

The Final Flight of 64-0629

629's last day was in no way spectacular. I wonder, if the plane truly has a soul and feelings, was it feeling distressed over being thrown away as scrap metal or was she relieved that after 35 years of service, she is finally allowed to rest? I'd like to imagine that she could look back at her life with self-pride at the crews she carried safely, the injured she transported safely home to loved ones, the food, water, and blankets she carried to the cold and hungry refugees in troubled spots around the world. Thankful that she never cost anyone their lives, and as a war machine spent her life dedicated to preserving life as opposed to taking it.

We arrived at the jet early in the morning on her last day of active service. She'd been neglected on the North ramp for months and was pieced together just enough to get her to Davis-Monthan in Arizona where she'll bake in the sun and endure the wind until she is reduced to the bare minerals she was born of.

The preflight was relatively uneventful, although there were close to 40 "Red-X" write-ups in her forms temporarily reduced to allow her to make this flight. The brakes were rusted, and the engine inlets & exhausts were filled with cobwebs. All sensitive components were removed, and she maintained the barest equipment required for this two-hour run to her death.

She seemed to balk at her fate once the engines were started and on doing a last scan of the engines before taxiing, I noticed fuel coming out of her number one engine accessory doors. We shut them down while a leaking B-nut at the fuel control outlet was tightened and then restarted them for our flight.

629 was loaded with 55,000 pounds of jet fuel and she faced into the wind and throttled up for her last takeoff. She rotated at 110 knots and climbed like she knew it was her final dash skyward. She was over 1000 feet above the runway by the time she reached the departure end overrun.

In-flight, I walked through the empty cargo compartment wishing her walls could talk. For the guys upstairs, it may have been just another plane on just another flight, but for me, this was a funeral march. To see this proud old lady who served us so well reduced to her current state was enough to make me cry. She had her inside furnishings ripped out for use on other planes and yet she vowed to keep us all safe for this flight. Her pumps purred steadily in the affirmation that all would remain well and she would ensure her last crew would not be jeopardized. I roamed the cargo box like I was walking with an old friend, stopping occasionally to check inside an access panel for leaks that my nose had already told me weren't there.

I looked out at her wings and marveled at the thrust her engines were putting out just as I did on my first flight. I thought back on the first days of the C-141, when she was looked upon by all who were lucky enough to see her as a masterpiece. Today, how many of her crew members know that the first 141 to leave the hangar was rolled out 50 years to the *day* after the Wright brothers' historic flight at Kitty Hawk? How many realized that the person who signaled the opening of the hangar doors on that day was none other than John Fitzgerald Kennedy? Moreover, who in *this* day really cared? Rest assured, I care. The C-141 was developed before computers could make the design workload little more than the click of a mouse button. She was designed using slide rules, longhand mathematics, and common sense, back in the days when a design engineer's answers were more accurate than the calculators of the day. They had to be, because the pride of a nation and the lives of countless crew members were to rest upon those numbers he had come up with.

Her final landing was as smooth as silk, and we taxied her off the runway and through the fence that secured the aircraft storage area where the workers will de-fuel and "embalm" her before dragging her to her final resting place amidst her long-lost brethren. Listening to the engines shut down for the last time sent a shiver through me straight to my core. The incredible, deafening silence that followed said it all.

I walked away from her painfully aware of the hole in my chest that saying goodbye to her had left. I felt like I lost my child, my mentor, my savior, and my best friend all at once. Then it hit me. . . *I did*.

This tribute to a majestic lady comes from the heart of one who has devoted his entire adult life to her with the care and love I devote to my own children. I hope you view the following pictures with the respect and reverence owed to the C-141 and every other aircraft that occupies that patch of barren land we call Davis-Monthan Air Force Base.



629 on the morning of her last flight



Various stages of cannibalization



A fully "embalmed" C-141





An original Blue Angels jet





64-0629's last crew