

William L. “Skip” Willaman



William “Skip” Willaman was born at Lake-O-Springs, Canton, Ohio in June 5, 1940. His family moved of Lake Cable, Jackson Township in 1941. He and brother Bob delivered the *Canton Repository* to Lake Cable residents in the early 1950s. Willaman graduated from Jackson High School in Massillon, Ohio in May of 1958 and then “left for the service of my country”, joining the U.S. Air Force on November 6th of 1958. He went to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas for his basic training.

Willaman next attended electronics school at Kessler Air Force Base, Mississippi. He attended Ground Radio Technician School and was assigned a Top Secret clearance in January of 1959. He was then sent to Okinawa on December 25, 1959, his first official duty assignment after training. While stationed in Okinawa, he occasionally carried a snub-nosed .38 caliber pistol in a shoulder holster and got the nickname “Elliot Ness”.

In January, 1961, Willaman went to Plattsburgh AFB, New York, assigned to the 380 Bomb Wing (B-47), Strategic Air Command (SAC). Due to his Top Secret security clearance, he was assigned a position as an analyst. He attended all Top Secret briefings and meetings. In 1962 (during the Cuban Missile Crisis), the unit was consistently on high alert. Willaman sat in the 389th Bomb Wing Headquarters briefing room when the bomber crews were briefed on their assigned bomb missions. He was shocked to hear the Wing Commander tell the aircrew members to prepare for a one-way trip into Russia. Willaman said “I felt numb and imagined the feelings of these officers. This was it and we were going all the way.” After this initial briefing, the room was cleared except for those who had need-to-know of the planned attack details.

In July 1963, Willaman was assigned to the 10th Radar Bombing Scoring Squadron, 1st Combat Evaluation Group in Hastings, Nebraska. As part of the Inspector General (IG) team, they evaluated the capabilities of the aircrew-members flying B-47 Stratojets, B-52 Stratofortresses and B-58 Hustler bombers flying nuclear bomb runs. He was offered a trip on a B-47 bomb run training flight on “Clear View Bomb Range” by the Wing commander at Lincoln Air Force Base, Nebraska and accepted it. The trip did not go as planned. As soon as they took off, the outer crew entry door came open and was flapping and banging. The pilot asked Willaman to open the pressure door, hang down to the door and close it. Willaman told the pilot that he would need some help, like someone to hold his feet as he dangled down toward the open door. The co-pilot took control of the aircraft and the pilot decided that he had better do the closing of the door while Willaman held his feet. He imagined that, if he dropped him, he would go right out the door to his death, so he held him tight. After closing the door, they continued the flight.

In June 1967, Willaman was assigned in a Temporary Duty (TDY) status to San Antonio, Texas for Classified Equipment (Cryptographic) Training. In August, he was sent to Naha Air Base, Okinawa and assigned to the 374th Tactical Airlift Wing (C-130) as an Airborne

Radio Technician. Here he was introduced to the SR-71 Blackbird aircraft and often debriefed their crews after their missions.

In 1967, Willaman was assigned to Cam Rahn Bay, Vietnam. He flew his first combat mission on the “Blind Bat: C-130 aircraft out of Ubon, RTAFB as a loadmaster. The “Blind Bat” flights were night missions flown to find targets (usually trucks on the Ho Chi Mihn Trail) using either night scopes or high quality binoculars, mark the targets with red phosphorous flares or illuminate the area of the target with white phosphorous parachute flares.

In 1968, Willaman did special missions for Colonel Brown of the 7th Air Force Headquarters as well as flying C-130 combat missions as a loadmaster (Flare Kicker) due to a shortage of loadmasters in the Air Force. COL. Brown gave him a blank check to do special secret missions for him – they were all by Verbal Order of the Commanding Officer (VOCO) versus printed orders. In one mission, Willaman flew the 21st TASS O-2 Skymaster out of Pleiku, Vietnam. The mission (generated by Willaman) was to fly the Ho Chi Mihn Trail, fire smoke rockets and planted Sandia Motion Sensors that were strung out along the trail to detect traffic and to verify the all sensors were working properly. The sensors transmitted signals via VHF radio and could distinguish between different types of traffic on the trail. They were to mark a suspected arms depot for F-4 aircraft to destroy and to look for anti-aircraft gun sites, mark them and have F-4 aircraft destroy them. They discovered three sites and had them destroyed. The Army Special Forces that had planted the sensors were waiting to hear the outcome of the mission. Every sensor worked as advertised. That afternoon COL. Hall (Commander of the FAC Squadron), flew Willaman back to Ubon Air Base. Willaman says, “We flew an unarmed aircraft (O-2) and did not carry parachutes.

During his time as a CIA Contractor in Thailand, Willaman saved a C-130 aircraft and the lives of four airmen on 2 October 1969. He was recommended for the Bronze Star, but the 13th Air Force Headquarters did not want to deal with him being in the CIA at the time of the incident. 13th Air Force downgraded the Bronze Star to a

Commendation Medal and apparently removed the entire incident from the USAF archives. Willaman says “I am guessing they did this because I was in the crash films and crash report. To this day, the USAF denies that this ever happened.”

Willaman joined E-Flight (classified Top Secret – Highly Sensitive missions), 21st Tactical Airlift Squadron and periodically contracted to work for Air America from 1968 to 1975. Other assignments and milestones of his career include: Clark AB Philippines, 1975; graduation from Los Angeles City College with an Associate of Science Degree in Electronics in 1975; Travis AFB, California as a C-5 Line Superintendent in 1975 and Bentwaters RAF base in England as an Avionics Branch Supervisor with graduation from the Air Force Community College in 1977.

Also, during his career, he graduated from Southern Illinois University in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Information Technology; was assigned as an advisor to Sembach Air Base, Germany in 1979; Beale AFB, California working with SR-71 and U-2 aircraft in 1981; TDY to the UK for SR-71 support in 1982; “Bodo (Norway) Express” SR-71 surveillance missions; PCS to the 14th Air Division Headquarters, Strategic Air Command, Beale AFB as an analyst in 1983. Willaman was promoted to Chief Master Sergeant, the number one selectee in the top 1% of the U.S. Air Force.

Willaman retired from the United States Air Force in July of 1985, after over 26 years of service. He accepted a job with Syscon Corporation, Sacramento, California in 1985 as a systems engineer and technical writer, writing maintenance books (technical orders) on the F-111 attack radar system. He left Syscon after they lost the F-11 contract and accepted a job with Eldyne Corporation in Vallejo, California where he worked with submarine electronics as a systems engineer, upgraded submarine communications from analog to digital.

Willaman worked for several civilian contractors and retired in 2005. He makes his home in California.