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"Hey, don't use the ladder, just step on our beds," came a voice from the rear of the C-141. The invitation had come from a sweat soaked soldier peering up at me from his evacuation litter. His eyes were tired and full of hope at the same time.

The freshly opened aircraft was still filled with the smell of wounded patients as I made my way to the rear of the cargo compartment with my tool bag and parts in hand. I had done this before, and had not looked forward to doing it again so soon.

The aircraft was a medical evacuation flight from Vietnam that had made its stop at Yokota AB, Japan, on its way back to the states. They were our highest priority and the 610th Military Airlift Support Squadron was one of the best at what it did.

The short ground time at our station called for a refuel and the remaining one and one half hour was all we had to fix anything that went wrong. If we couldn't do it fast, it meant the patients would have to be unloaded into an ambulance bus and driven to the hospital at Tachikawa AB for an overnight stay. The wounded and sick troops on board knew this. None of them wanted that to happen.

As we had heard before, some

Remembering a "lady"

of them called out to us, "Get this thing fixed so we can get back to the world!" They saw the U.S. as their only world, partly because they refused to let the misery and harsh reality of war become a part of them, and largely because it held the memories of times much better than what they had recently seen.

The sleek C-141 was their ticket out of that misery and it was the sole focus of their attention at this point in their journey. The fact that it now had a maintenance problem was clearly their primary concern.

I hated when a medivac broke at Yokota. I knew how important it was to speed these people home. Important because those depending on it had paid their dues and important because some of their lives depended on how fast they could make it to the West Coast.

The aircraft was a good one. It didn't have serious problems often. The aircrews didn't even bother maintenance with minor problems on one of these missions. They were hell bent to get these people home too.

As I placed a foot on the edge of the litter of the soldier who had called out, I noticed out of the

corner of my eye that he was missing an arm. He still looked at me with the anticipation of a child who had just seen Santa Claus come down the chimney. I was his hope to get the big metal tube back into the sky; his hope to once again be speeding towards home and "the world."

The wonderful C-141s were an awesome thing to those men and women. They viewed it as a magic time machine that could separate them from a land gone crazy — one of the only ways out.

The Starlifters had made wishes come true for many. They had also carried home those who had paid the ultimate price. We had witnessed many of them transit Yokota on their solemn journey. I was always amazed at how quiet the inside of a C-141 could become when it carried the dead.

After changing an actuator inside the tail of the big jet, I quickly descended the ladder and once again stepped through the maze of litters under the watchful gaze of hopeful eyes.

"Well, are we going home tonight or to the hospital?" one eager passenger asked.

"Looks like you're going home", I announced. You would have

thought they had all won the lottery from the cheers.

The saga was repeated many times. The gleaming C-141s streamed through Japan with needed supplies for the war. The Medivacs would occasionally come through with their cherished cargo. The Starlifter was a sight to behold and became more than a machine to everyone.

Maintainers all over the world have spent a lot of sweat and blood on the aircraft's upkeep. Most have come to admire them as a legend in the airlift arena. It has come to the rescue in peace and at war. Most of those who worked on them are younger than the jet itself.

Who can forget the video beamed around the world of our POWs exiting a C-141 on their way home? To them the airplane was a hero too.

The Starlifter has continued to serve our nation through contingencies in Granada, Panama, and Desert Storm.

Now, in the twilight of its career, it is proper to recognize its deactivation at Charleston. It is a grand lady who has excelled at every endeavor and who has become a part of memory for millions.

As for myself, even after the last C-141 engine has been silenced forever, I will still see the look on that soldier's face.