high school, Dan realized his passion for flying and began working at the airport at every opportunity. This led to flying lessons and finally soloing as a pilot in 1947. His dream was to be a pilot in the Air Force but, at that time, two requirements stood in his way. You had to be 20 years old and have two years of college. The next best option was aircraft and engine mechanic school at Kessler Air Force Base in Mississippi.

In June 1948, the Berlin Air Lift suddenly demonstrated an acute shortage of C-54 maintenance people, and an accelerated program for qualified volunteers was instituted. At age 19, Dan found himself on a ship bound for Germany and within two weeks was assigned to the 331<sup>st</sup> Troop Carrier Squadron at Frankfort a Main. Work on aircraft was interspersed with flying as a flight engineer as the crews made two to three flights to Berlin per shift. The planes flew the

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corridor three minutes apart in a continuous 24 hour day for fifteen months, carrying everything from medicine, food, clothing, shoes to things like fuel oil and coal.

The Soviet Union thought they had a strangle hold on the allied portion of Berlin with all roads and railroads blocked and could not conceive it surviving by air support alone. As the airlift continued, their frustration was evident when they started buzzing our aircraft with Yak fighters as the planes neared Templehoff Airport in Berlin. But they never opened fire. They had underestimated our determination and weren't ready to start World War III. So the miracle continued and final success for the allied nations was ultimately achieved.

After return to the United States, Benstrom was assigned as an Instructor Flight Engineer with the Military Air Transport Services, and in 1952 he again saw overseas duty with the 21<sup>st</sup> transporting passengers and cargo to and from Korea. Of the six to eight daily scheduled courier flights, two or three were air-evacs in which seriously wounded were brought into the Seoul City Airport by helicopter directly from the front. As many as 44 litters could be carried in the C-54 along with two nurses, a couple of medical techs, and a doctor, if possible, on their flight to the Marine Air Base at Itauri in southern Japan. Seeing this flow of human suffering, mainly of teenagers and young twenty-year-olds which just hours before had been healthy, active and strong, made a deep impression on Benstrom which remains with him until this day.

Subsequent military assignments included the Air Defense Command, Line Chief, C-47 Flight Engineer 1954-1965; C-54 and C-47 Flight Engineer/Flight Examiner and Line Chief, NATO, Naples, Italy 1965-1968; Maintenance Superintendent HH-53 Super Jolly Green Rescue Helicopter, Udorn, Thailand 1970-1971. For supervision of helicopter participation in Son Tay POW Camp Raid, he received the Bronze Star Medal; Maintenance Superintendent B-52

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Bomber Branch SAC, K.I. Sawyer 1971-1974; Strategic Air Command, Aircraft Maintenance Inspector 15 AF SAC IG 1974-1975. Meritorious Service Medal was presented upon retirement.

Benstrom has also received numerous civilian awards including: Chief of Northrop Aircraft Maintenance Defense Contract T-37 ACE Program, K.I. Sawyer AFB 17 yrs, 1977-1994; Technical Advisor Experimental Aircraft Association, 1976 – present; Aviation Pioneer Award from State of Michigan, 1987; Working towards establishing K.I. Sawyer Heritage Museum, Executive Director, 1994 – present; Member of Marquette County Airport Board, 1995-1999; Airport Zoning Board of Appeals – present.

TJ Mudge, Aug. 2005