

KOREAN WAR 21ST TROOP CARRIER SQUADRON K-2 LEAFLET DROPS
MADAM RHEE'S "RABBITS" C-47 YALU MIG ATTACK
AIR RESUPPLY & COMMUNICATION SERVICE PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE
COMM OUT K-14 NAPALM AT NIGHT B-29 SPECIAL OPS DETACHMENT 2

AIR COMMANDO!

1950-1975: Twenty-five years at the Tip of the Spear

OPERATIONS C-130 BAD TOLZ OPERATION "DOAN 559" BAHIA DE COCHINOS
PLUTO B-26 "POPPA DOSTER" EXILE AIR FORCE LIMA SITES
ADERHOLT U-10 HMONG MILLPOND SANDY BEACH ONE 4400
CCTS FARMGATE THE CONGO GENEVA ACCORDS RANCH
HAND JUNGLE JIM AIR COMMANDO! BOLD VENTURE CUBA II
KURDISTAN EL SALVADOR T-28 GOLD FORTUNE WATERPUMP
FIREFLY "SHEEP-DIPPED" A-1 BUTTERFLIES DUCK HOOK

Written and edited by **MICHAEL E. HAAS**, Colonel, USAF

MERCENARY PILOTS LAOS RAVEN BIG SHOOT QUICK SPEAK

with **DALE K. ROBINSON**, Technical Sergeant, USAF

PUFF THE MAGIC DRAGON CH-3 TAN SON NHUT SPECTRE BIG

With a foreword by Lieutenant General **LEROY J. MANOR**, USAF (ret)

EAGLE A-26 VANG PAO SHADOW BEN KING THE TRAIL

PONY EXPRESS A SHAU JPRC CANDLE STICK NHA TRANG COMBAT



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AFSOC/HO

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Lieutenant General, USAF (ret)

*To the Air Commandos
who flew forth into the darkness . . .*



. . . and never returned

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In special tribute to Brigadier General Harry C. "Heinie" Aderholt, whose 34 years of unconventional warfare experience span World War II, Korea, and Southeast Asia. His dedication to the mission and his Air Commandos provides an enduring example of valor and leadership in the Profession of Arms.

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*Those who cannot
remember the past are
condemned to repeat it*

Santayana

PREFACE

The following stories introduce the first step in a research program undertaken by the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) in late 1993. To improve awareness throughout this Command and beyond of the unique, unconventional warfare heritage brought to AFSOC by its predecessors, this pictorial history focuses on a select series of operations that highlight the initiative and daring of a truly elite group of airmen.

Attempting to capture the 1950-1975 history of these airmen is an exercise in humility; in some respects a historian's worst nightmare. The clandestine nature and pace of their worldwide operations, their need and talent for deceptive cover stories, and their support to intelligence agencies and special forces of other services (and countries), all combine to confuse the unwary researcher. Even experienced Air Commandos were frequently unaware of what their contemporaries were doing in other, far-flung corners of the globe. The author has no illusions as to having captured the whole story.

However this history does claim to present a previously unpublished insight into the diverse capabilities and unusual people who made up this elite group during these unusual times, truly a breed apart.

The 1950-1975 years are of particular interest for two related reasons. First, they enclose a virtual "black hole" of information released to the public on USAF unconventional warfare during this period. Second, the end of the Cold War has made possible for the first time the declassification of a great deal of information regarding "special air missions" during this period. What emerges from behind this quarter-century curtain of secrecy is one of the most remarkable chapters in the history of the United States Air Force.

Readers already knowledgeable of U.S. unconventional warfare history may be confused by the author's liberal use of the title "Air Commando", to describe individuals, specific operations or organizations that operated under widely different names during the 1950-1975 period. They will recall that no Air Commando-designated forces existed from the end of World War II until the "Jungle Jim" project was initiated in 1961. In these cases the author has taken the liberty to use this honored title for two reasons.

First, the general belief that the 1960s-era Air Commandos were the first, post-WWII reactivation of USAF's unconventional warfare capability is in fact far from reality. Recently declassified documents and interviews published here for the first time make clear that National Command Authorities maintained and often employed unconventional air warfare operations throughout the Cold War period.

Such operations were carried out under a variety of carefully created, intentionally confusing deceptions generated to maintain the necessary degree of secrecy. To avoid trapping the reader in this kaleidoscope of misleading terminology, the term "Air Commando" is used to describe the personnel who carried out these missions.

Second, this title is used to honor succeeding generations of USAF's unconventional warriors who fought (and sometimes died) in clandestine "wars in the shadows". As only a few really know, these wars often proved every bit as dangerous as the more highly publicized, conventional combat of the same period.

The Author
Hurlburt Field, Florida
August, 1994

FOREWORD

From their inception as “*Air Commandos*” in World War II’s China-Burma Theater to their present-day organization as the Air Force Special Operations Command, the Air Force’s unconventional warriors have both inspired and infuriated those who have had the fortune (or misfortune) to cross their path. Dominate in spirit, tenacious in battle, exceptionally individualistic in nature, they have proved absolutely chameleon-like in their ability to adapt, survive, and even grow in hostile environments ranging from the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the Pentagon.

The official deactivation of the Air Commandos at the close of World War II led to a widespread belief that with the deactivation the Air Force lost its unconventional warfare capability, at least until its public resurrection in the early 1960s. Officially corrected for the first time in the remarkable tale that follows, this widespread belief wasn’t even close to the reality.

The “secret” to the post-World War II survival of Air Commandos capabilities (under a variety of names), can be traced to one irrefutable fact. Beginning with President Harry S. Truman, every succeeding U.S. administration has found this capability simply too useful to disband. Even during the lean years, with shoestring budgets, “junkyard” aircraft, and many of its officers seconded to intelligence organizations, the “pilot light” was never quite extinguished. To the contrary, the Air Commandos were proving more useful than ever to U.S. strategists seeking a viable response short of declared war to communist revolutionary warfare sweeping the Third World during the 1950s - 1960s. From Laos to Tibet to Iran the Air Commando presence was felt, if not always seen.

During the 25-year period that unfolds on the following pages, some “special air missions” occurred that demanded such extreme security measures that the normal military chain of command established to task the Air Commandos was bypassed. The highly classified Air Commando operation in Laos during the 1960s is perhaps the largest-scale example of this bypassing of normal military channels; the 1970 Son Tay POW rescue mission provides an excellent example of a high-risk mission important enough to require the personal approval of the President of the United States.

The pattern that emerges in many of the subsequent stories from such direct, high-level involvement includes the temporary issuance to the Air Commandos of a “blank check” for resources, “*must not fail*” guidance from the check writers, and an aggressive Air Commando response in the field. Successful mission accomplishment has usually followed, albeit not without a demonstration of unorthodox tactics that frequently falls beyond the scope of published regulations. Inevitably, some residual criticism has fallen upon the Air Commandos in general, and their leaders in particular.

This pattern of “unorthodox tactics - bureaucratic criticism”, is not peculiar to Air Force unconventional warfare operations. It comes as no surprise to many readers that both Army Green Berets and Navy SEALs have experienced their share of travails with this scenario. While much has been done since the 1980s to reduce this friction, it is hoped the reader will see in these stories many of the ingredients that have historically created exaggerated images, both positive and negative, of one of the most colorful bands of warriors America has ever produced.

Lieutenant General Leroy J. Manor, USAF (ret)
Commander, Joint Contingency Task Group *Ivory Coast*,
the top-secret commando raid to rescue American POWs
imprisoned 23 miles from Hanoi, North Vietnam



KOREA

Korea's harsh terrain and weather could prove more deadly than the enemy for special air mission C-47s flying low-level, long-range night infiltration missions. Note the B-26 in upper left-hand corner, another aircraft used for parachuting agents behind the lines. (USAF photo)



“RABBITS” AND NAPALM

Agent Insertions and the C-47 “Bomber”

So little has been published on the brutal “police action” that began on the Korean peninsula in the summer of 1950, that this combat has been described in recent books as “The Forgotten War”, and “The Untold Story”. Even by this standard however, the remarkable story of the Air Force’s unconventional warfare operations behind enemy lines has remained an impenetrable mystery to this day. But told here for the first time, from recently declassified documents and personal interviews, is the story of one Air Commando leader who was there.

“Special Air Missions” in Korea were essentially conducted by two Air Force organizations, neither of which had anything to do with the other, and in fact were only vaguely aware of each other’s existence. The highly classified mission of the 581st Air Resupply & Communications Wing dictated its need for aircraft as different as B-29 Superfortress bombers, twin-engine amphibians, and helicopters.¹ In contrast to the large-scale, strategic 581st mission, another, virtually unknown and much smaller group was also flying at night . . . and with a much different set of rules.

In the Pacific theater the 315th Air Division commanded the well known C-47 transports of the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron. In the early days of the war this overworked squadron was seemingly based out of whatever frontline airstrip its twin-engine transports found themselves at by the end of the day. And this “everywhere-nowhere” presence made the 21st an ideal cover for another, very different group of people. Buried deep within the 21st “Kyushu Gypsies” was the innocuously-named “Detachment 2”, a clandestine Special Air Missions element soon to perform some of the most bizarre unconventional warfare missions of the war.

Moving north to Seoul’s Kimpo Airport following the southern Pusan Perimeter breakout in September, 1950, Detachment 2’s aircraft soon became active far behind enemy lines as far north as Manchuria. Det 2 supported a wild variety of “customers,” including Far East Command (FECOM)-Technical Intelligence, 5th Air Force, the Central Intelligence Agency, and a very tough collection of U.S. and South Korean irregular partisan units.

Seldom numbering more than six-to-eight C-47s, Det 2 pilots coordinated and flew specific penetration missions for all of these individual groups. Later, in July, 1951, they were amalgamated under another intentionally bland cover, “Combined Command for Reconnaissance Activities, Korea” (CCRACK), also headquartered in Seoul. From the very beginning the multi-service FECOM/Det2/CCRACK team came together with surprisingly few miscues.

Psychological Warfare flights were a primary mission for Det 2, with wide-ranging leaflet drops urging Chinese and North Korean soldiers to surrender or face inevitable death. But Det 2 was to find its real niche in CCRACK with a much more interesting, and dangerous, role.

Night, long-range, low-level penetration missions to insert Korean partisans

¹The 581st is described in more detail in the following two stories “The Pentagon’s Air Resupply & Communications Wings,” and “The Night Shift.”



American Air Force and Army officers coordinate a "special air mission" with their South Korean counterparts and an unidentified civilian. Air Commandos, Army Special Forces, Navy frogmen, British Royal Marines, the CIA, and South Korean partisans combined to run a substantial unconventional warfare operation behind enemy lines during the war. (Aderholt collection)

and intelligence agents behind communist lines became Det 2's specialty. Flying single-ship, 8-hour long night missions in Korea's rugged mountains, long before the advent of radar altimeters, satellite navigation and communications, or moving map displays, was almost as dangerous for the aircrews as the mission was for the parachuting agents themselves.

To ensure maximum possible communications and operations security for these classified operations, FECOM-Intelligence gave the code-name "Rabbits", to these highly-valued HUMINT² agents. Courageous and tough, they knew that once out the aircraft's door there was only one way back to friendly lines and survival: walk.

Behind enemy lines the Rabbits used SCR-300 infantry radios to request resupply and to relay intelligence through a Det 2 aircraft orbiting overhead with a long co-axial reception antennae trailing behind the aircraft. It worked, assuming of course that anti-aircraft fire, weather, or a collision with fog-

²HUMINT is the military acronym for Human Intelligence, which in turn defines the intelligence collection means (an agent) by which information is gathered from the source (another person).

shrouded mountains had not terminated the flight earlier.

One small group of Rabbits in particular was used for a very special kind of reconnaissance. Sixteen young women were recruited by Madam Rhee, wife of South Korea's President Syngman Rhee and patron of the theater arts crowd in pre-war Seoul. As Det 2's commander at the time recalls

The agents were furnished by the Koreans. We had hundreds of them. Madam Rhee furnished all the women. They had all the movie stars and everybody, the best-looking girls. We put them out over enemy territory during the winter of '50-'51 when the outside air temperature was forty to fifty degrees below zero. They would go out in cotton padded shoes and suit. They didn't weigh enough to get to the ground, you would think.³

Alone, without weapons or radios, with nothing save their courage and wits to handle the instincts of front-line combat troops in the midst of a savage war⁴, these female "Rabbits" proved remarkably resilient and effective.

According to Army Captain Bob Brewer, the FECOM Intelligence case officer who screened and selected them for *Operation Aviary*, approximately one-thousand male and female "Rabbits" were parachuted into enemy territory between September, 1950, and June, 1951.⁵ Remarkably, more than 70 percent either returned on time or shortly thereafter. Aderholt clearly recalls at least one occasion in which one Rabbit's post-mission debriefing proved a key intelligence input to turning a potentially catastrophic North Korean surprise attack into a significant battlefield victory for UN forces.

Det 2 was clearly working a long way from the "real" Air Force as it supported a very odd collection of United Nations Army, Air Force, civilian and Korean strangers. But . . . the patchwork operation *was* working. And in the process, their growing expertise and reputation within the "spook community" inevitably opened the door to other possibilities. At least that's the way it looked to Det 2's commander, an enterprising, imaginative young captain named Harry "Heinie" Aderholt.

The Det 2 Commander's answer to his self-imposed question resulted in what could arguably be called the first (and last!) C-47 "Bomber". Proceeding on the premise "it's better to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission," Det 2 proceeded to modify some of its C-47s with container racks and bomb shackles to sling two, 75 gallon napalm bombs under the transport's belly. With the one priority restriction that the agent insertion mission be completed first, the "bomber" crews were free to take the war to the enemy . . . anywhere, anytime.

With the aid of moonlight the Det 2 crews soon became adept at locating truck convoys moving south under cover of darkness to avoid allied airstrikes.



Parachuting at night from Air Commando C-47s deep in enemy territory, female intelligence collectors in Operation Aviary had one of the most dangerous missions of the war. Unarmed, without even radios, their survival was totally dependent on their individual ability to deceive the enemy officers they were sent out to approach. (USAF photo)

³ After parachuting into enemy territory, these female agents were to attach themselves to the highest ranking Chinese or North Korean officer nearby, and travel with him as far as possible toward the front lines. Once near the lines they would allow themselves to be captured by friendly forces. From the Prisoner Of War (POW) cages a pre-arranged signal from them would lead to their release, and immediate debrief of intelligence gathered during their mission.

By attacking at extremely low altitudes their accuracy on the convoys was phenomenal. Best of all, they discovered something they could never have guessed until then.

North Korean and Chinese fire discipline was impeccable. Ordered by their commanders to avoid detection at all cost, even after being fired upon, the truck convoys took the napalm attacks without response. Later, Aderholt recalls being one of the first Americans to sight the huge, nighttime Chinese infiltration that changed the course of the war

We saw thousands and thousands of troops, trucks, bumper to bumper! It was a moonlit night, snow on the ground . . . We flew right down, turned our landing lights on, and they wouldn't fire. We came back and reported and were told "Well, the B-26s will get them."⁶

As history shows, the B-26s didn't get them, Det 2's pinpricks were shrugged off, and the massive Chinese attack took the UN headquarters by bloody surprise.⁷ Det 2's "bomber" operations were ordered shut down when headquarters became aware of their existence, as was a later FECOM/Det 2 plan to raid the headquarters of the Russian Advisory staff in North Korea.

As the UN forces retreated from the Chinese attack that winter, contact was lost between the two armies. The urgent question for the UN became, where will the Chinese strike next? From FECOM-Intelligence the mission went to CCRAK/Det 2: Find the Chinese, and *fast!*

In response, Det 2 parachuted an "early warning line" of Rabbits at various distances along an east-west axis across the Korean peninsula. Because the SCR-300 radio frequently took too long to set up, or terrain blocked its signals, the agents on this mission were given red, green, and yellow smoke grenades. At the same time Det 2 had large black and white stripes painted underneath its C-47s' wings for identification purposes.

In the following days Det 2 aircraft flew at 3,000 ft over the terrain along the line of agents. Upon spotting the conspicuously marked Det 2 aircraft, the Rabbits communicated with a simple system. If the Chinese had crossed the point, red smoke was put out; green if South Korean troops were near the area; yellow if no one had crossed the line. Crude but effective, the field-expedient detection system worked.



Returning from a mission a Det 2 aircraft lands at a captured enemy airstrip. For the time-critical mission to locate advancing Chinese units, special identification stripes were painted under the wings of the Air Commando C-47s to identify the low-flying planes to agents using colored smoke signals for communication. (USAF photo)

⁴ Extensively documented elsewhere, the refusal of the United Nations Command headquarters to believe front-line and intelligence reports of the massive Chinese infiltration led to horrific UN casualties in a number of subsequent defensive battles.



Det 2 also returned to Psychological Warfare (PSYWAR) operations, this time by fitting loudspeakers to two of its C-47s. Just the sight of a slow-flying aircraft flying low over their positions with impunity was in itself a psychological blow to Chinese communist and North Korean soldiers below, who undoubtedly wondered why *their* air force wasn't fighting.

Occasionally a female voice was used for the loudspeaker messages, adding insult to injury to the enemy below. Measuring the effectiveness of airborne PSYWAR was difficult, but sometimes a mission occurred that really underscored the power of these messages

The exhaustion and strain of high-risk HUMINT gathering shows on the faces of two returning female agents during a post-mission debriefing. The debriefs immediately follow their release by pre-arranged code word from a United Nations prisoner of war cage. (Bob Brewer)

The surrender messages were particularly effective . . . a large group of Communist troops once surrendered to the circling C-47 "Voice" plane, which then directed them where to walk. The C-47 was accompanied by four F-51's and the loudspeakers told the troops they could be napalmed if they didn't obey. More than 300 troops surrendered along with several trucks of supplies.⁸

In the overall scheme of the United Nations' PSYWAR effort, Det 2's contribution was minuscule in scope but significant in other ways. Perhaps most important, it demonstrated yet again the flexibility, initiative, and aggressiveness that characterize Air Commando operations.

And just as the World War II heritage was passed onto those who flew and fought in Korea, Det 2 in turn would pass it on to those would follow in their footsteps. The true spirit that marks the Air Commando, whatever they're called, whatever their war.

THE PENTAGON'S

"Air Resupply & Communications Wings"

Following the North Korean invasion of South Korea, the U.S. Air Force found itself unprepared to conduct the kind of strategic psychological warfare (PSYWAR) required to support U.S. objectives on the war-torn Asian peninsula. All Air Commando-designated units had been deactivated near the end of World War II. But now the violent outbreak of large-scale combat on the Korean peninsula underscored once again the need for a substantial Air Force unconventional warfare capability.

Despite the sense of urgency in the Pentagon, it was eight long months after the opening of hostilities before the Air Resupply and Communications Service (ARCS) was established at Andrews AFB, Maryland on February 23, 1951. The ARCS was tasked to develop an unconventional warfare capability that included inserting, supplying, and extracting indigenous partisans and U.S. special forces personnel behind enemy lines. Of equal priority was the capability to design, produce, and air drop psychological warfare materials.⁹

Three flying wings, equipped with huge B-29 bombers, twin-engine SA-16 amphibians, C-119 and C-54 transports, and H-19 helicopters, were established to perform the psychological warfare and unconventional warfare missions. Although the Military Air Transport Service was the official parent command for the ARCS,

the wings were actually directed from the Pentagon as operational arms of the Psychological Warfare Division, Directorate of Plans, HQ USAF.¹⁰

For experienced leaders and flight crew, HQ USAF drew on former members of World War II's 492nd Bombardment Group, the "Carpetbaggers". The Carpetbaggers had performed precisely the same kind of clandestine missions over Nazi-occupied Europe in support of the Office of Strategic Services, forerunner to the Central Intelligence Agency.¹¹

Taking a page from Carpetbagger field operations, the B-29s were modified for low level agent and special forces team drops by removing the lower aft gun turret and installing a sheet metal tub and hatch (windbreak). To

avoid radar and visual detection, the drops were performed at night at 500 feet. While this tactic helped protect the aircraft, it was also too low for the parachutist to use his reserve parachute if needed.

The B-29s were also used for leaflet drops, and, using special canisters, for clandestine resupply of agents and teams. Except for the tail guns, all armament was removed from the giant bombers. Most had the underside of the aircraft painted black, and all markings removed except for the national star insignia.¹²



The rugged SA-16 "Albatross" amphibian was one of the most versatile aircraft found in the AR&CWs. Ideal for inserting small teams, it was flown by AR&CWs in the Far East, Middle East and Europe. This 581st Albatross, painted black for night work, sits at a forward airstrip in the Philippines. (AR&CW collection)



The helicopters and amphibians were used for inserting and extracting individual agents and small teams. The twin-engine C-119s and four-engine C-54s were used for a variety of resupply, transport, and air drop missions. These large transports were augmented by both C-47 and C-118 cargo planes.¹³

The 580th and 582nd Air Resupply and Communications Wings were established to support operations throughout the Middle East, as well as western and Soviet-occupied Europe, and the Soviet Union. Both were activated at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho in 1951; the 580th in 1951 and the 582nd a year later. After their activations, both Wings were promptly sent overseas, the 580th to Wheelus Air Base, Libya, and the 582nd to Royal Air Force (RAF) Station Molesworth, England.

As the first ARCW in the Middle-East/European theater, the Libya-based 580th operated in Europe as well as the Middle East, frequently working with U.S. Army Special Forces based in southern Germany's rugged Bavarian Alps. The 580th also had extensive ground-based printing facilities to produce propaganda leaflets to be dropped from its B-29s.¹⁴

Between 1954 and 1956, the 580th's SA-16 Flight supported U-2 overflights of Eastern Europe. On two different occasions, SA-16 crews recovered U-2 pilots after their all-black, single-engine jet spy planes crashed, one in the Caspian Sea north of Iran, and the second in the Black Sea.¹⁵ The SA-16 Flight was also particularly suited to support the Special Forces teams. This fact led to one mission in particular reminding all concerned that even in the Cold War, a sense of humor could come in handy.

This mission required an SA-16 to fly across the Mediterranean at night from Wheelus, land on a lake in Germany at dawn, pick up a team from the 10th Special Forces Group in Germany, and transport them to RAF Molesworth, England. The SA-16 crew was briefed that their "customers" would be in a boat on the lake, disguised as fishermen. As dawn broke over the lake, the plane settled down onto the water promptly on schedule and taxied over to the only boat on the lake.

Loading their passengers aboard quickly, the crew took off for England, surprised to find that the three-"man" Special Forces team was actually comprised of two men

With its underside and tail painted black for night operations, this 581st Air Resupply & Communications Wing (AR&CW) B-29 Superfortress made a formidable, long-range infiltration weapon for partisan insertion and propaganda leaflet drops. A downed crew from one such B-29 was the last group of Americans released by the Chinese communists after the war. (USAF photo)



Tough and fiercely anti-communist South Korean partisans inserted behind enemy lines by AR&CW aircrews fought in vicious small unit combat until they returned to friendly lines . . . if they returned. (Bob Brewer)

and a woman. They fed their passengers hot soup to warm them up, remarking among themselves they hadn't known Special Forces now included women.

The amphibian arrived at Molesworth without incident and the aircraft commander reported to base operations to close his flight plan. Only then did he learn the SA-16's mission had been scrubbed earlier that morning! A quick check of the "Special Forces" team revealed they were simply three German citizens out for an early morning fishing trip. The passengers thanked the Air Commandos for the

soup and fun plane ride, asking only for a ride back to their boat to finish their fishing!¹⁶

The 581st AR&CW was activated at Mountain Home AFB in July, 1951, and promptly posted to Clark Air Base in the Philippines. The 581st saw combat during the Korean Conflict, printing and then dropping millions of surrender leaflets on the enemy in countless PSYWAR missions. They also supported the Central Intelligence Agency by performing agent drops and extractions, and resupplying South Korean partisans operating behind enemy lines.¹⁷

Other 581st combat operations in Korea included a special H-19 Helicopter Flight co-located and blended in with elements of the 2157th Air Rescue Squadron at Seoul City Airbase.¹⁸ In one six month period of operations, the H-19s logged over 1,100 hours of combat flying in over 300 intelligence and rescue missions.¹⁹ (For more on this little known group, read the "The Night Shift", following this story)

In January, 1953, the 581st lost one of its four-engine B-29 Superfortresses and its entire fourteen-man crew while flying a leaflet drop mission over North Korea near the Chinese border. The huge B-29, callsign "Stardust Four Zero", had already dropped leaflets over five North Korean towns during the night of 12 January, and was beginning its run on its last target, the village of Cholson. Some of the leaflets carried news about the war, but others warned the villagers to leave their towns -- they were soon to be bombed by United Nations forces.²⁰

Cholson was less than a minute away as the B-29 began its leaflet pass. Enemy searchlights suddenly lit up the sky, illuminating the Superfortress in their beams. In a rare night attack, a MIG-15 fighter fired on the plane seconds later, setting afire its right, inboard engine. The bomber shook as the tail gunner responded to the attacking fighters with return cannon fire. Two more MIGs swept by the B-29, this time hitting the number three and four engines with machine gun and cannon fire. With the crippled and dying plane falling from the night sky, the pilot ordered the crew to bail out.²¹

Three of the crew perished in the crash, but the remaining crewmen, including the

581st Wing Commander, Colonel John K. Arnold, were captured and spirited into China. They were imprisoned by the Chinese as war criminals engaged in "espionage." Before and during an internationally publicized propaganda trial, Arnold and his crew were coerced into confessing the classified unconventional warfare mission of the 581st.²² Later, under growing international pressure, the Chinese released the eleven airmen on 3 August, 1955, making them the last Korean War American prisoners to be released by the Chinese communists.²³

The 581st had little opportunity to rest as air operations in Korea began winding down in 1953. In response to urgent pleas from the French government for assistance, the 581st was tasked to resupply French forces fighting the communist Viet Minh in the First Indochina War. 581st Flying Boxcars shuttled cargo and troops back and forth continuously between the Philippines and French enclaves in Da Nang, Hanoi, and Haiphong, Vietnam. The 581st also trained civilian C-119 pilots for the Civil Air Transport (CAT), a company that continued to fly combat missions throughout Indochina for the remainder of the war.

Soon after training the CAT pilots, the 581st began flying its C-119s from bases in Japan to the huge U.S. maintenance depot at Clark Air Base. The Flying Boxcars would enter wearing "U.S." insignia, and depart wearing French Air Force markings. The 581st crews would also ferry the now-"French" transports to Hanoi, returning to the Philippines with worn-out, battle-damaged aircraft. Reversing through the depot, the refurbished aircraft would emerge with U.S. markings for the flight back to Japan. American assistance to the French continued until their final defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.²⁴

All three AR&C Wings were down-graded to Group-status in 1953, but continued to perform classified operations until their final de-activation in 1956. Their missions were continued, on a smaller scale, by USAF successors under a variety of different covers.

In Europe, the 42nd Troop Carrier Squadron (Special) absorbed the C-119s, SA-16s, many of the personnel and the mission of both the 580th and 582nd Air Resupply and Communications Groups. The 42nd, based at RAF Molesworth, also maintained a detachment at Wheelus Air Base, Libya.

In 1957 the 42nd traded its C-119s for the more powerful, longer-range C-54s, and moved from Molesworth to RAF Alconbury. As the year ended, the 42nd was de-activated and with it the Air Commando mission in Europe. In the Pacific, the mission of the 581st was taken over by the 322 Troop Carrier Squadron (Medium, Special), flying C-54s until its de-activation in 1958.²⁵ (See the following story "On the Roof of the World" for a description of one of the most remarkable missions conducted by this unit and its successor)

During the early years of the Cold War, the men and women of the Air Resupply and Communications Service were unsung heroes, performing an important but "invisible" mission vital to the security of the United States. As the successors to the Air Commandos and Carpet Baggers of World War II, they added their contributions to the growing legacy of today's Air Force Special Operations Command - "Quiet Professionals."



Dropped by the millions over enemy territory by the 581st AR&CW, these psychological warfare leaflets attempted to induce the individual soldier to surrender. Those that did could use the leaflet for a "safe conduct" pass to United Nations' front lines. (USAF photo)



THE NIGHT SHIFT

These Helicopters had a Different Mission

Like owls, bats, and other aerial “things” that go bump in the night, Air Commando helicopter crews flying behind the lines during the Korean War did their best work in the dark. Adding further to this natural darkness was a man-made darkness, created with the deception plans and misleading unit designators that characterize many covert operations. This man-made darkness would prove so effective it would last forty years *after* the war ended. How were these secret helicopter missions masked so successfully? And what were they doing that warranted this effort?

A visitor to Korea’s war-torn capital of Seoul in late 1952 could reasonably assume that all of the dozen or so H-19A helicopters parked at Seoul City Air Base (designated “K-16” by the United Nations Command) were part of the 2157th Air Rescue Squadron (ARS), then operating from K16. A more discerning eye however might notice that on some of the helicopters, the big “RESCUE” markings on the fuselage had been painted over.

If particularly curious journalists were to look beyond the Air Rescue Service, they might simply be told the unmarked helicopters worked for an obscure “trash hauler” transport unit, blandly designated the 581st Air Resupply & Communications Wing (AR&CW). There was even a “581st Helicopter Flight” sign in front of a tent that said such was the case. But there were two things they would most definitely *not* be told.

First, as described in the previous story the Air Force earned more points for creativity than candor when it designated the 581st simply a “Resupply and Communication” outfit. The 581st AR&CW was clearly trained, equipped and organized from the start for its classified, unconventional warfare missions. It “resupplied” intelligence agents and South Korean saboteurs behind enemy lines; many of which the 581st itself had put there in the first place. It “communicated” with psychological warfare propaganda leaflets, dropped by the millions at night over enemy held territory.

Second, the unmarked helicopters didn’t get their missions from the 581st or even a third cover in use, the “Light Attack Bomber” operations desk at 5th Air Force-Forward Deployed headquarters in downtown Seoul. The truth was to found down one more level.

The Air Commandos in fact responded to orders from the fourth layer in this elaborate deception cover, U.S. Far East Command’s “Liaison Detachment” (FECOM-LD)²⁶. But even this final layer had a surprise. The innocuous-sounding “-LD” was anything but a routine headquarters staff function. It was in fact the link to a bizarre group of United Nations intelligence and guerrilla organizations under the umbrella name “Combined Command for Reconnaissance Activities, Korea.” (Confused yet?)

That’s *how* the deception was maintained. The *why* the deception was

²⁶ Noted earlier, FECOM-LD was also coordinating with Captain Aderholt’s Det 2, 21st Troop Carrier Squadron for behind-the-lines, fixed-wing infiltration operations.

maintained at such effort makes for some very interesting reading: as does a glance at some of the personalities making up the Flight's original roster.

Included in the group of six pilots that activated the Helicopter Flight at K-16 was a very determined second lieutenant named Robert F. Sullivan. To date his determination had displayed itself primarily by the lengths he was willing to go not to "haul trash" in the C-82 transports to which he had been assigned. Perhaps forgetting the maxim "be careful what you ask for, you might just get it," Lt Sullivan made his moves.

The former paratrooper's first escape move was to volunteer for Forward Air Controller duty with the infantry (remember this was in the middle of a war). With that qualification under his belt he volunteered for helicopter training to further mask the "fixed-wing skeleton" in his closet. Successful with both moves, Sullivan immediately found himself enroute to war-torn Korea, to a unit unknown even to the Replacement Depot staff. Further inquiries led to an intelligence officer who knew of the unit, but refused to disclose its mission. Some of Sullivan's adventures follow later in this story.

By late 1952 the Helicopter Flight, 581st Air Resupply Squadron, had four brand new H-19As available and crewed at K-16 for the mission that had only recently been divulged to them by "-LD", FECOM's previously described spook-to-helicopter liaison detachment. Flying blacked-out, single-ship, night low-level insertions of United Nations agents and sabotage teams behind North Korean lines was to be their primary mission; augmenting the 2157th ARS for

combat rescue missions a secondary.

The Flight's relations with the "white hat" 2157th ARS, with whom their living tents were co-located, cooled somewhat after the latter discovered the "black hat" mission of the new strangers in their midst. The local rescue commander immediately requested the Flight remove the RESCUE markings with which the Flight's aircraft had arrived at K-16. The ARS decision not to fly missions at night further separated the Air Commandos from their Air Rescue Service contemporaries.

One unfortunate fallout for the Flight from ARS' "no

night rescue" policy was that the North Koreans soon learned the sound of a helicopter at night could only mean one thing. An agent insertion or extraction mission was in progress, perhaps warranting an extra response that might not be worthwhile for a defensive-oriented rescue mission. As described later in this story, this operational distancing between "black hat/white hat" missions occasionally clashed with combat realities that demanded the two work closely together in rescue missions.

Virtually all night insertion missions began with one of the Flight's H-19s



Painting "Air Resupply" on the side of their H-19 helicopters was one experiment that was dropped abruptly after re-thinking the likely fate of a captured pilot should the North Koreans discover what "Air Resupply" really did at night. (Joe Barrett)



departing at night from Cho-do Island, a bleak rock located only ten miles from the Korean coast . . . and sixty miles *behind* North Korea's front lines. As vulnerable as it was, Cho-do's proximity to the peninsula's rugged coastline and mudflats provided an ideal base from which to conduct night unconventional warfare missions.

Picking up the agents and a final brief on Cho-do, the H-19s flew north out over the sea, flying just above the treacherous waves to avoid North Korean radar. Attempting to keep the engine exhaust stack on the left side of the helicopter away from the coastline as much as possible during the run-in, the crews could only hope the North Koreans weren't waiting in ambush for them.

Sometimes the threat started long before the Air Commandos crossed the shoreline, as on one mission for which the crew had the radio callsign "Treefrog 33."

Flying an insertion mission north along the coast in total darkness the crew heard "Kodak" (the radar tracking site on Cho-do) ask "Treefrog 33, how many treefrogs are out there?" Maintaining radio silence the Air Commandos refused to respond. Kodak then announced "Treefrog 33, I am painting five, repeat five, slow moving targets your vicinity."²⁷

Without a word the helicopter banked out to sea, disappearing silently over the horizon enroute back to Cho-do and safety.

Flying over the ocean in near total darkness, under radio silence, without lights, navigation aids, night vision goggles or radar altimeters, demanded superb airmanship at its rawest level. On one mission Lt Sullivan recalls feeling the nose of the helicopter tug and dip slightly as he flew the helicopter's nose wheels into the freezing ocean waters. Another Air Commando, Lt Frank Fabijan, reported the same hair-raising close call on one night flight.

Barren Cho-do Island was the launch site for agent insertions along Korea's western coastline behind enemy lines. Described by one Air Commando pilot as "acres and acres of nothing but acres and acres", this photo shows the small radar site ("Kodak") that monitored the infiltration missions. (Joe Barrett)

As dangerous as the night missions were, the Air Commandos at least had the element of surprise and safety of darkness on their side. But both were usually lost before the mission ever began when it came to daylight combat rescue of downed fighter pilots. Whereas the ARS preferred thorough if time-consuming mission planning, the faster-moving Air Commandos attempted to reach the downed pilot before the enemy had a chance to prepare its anti-aircraft defenses for the inevitable rescue attempt; riskier but in their opinion more productive.

Whatever the choice of tactics, there was simply no way out of a knock-down brawl if the North Koreans were near enough the downed pilot to smell blood. And on February 24, 1953, there was enough blood, enemy soldiers, firepower, and bad weather near a downed Marine Corps fighter pilot to produce three Silver Star Medals for two Air Commando pilots and their Air Rescue Service crewman.

Things were not going particularly well for Marine Major Dave Cleeland on this very cold February morning. His 100th combat mission had left him wounded, freezing, lying next to his crashed F4U Corsair fighter in the middle of a frozen reservoir behind enemy lines . . . and watching North Korean soldiers organizing on

the shore to come for him. A lack of maps, low fuel, and subsequent confusion had already deterred two Air Rescue helicopters. And things were about to get worse.

Low cloud cover began to frustrate Cleeland's wingmen attempting to strafe the enemy now massing on the reservoir's shore. Worse yet, massed North Korean groundfire succeeded in driving two Corsairs from the scene with heavy battle damage. With time, fuel, and ammunition slipping away quickly, the two remaining Corsairs were down to making dummy strafing runs against growing enemy fire when the entire picture changed yet again.

The good news was that an Air Commando helicopter, having been scrambled from K-16 for an immediate rescue attempt, was approaching the reservoir with the crashed F4U in sight. The bad news was that the North Koreans, having heard or seen the approaching helicopter, were now charging out of their positions for a last-ditch effort to capture or kill the wounded Marine pilot. Whether what happened next is considered good or bad news has a lot to do with whether the reader is American or North Korean.

As the enemy made their rush toward Major Cleeland, a combination of just-arrived Corsair and USAF F-80 jet fighters orbiting overhead reacted instantaneously, raking the exposed enemy with their 20mm cannon. In response the North Koreans opened up on the low flying fighters with



In isolation on Cho-do Island while awaiting a night insertion by one of the Flight's helicopters, this Korean agent appears dressed in an enemy uniform for his mission. (Joe Barrett)



Only this small sign, and the absence of "RESCUE" markings on their helicopters suggested the Flight worked for someone other than the 2157th Air Rescue Service Squadron with which it was co-located. But even the sign was a lie, as was yet a third layer of deception that was put in place to cover their real mission. (Joe Barrett)

everything they had. In the midst of this air-ground frenzy, the H-19 swooped through a hail of ground fire seemingly coming from every direction. Picking up the Marine pilot, several bullet holes (including one to a gas tank and a second through the hand of the crewman, 46-year old A2C Thornton), and a good scare, the H-19 crew fled the firefight enroute to some well-deserved Silver Stars.⁶

Sometimes the co-located Air Commando and Air Rescue crews crossed paths in odd ways. This was never more true than on April 12, 1953, when two F-86

fighter pilots bailed out of their battle-damaged jets over the Yellow Sea. One of the two, Captain Joe McConnell, was already an ace and enroute to becoming the leading jet ace of the Korean War. With one Air Commando and one Air Rescue helicopter searching for the pilots,

Off Cho-do Island, one of the Flight's H-19s flies in daylight relatively high over the deceptively pleasant looking Yellow Sea. The Korean coastline in the background is enemy held territory, as Cho Do was sixty miles behind enemy lines. (Joe Barrett)



McConnell splashed into the near-freezing ocean next to Lieutenant Sullivan's aircraft, and a very quick pick-up courtesy of the 581st.

Or at least that's what Sullivan thought until he saw newspaper descriptions of the rescue, featuring photographs of a H-19 with RESCUE markings hoisting "McConnell" out of the water.²³ He later learned the photograph came from an Air Rescue re-enactment of the rescue, conducted in a freshwater lake in Japan. *C'est la guerre!*

Two Air Commando H-19 pilots would later receive a Silver Star and Distinguished Flying Cross from an attempted rescue mission described in their citations as "the deepest helicopter penetration of the Korean War."

⁶ Grateful naval authorities reportedly proposed to nominate the trio for the Navy Cross. The Navy subsequently demurred after the Air Force responded it would provide its own recognition to the airmen. On May 21, 1953, Captain Joseph Barrett, 1st Lieutenant Frank Fabijan, and Airman Second Class Thomas Thornton received Silver Stars for their gallantry; HQ Far East Air Forces General Order #246.

Taking off from Cho-do in the early morning hours, Captain Frank Westerman and Lieutenant Robert Sullivan flew low-level through the darkness for two hours, guided north by an Air Rescue SA-16 pathfinder aircraft flying overhead at an altitude of 100 feet.

First light found their helicopter 16 miles south of the Chinese border . . . and within ten minutes flying time of *Antung*, the biggest Chinese MIG fighter base in the region. Racing inland they discovered the valley the downed pilot was reported to be in . . . and something much worse, as Lt. Sullivan recalls:

This valley in which intelligence had told us we would find nothing but farmers, contained at least a regiment of troops . . . all armed and all firing as fast as they could . . . the hills looked like a bloody warehouse, piles of stuff under camouflage nets . . . it was damned evident no (evader) was walking around loose in that place.²⁴

The Air Commandos fled for their lives, urging the SA-16 orbiting offshore to do the same. Perhaps an evader was in the valley, but the more likely explanation is that the survival radio emission that generated the rescue attempt was in fact the bait for a Chinese trap. A very long "day at the office" indeed for everyone involved.

Individual combat tours in Korea lasted one year. By the summer of 1953 however, the Armistice negotiations had ended the agent insertion missions, and the Flight's four H-19s were integrated with the 2157th ARS. For most people the end of the Korean War meant a return to family and civilian careers. For the Air Commandos however, the war changed but never really ended, as the following Cold War stories reveal.



Home base for the Air Commando helicopters was Seoul City Air Base, designated "K-16" by the United Nations Command. Clearly showing the signs of war, K-16 was an hour's flight from the agent launch site on Cho-do Island. (Joe Barrett)





COLD WAR

There *is* a reason why Tibet is often called "the roof of the world." One 19th century adventurer described the frozen, barren terrain as "the most frightening desert in the world." The loss of even one of the DC-6's four engines on a night infiltration mission at these altitudes would have led to an almost certain crash in the terrain below. (USAF photo)

ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

With the "bandits" in Tibet

If the signing of the Korean War armistice in 1953 did little to ease Cold War tensions, the loss of an estimated 2.4 million casualties²⁵ to both sides appears to have at least influenced a change of battlefield during the following decade. Almost as if by mutual agreement both western and Soviet bloc powers adopted a more discrete but still vicious

form of warfare, utilizing intelligence agencies and supporting military "special operations" or "*spetsialnoye nakhacheniyeye*"⁷ forces. It was from these secret "wars in the shadows" that many of the most effective future Air Commando leaders would learn their tradecraft.

Throughout the 1950s successive U.S. administrations tasked the Air Force to support intelligence organizations providing clandestine aid to a number of anti-communist rebellions, including one taking place in the remotest and darkest of these "shadow wars". When China's Chairman Mao ordered his army into the nameless wilds of Tibet in 1950, Tibet's fiercely independent Khamba and Amdo tribes rebelled, becoming "bandits" in the Chinese propaganda machine.

Much to Chinese dismay, they rebelled with such ferocity that seven years later, the Chinese invasion forces were still fighting against an 80,000 strong, horseback-riding guerrilla army that seemed to come out of a Rudyard Kipling poem.²⁶ But the Chinese continued to have one indispensable advantage going for them. The brutal geography of Tibet itself made outside, western support to the guerrillas almost impossible.

The barren and freezing mountain kingdom of Tibet, on Communist China's southwestern flank was by anyone's reckoning, a long way from anywhere else. When tasked to support the anti-communist guerrillas, the U.S.' still fledgling intelligence community lacked the expertise and equipment to conduct the long range, air commando-type clandestine missions it needed just to get to Tibet. But where to get the help it needed?

The needed help was soon forthcoming in the form of a select group of both new and experienced USAF officers seconded for service outside the Air Force. Some of these were assigned to Detachment 2, 1045th Observation, Evaluation & Training Group (OE&TG)⁸ on Okinawa.²⁷ Most of this small team, like Captain (later Colonel) Ed Smith and Lieutenant (later Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense) Larry Ropka, were new to the unconventional warfare business. But the commander who set the pace for these air commandos had already established himself as a formidable unconventional warfare fighter and leader in Korea.

Introduced in the first story, now-Major "Heinie" Aderholt's unconventional combat experience in "special air missions" proved especially useful to the young group assembled on Okinawa. Now commanding Det 2, 1045th OE&TG, he was soon to become one of the most influential (and controversial) Air Commandos in Southeast Asia. But that was to come later and for the moment, the high-altitude, high-risk, clandestine flights to Tibet demanded the best possible support.

To support extreme-range, U.S. paramilitary operations with secret airdrops of weapons and personnel to remote drop zones, Det 2 planners had to overcome enormous distance and altitude problems posed by the Tibetan geography. There is a reason why Tibet is often referred to as the "roof of the world," a country in which the "lowlands" are found at 13,000 ft elevation. Fundamental to the entire problem was simply finding a transport aircraft with adequate range and payload performance to operate under these extreme conditions.

Prior to 1959, Det 2's only C-118, (tail number 53-3820) was actively in use with the U.S. government-supported proprietary airline, Civil Air Transport (CAT).²⁸ And according to legendary Air Commando Brigadier General Edward Lansdale, CAT had by that date completed "more than 200 overflights of Mainland China and Tibet".²⁹

But the C-118's payload and power limitations at Tibetan altitudes precluded effective



Seeming to ride straight out of a 19th century Rudyard Kipling poem, the Tibetan guerrillas proved deadly enough in close-quarters combat. Man and beast fought at altitudes above that at which U.S. military pilots are required to wear oxygen masks. (Michel Peissel, *The Secret War in Tibet*, HarperCollins)

⁷ A Russian term for "special purpose" military units.

⁸ The 1045th reported to the 1007th Air Intelligence Group, co-located with and reporting in turn to HQ USAF, Plans and Policy Directorate, the Pentagon.



With all USAF markings removed, Civil Air Transport crews flew the long-range, C-130 Hercules on the final night infiltration leg into Tibet. Tibetan guerrillas, some trained in Colorado, returned to their homeland by parachute from these "skyboats," as the Amdo and Khamba tribesmen called the big planes. (USAF photo)

support on the required scale. Earlier accounts of the C-118s flying at "terrain masking" altitudes to avoid Chinese radar are in error; the C-118 simply couldn't fly any higher!³⁰

The loss of even one of the C-118's four R2800 engines over Tibet's jagged mountains would make the loss of the aircraft and its American crew virtually inevitable; taking with them any hope of maintaining "plausible denial" of U.S. support. The new Lockheed C-130A was the obvious choice for this operation, but the only C-130s available in the Pacific were assigned to the USAF's 315th Air Division; parent organization of the (still active) 21st TCS.³¹

To tap clandestine Air Force C-130 support for Tibet, the intelligence community approached the Office of Special Operations (OSO),⁹ the division within the Office of the Secretary of Defense charged with providing military support to the intelligence community.³² The Air Force response manifested itself quickly with establishment on Okinawa of E Flight, 21st TCS, in March, 1961.³³

E Flight was equipped from the start with the best long range tactical transport in the world, the C-130. And as the operations tempo increased, so did the reputations of the Det 2's planners. Under the direction of Aderholt's Det 2, E-flight C-130s were flown to Takhli, Thailand for removal of USAF markings and swap-out with CAT aircrews flying the final leg over Tibet.³⁴ With the passage of time Det 2's self-confidence, common sense and imagination overcame every obstacle to provide the publicly "invisible" but all-critical air

⁹General Lansdale's office was in the OSO at this time.



support. And they did so without the loss of a single aircraft or crew during the entire campaign.³⁵

To reduce the chance of Chinese detection, the CAT aircrews flew their “sterilized” C-130s from northern Thailand, flying across inadequately charted mountainous terrain with no reliable navigation aids save the navigator’s celestial plotting skills.³⁶

To further mask the flights from possible Chinese intercept, all missions were flown at night, during the ten-day “moon windows” that allowed at least some visual terrain recognition. Monsoon weather restricted the program still further, to dry-season only flights.

While the night and remote terrain factors helped avoid detection, they also complicated

the mission planners’ efforts. One planner recalls assembling old French maps in which the same river, running across different map sections, was disjointed by miles at the map junctions. To execute these high risk missions, the contract aircrews were paid the remarkably low sum of \$350 for a “routine” mission; \$500 “if unusual hazards” were involved.³⁷

A routine mission might carry a number of pallets rigged for airdrop, along with a group of parachutists consisting of a U.S. advisor and a Tibetan guerrilla team finished with its training.³⁸ These missions taxed even the extreme range capability of the C-130. If shifting winds or mechanical problems caused mission deviations, discrete diplomatic arrangements allowed the pilots to land in East Pakistan.³⁹

Not all air commando support was performed in Asia. As early as 1957, USAF C-124 Globemasters began flying Tibetan guerrilla recruits, many who had never even seen an airplane before, and their U.S. advisors to Petersen Airfield, Colorado. Upon landing they were immediately bussed to Camp Hale, a secluded training site located above 10,000 feet elevation near the old mining town of Leadville.⁴⁰

Following their training they were quickly flown back to Asia. Shortly thereafter they were parachuted from the “skyboats,” as the guerrillas called aircraft, onto Tibet’s high desert plateaus. When Tibet’s leader, the Dalai Lama, fled his country in 1959, it was these Colorado-trained Tibetans and their case officers who were credited with setting up the clandestine resupply airdrops that were crucial to the success of his escape to India.⁴¹

The downing of Gary Power’s U-2 over Russia in May, 1960, and the overwhelming power of the Chinese pressure in Tibet brought an abrupt cessation to all air commando support to Tibet that same month.⁴² While Tibetan resistance continued¹⁰ (violent anti-Chinese riots in Tibet were reported as late as 1987), America’s attention was being drawn toward a growing conflict in Southeast Asia. In the decade that followed, the Air Commandos would flourish to an extent never seen before or since.

Their appearance reflecting the extreme climatic and geographic conditions in which they live, Tibet’s Khamba and Amdo tribesmen (left) boast a long and successful tradition of irregular warfare. (Michel Peissel, *The Secret War in Tibet*, HarperCollins)



Tough faces, tough war. No quarter was given or asked by the guerrillas or their U.S. advisors. (Michel Peissel, *The Secret War in Tibet*, HarperCollins)

¹⁰ In yet another Cold War twist, Soviet airdrops to the guerrillas became common by 1966, following the Sino-Soviet fallout. Unlike earlier U.S. “plausible denial” operations, the Russian diplomats were quite open in admitting their support (See *The Secret War in Tibet*, Endnotes, p. 234.)

BAHIA DE COCHINOS

With the Alabama Air National Guard Over Cuba



CIA-purchased and refurbished B-26s from USAF's aircraft "boneyard" in Arizona provided the air-to-ground attack force for the exiles. The Alabama Guard instructors had their hands full training the low-time civilian pilots to fly them to their combat potential. (Joe Shannon)

On April 17, 1961, a CIA trained, equipped and organized Cuban exile force executed "Operation Pluto", an amphibious and paratroop invasion of Cuba at *Bahia de Cochinos*, a site to become known to the American public overnight by its English language name: The Bay of Pigs. The subsequent *debacle* brought worldwide embarrassment to a new President, and a predictable cry for the heads of those responsible for the failure. Long since lost in the shadows of the public outcry is another story, largely untold until now.

This story involves the odd role played by an experienced Air Force special warfare officer seconded to the CIA, the secret training team he helped recruit from within the Alabama Air National Guard (commonly shortened to "Air Guard"), his late-night meeting with a key Central American dictator, and American air-to-air combat casualties over the Bay of Pigs on D+2 of the invasion. It also leaves behind an intriguing "what if" question, had the advice of the special warfare officer been heeded.

Less than a week after the defeat of the Cuban exiles, President Kennedy ordered a

select panel chaired by Army General Maxwell D. Taylor to conduct a "lessons learned" study to determine the causes of the failure. Two months and 358 pages later, the report⁴³ was submitted. Fidel Castro's response to the same question was somewhat shorter. When asked after the battle why the invasion had failed, he replied simply "They had no air support."⁴⁴

The lack of air support was not due to a lack of aircraft. In fact, in the months leading up to the invasion the Cuban exiles had more air support--transports and especially World War II vintage B-26 light attack bombers--than they could crew.⁴⁵ The 15 bombers used were CIA-purchased and refurbished from the mothball fleet in the Air Force's aircraft boneyard at Davis-Monthan AFB in Tucson, Arizona.

To fly these combat aircraft however, the Cuban exiles had only a handful of former airline and crop duster pilots. Searching for B-26 instructors and maintenance personnel, the CIA became aware of an organization that had exactly the people it needed: The Alabama Air National Guard, the last USAF organization to fly the B-26, had only recently retired the old bombers given to the state.

To make discrete contact with and help recruit Alabama's Air Guard personnel, the Agency used an Air Commando Major already in CIA service in Okinawa. Already familiar to the reader from previous stories in this history, this Alabama born and raised Major was none other than "Heinie" Aderholt. Advantageous to the CIA's need for secrecy was the fact that General George "Poppa" Doster, Commander of the Alabama's Air Guard, already knew Major Aderholt. And it didn't hurt that the Major's brother had previously served in the Alabama Air Guard.

The CIA made contact with the Air Guard Commander in October, 1960.⁴⁶ In less than two months, the charismatic Doster had assembled eighty American instructors with B-26, C-46 and C-54 experience,¹¹ then promptly moved the entire group (and himself) to the secret CIA base at Retalhuleu, Guatemala to begin training the Cuban exiles.⁴⁷ Both B-26 ground attack missions and C-46 paratrooper training for the exile's airborne force were emphasized.

As the invasion date approached, Major Aderholt was sent to find another airbase, one isolated enough to minimize public curiosity yet still place the invasion beach within the combat radius of a fully loaded B-26. This search ultimately led the Major to a prophetic meeting with one of the most interesting and durable dictators in Central America.

Securing the use of the remote airstrip at Puerto Cabezas on Nicaragua's eastern coast would provide the CIA with the closest launch point it could reasonably expect to find, while still maintaining the needed secrecy. This is of course, *if* Nicaragua's President Anastasio Somoza was willing to take the political risk of supporting the U.S. against a fellow Latino government leader.

Flying in civilian clothes to Nicaragua at night as representatives of a large U.S. corporation operating in Central America, Major Aderholt and a CIA official met with President Somoza at 2 am to ask for Puerto Cabezas, a remote airstrip on Nicaragua's eastern coast. Somoza quickly agreed, prophetically adding only one stipulation

I know who you are. I'm willing to support you, but be sure you get rid of that son-of-a-bitch, or you are going to have to live with him for the rest of your life⁴⁸



Sitting atop the cockpit of an Alabama Air National Guard (AANG) B-26, Brigadier General George "Poppa" Doster would prove an enthusiastic and effective organizer for the Air Commando/CIA team's plan to train Cuban exile aircrews for a return to their homeland. (AANG archives)

¹¹ By now a vintage Air Commando operation in all but name, this program was to prove a prototype for similar Air Commando operations in Indochina. In such programs, host-country nationals with little or no flying experience were successfully taught to fly combat aircraft such as the T-28 fighter and B-26 bomber, as well as the C-47 transport. The highly-classified training of Thai mercenaries and Lao nationals in Thailand by Air Commandos in Operation "Water Pump" is described later in this history.



A Cuban exile undergoing pre-invasion paratrooper training from an exile-flown C-46 at the secret CIA training base in Retalhuleu, Guatemala. Paratroopers would later lead the way for the main amphibious landing. (Joe Shannon)

The next day Somoza's son flew with the Major in a Nicaraguan C-47 to Puerto Cabezas. There Aderholt inspected the area and prepared a sketch from which the departure base for the invasion would be constructed.⁴⁹

Major Aderholt also assessed the invasion force air plan, fighting--and losing--an argument to increase the number of B-26 sorties needed to ensure that pre-invasion air strikes knocked out Castro's small fighter force, especially its three T-33 jets.⁵⁰ This time a lost argument would come back to haunt the planners, and bring tragedy to General Doster's volunteer instructors.

The American instructor pilots were told prior to



volunteering that their primary mission was to train the Cuban exile aircrews; Americans would fly in combat only as a last resort.⁵¹ Key personnel with knowledge of the CIA's internal operations, such as B-26 squadron commander Lt Col Joe Shannon, and his Operations officer, Major Riley Shamburger, were ideally suited for the training role, but were specifically prohibited by name from flying combat for fear their capture would compromise CIA security.

Point of departure for B-26s supporting the exile's paratroop and amphibious landing at the Bay of Pigs, remote Puerto Cabezas airfield was expanded in a hurry from rough plans made by Major Aderholt, an Air Commando officer then seconded to CIA. (Joe Shannon)

But with the loss of two exile-flown B-26s on D Day and the subsequent demoralization of most remaining exile pilots on D+1, CIA's Deputy Director, Plans, reluctantly authorized American volunteers to fly combat missions over the beachhead the following day.⁵² Five sorties were scheduled, four of them with American crews including pilots Shannon, Shamburger,^{1,2} and two other Guardsmen, Willard Ray and Billy Goodwin.⁵³ Only half these Americans would survive the day.

Tragically for the Guard volunteers and the few remaining exile pilots, the initial, critical B-26 airstrikes had been

Following his B-26 training in Guatemala, former *Air Cubana* airline pilot Gustavo Ponzoa (left) became a key leader in the first, pre-invasion airstrikes intended to knock out Castro's fighter force. (Joe Shannon)

curtailed,¹³ leaving Castro with a handful of fighters with which to attack the relatively slow moving B-26s. Forsaking the vital military element of surprise for political considerations, a jittery White House staff issued last minute orders to reduce the D-minus

¹² Like the other Americans, Shannon and Shamburger were volunteers. Reversal of the earlier prohibition against their participation in combat is attributed to the gravity of the situation that night.



GULF OF MEXICO

Straits of Florida

LA HABANA
HAVANA

BAY OF PIGS

590 MILES

B-26s flown by Cuban exiles and Alabama Air Guard crews had a long haul from Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua to the invasion beach in Cuba, but it was the closest site that could be politically arranged.

B-26 BASE

CARIBBEAN

PACIFIC 36

OCEAN

Cartagena



After the collapse of the exile landing force, Fidel Castro views wreckage of a B-26 downed by Cuban fighters during the invasion.

2 airstrikes as a tactic to mask U.S. involvement; to make the airstrikes “look Cuban.”⁵⁴ A subsequent decision by the same political advisors using the same rationale cancelled a second airstrike intended to finish off the Cuban fighters not eliminated by the first, curtailed strike.

Castro’s remaining T-33 jet and propeller-driven Sea Fury fighters were waiting overhead for the Alabama Guardsmen on D+2 as the B-26s attempted to drive home attacks against the advancing Cuban ground forces. In the day-long combat that ensued, four Alabama Air Guard aircrew¹⁴ in two B-26s were shot down by Cuban fighters.⁵⁵ Agonized U.S. Navy fighter pilots flying over the beachhead from the aircraft carrier *Essex* watched the fighters attacking the B-26s below, but were prohibited from defending the Guardsmen.

The invasion collapsed the following day.

AFTERMATH

Immediately following the collapse of the invasion, the Captain of the *Essex* was ordered to personally burn all orders and ship’s logs covering the period of the invasion.⁵⁶ The remaining Guardsmen returned from Central America to Alabama with strict orders not to divulge their involvement in Operation Pluto.

The probable response of the Cuban public to a successful invasion in 1961 is still a matter of debate. Lost in the political finger-pointing that swept through Washington and other world capitols was just how close to success Operation Pluto actually came. And President Somoza’s prophetic warning was to haunt successive U.S. administrations to this day.

¹³ At the Puerto Cabezas airfield, Lt Col Shannon was told the reduced sorties would keep the air attack “from looking too spectacular . . . too much like a U.S. operation.”

¹⁴ Shot down by Cuban T-33 fighters on April 19th, the second day of the invasion: Riley Shamburger, Wade C. Gray, Willard Ray, and Leo F. Baker.

THE WAR THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN:

With the Green Berets in Iran

Like that of their Green Beret counterparts, the Air Commando image in the public mind is virtually synonymous with Southeast Asia during the 1960s, and for good reason. Throughout the American involvement there, both acknowledged and secret, Air Commandos fought and died in larger numbers than ever before. But the

U.S. had vital interests elsewhere during this period that also needed attention. And nowhere was this more so than in oil rich and unstable Iran, strategically located between the Soviet Union and the oil-rich Persian Gulf.

By the early 1960s the Shah of Iran was in trouble. The Kurds, a fiercely independent mountain people, were succeeding in their intent to forcibly establish an autonomous Kurdistan in the mountains overlapping the Iranian, Iraqi and southern Turkish boundaries. Like most people living in harsh terrain and climatic conditions, the Kurds are products of their environment, expert guerilla fighters used to hardships and with an intimate knowledge of their own land. In response to the growing rebellion and a request for help from the Shah, an eighty-man Green Beret team and two Air Commandos arrived in snow-covered Teheran in March, 1963.

What USAF Major Arnie Tillman and Captain Richard Secord found in Iran had an all too-familiar ring. The Shah's showcase unit of F-86 jet fighters didn't "do" counterinsurgency (COIN). What "did" COIN was what Secord describes as a "junkyard air force of C-47s and T-6 trainers", flown by the "F-Troop of the skies." But the Air Commandos did have three advantages going for them that in the end proved decisive.

First, although the "junkyard pilots" were from the bottom of the social and promotion barrel, they were competent pilots who knew their machines. Second, there were plenty of light aircraft available.



And finally, where the American Green Beret/AirCommando team was going was far enough from headquarters and the news media to provide the needed freedom of action. This latitude would allow them to devise an effective air-ground tactical doctrine tailored to meet battlefield realities. Nor would this reality-based doctrine be hampered by a lengthy "Rules of Engagement" list comprised by people far from the war zone.

The team operated from the U.S. Military Assistance & Advisory Group (MAAG) compound in Kermanshah, a town only a few kilometers from the

Iraqi border. More importantly, it sat on the southeastern edge of Kurdistan. From the narrow gravel airstrip that was their only airbase, the two Air Commandos quickly began modifying their junkyard aircraft.

To develop an air-to-ground strike capability, the T-6s were modified with .30 caliber machine guns, and wing-racks for Zuni aerial rockets and light bombs. One C-47 "psychological warfare" aircraft sported a loudspeaker. All available aircraft immediately began flying ground support missions to the isolated Iranian army positions strung out ineffectively over the contested mountains. Secord describes in his memoirs the fundamentals of this successful COIN operation.

Both the ground and air campaigns were aimed at building the "sinews of war" . . . rapid, secure communication; wholesome field rations; plentiful ammunition; timely evacuation of wounded and adequate medical treatment; good real-time combat intelligence; and a sound doctrine for coordinated air-ground activity. With that infrastructure, the war becomes much easier.⁵⁷

Within several months, the positive results of these efforts began to show themselves. The Iranians began winning more than they lost. So much so that by the fall of 1963, less than a year after their arrival, the Kurdish threat to the Shah's government was virtually nil.

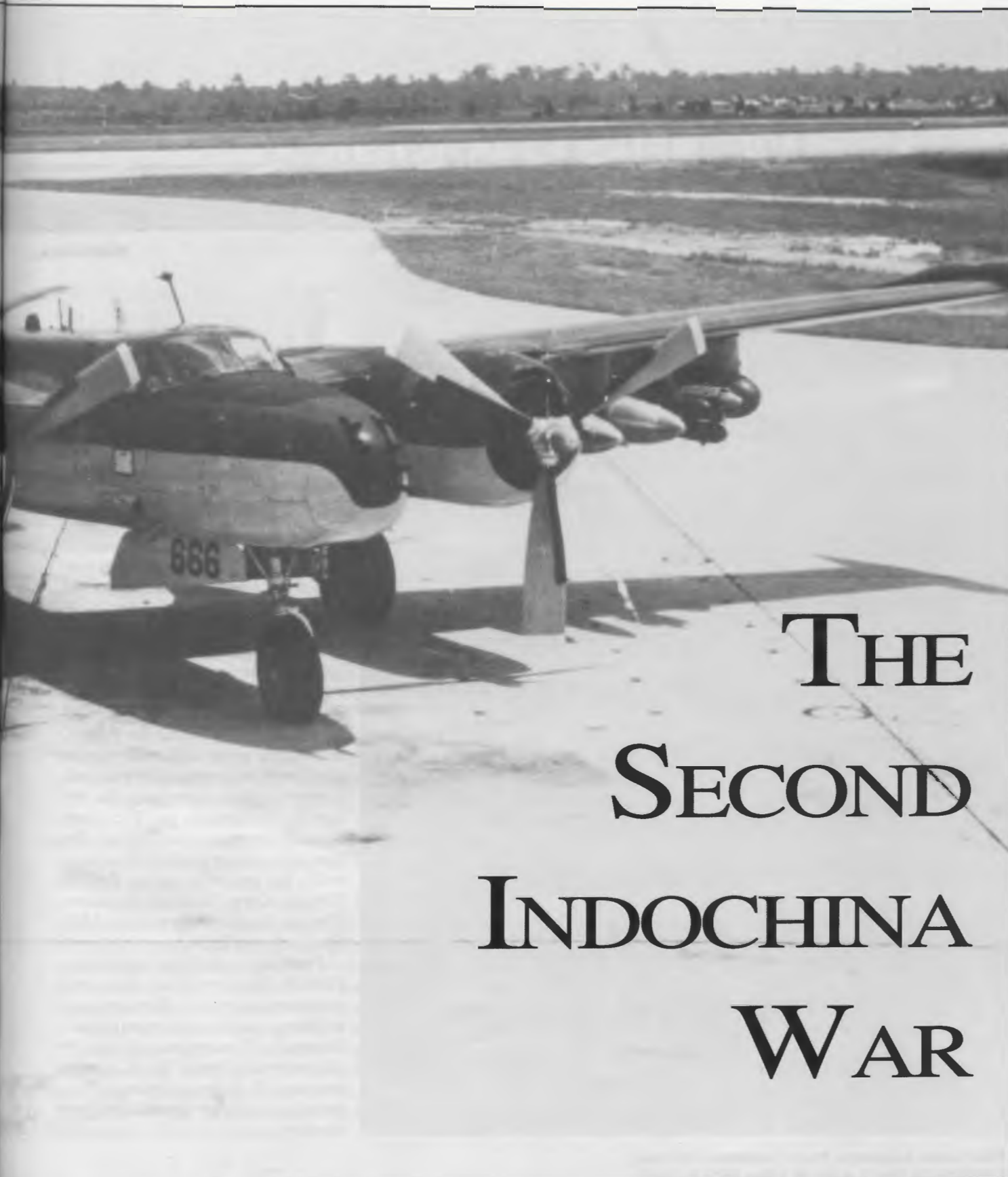
After three consecutive 180-day TDYs the U.S. air advisors were confident they could claim victory without contradiction. Once again the "KISS" (Keep it Simple, Stupid!) Formula had provided the framework for Air Commando operations that helped provide the U.S. government precisely the military and political successful outcome it sought. It was never to happen so clearly again.



Originally designed as a trainer, the rugged, two-seat T-6 proved an effective counter-insurgency strike aircraft when modified to carry machine guns and rockets or bombs under its wings. This worn out, rocket-armed war bird proved an ideal aircraft for the primitive war fought in the high desert mountains of Kurdistan. (USAF photo)



Sitting on the ramp at Hurlburt Field in the early 1960s, this updated model of World War II's B-26 was to serve the Air Commandos well with its combination of firepower and loiter time over target. (ACA collection)



THE SECOND INDOCHINA WAR


IN THE BEGINNING

How it All Started, Again

The so-called “Cold War” between western and communist ideologies could turn very hot indeed for those unfortunate enough to be caught in the middle. Developing countries in Africa, Latin and Central America, and especially Southeast Asia, were ripe targets for the siren song of communist insurgency. Successfully exploiting long-standing, frequently legitimate grievances, these communist “liberation movements” had become so widespread by the early 1960s that President John Kennedy felt compelled to have the Army, Air Force, and Navy each establish specially-trained counterinsurgency (COIN) forces.

The Army moved out first by expanding its well known Special Forces, or “Green Berets.” Excellent COIN advisors, the Green Berets’ dependence on air support for remote area operations prompted them to seek their own organic air support. The Air Force responded to President Kennedy’s urging, (and perhaps the Special Forces air support initiative as well), by establishing the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron (Project “Jungle Jim”) at Eglin AFB, Florida, in April, 1961.

Forming up at Eglin’s Auxiliary Field #9 (Hurlburt Field), the initial cadre consisted of 352 officers and men and thirty-two propeller-driven aircraft; Sixteen C-47 transports and eight B-26 bombers of World War II vintage, and eight T-28 trainer/fighters.⁵⁸ A periodical of the day summarized their mission



Racing across the treetops, this Air Commando A-26 drops a resupply canister to a special forces patrol in thickly wooded terrain. Canisters remaining on wings will keep other patrols in the field longer, without compromising patrol's position or exposing more vulnerable helicopters to enemy ground fire. (Bob Adams)



The commandos' mission is to provide close-in airsupport for U.S. and allied irregular forces behind enemy lines and, even more significantly, to show friendly underdeveloped countries how to cope with guerrilla uprisings or other violent threats⁵⁹

In its first six months the 4400th flew more than 9,000 hours of day and night low-level navigation, munitions delivery, remote field operations, skip-bombing, and reconnaissance missions to become proficient in every conceivable COIN mission; all without a single accident.⁶⁰ Less than six months later, in September, the 4400th was declared "Operationally Ready."

Within the same month the 4400th sent Detachment 1 with two C-47's as part of a joint U.S. Army-Air Force Mobile Training Team (code-named "Sandy Beach") to the west African country of Mali, to train that country's paratroopers. Flying through a terrific rainstorm to arrive on time, the Americans soon discovered their training would be conducted from the same airfield ramp that housed Russian and Czech aircrews doing their version of the same training. *C'est la vie!*

Two months later, on November 5, 1961, the 4400th deployed Detachment 2 (code-named "Farm Gate"), with instructor aircrews and maintenance personnel, to the Republic of South Vietnam with four C-47s, four B-26s, and eight T-28s.⁶¹ Farm Gate's training mission was clear enough, but few involved could appreciate the speed with which events in Vietnam and the U.S. would soon overtake the entire mission. In fact, Detachment 2 became the first USAF unit to conduct combat operations in Vietnam.⁶²

From its charter as a training mission stemmed the fundamental and logical rule that Air Commandos would not enter combat without a Vietnamese national on board the aircraft; the Vietnamese trainee being the ostensible reason for the Air Commando presence in the first place. A seemingly rational policy, this rule took little account of the fluid nature of guerrilla warfare, or the already overwhelmed bureaucracy of the fledgling South Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF).

The incredible A-1E Skyraider became synonymous with Air Commando operations even in the most primitive conditions. Contrary to appearances, this photo was *not* taken at the Air Force's aircraft boneyard in Arizona. Probably assigned to NKP, Thailand, it is in fact a combat-ready plane awaiting an upload of munitions for its next mission. (ACA collection)



Putting the versatile U-10 on floats was an Air Commando innovation that had merit . . . as well as some obvious risks. Tested near Hurlburt Field, the idea was eventually dropped following the conclusion the latter outweighed the former. (ACA collection)

barrage, pinning down the VNAF T-28s while other Viet Cong troops attacked two towns some 70 miles to the southwest. Running from their quarters through the mortar fire, four Air Commandos scrambled two armed T-28s, attacked the mortar flashes and stopped the attack. These USAF pilots later received commendations for their initiative and courage, and *reprimands* for engaging in combat without the required VNAF crewman on either aircraft.⁶³ *C'est la guerre!*

Responding to the quickening pace of combat in Southeast Asia, Air Force Chief of Staff General Lemay moved to expand Air Force unconventional warfare capabilities by upgrading the 4400th to the Special Air Warfare Center (SAWC) at Eglin AFB in April 1962. Commanded by Brigadier General Gilbert L. Pritchard, the SAWC included the 1st Air Commando Group, 1st Combat Applications Group, and a Combat Support Group. Not likely lost on General Lemay were continued reports emanating from the U.S. Army's

Tactical Mobility Requirements Board, pushing the Special Forces initiative for its own (Army) organic air arm.⁶⁴

To help man the burgeoning Air Commando organization, HQ USAF established a new, "Counterinsurgency" officer specialty code, simultaneously stepping up its recruiting efforts for COIN specialists. The response was so overwhelming the Air Staff soon asked Commands and individuals to defer volunteering for a period.⁶⁵ The June 9, 1962 issue of *Air Force Times* observed dryly that special air warfare apparently appealed to many more airmen than did the scientific impersonality of the space age.⁶⁶

The widespread interest in Air Commandos was fortunate, as the organization was rapidly growing beyond anyone's wildest expectations. In May, 1963, the 1st Air Commando Group was expanded and re-designated the 1st Air Commando Wing. Detachments, later squadrons, were activated in

Panama, Germany. And in March, 1964, the 1st Air Commando Wing deployed a very unusual unit, designated Detachment 6 (code-named "Water Pump") to Udorn, Thailand.¹⁵



This experimental craft was built from the under-wing external fuel tank of a C-130 transport! Designed for low-level observation/strike missions, the idea was deemed impractical following testing. Note Air Commando emblem on fuselage. (ACA collection)



A classic photo from the Vietnam era, showing an Air Commando instructor with a Vietnamese pilot walking past rows of aircraft. The men are wearing flight suits and holding their helmets. For the Vietnamese and Lao pilots there was no "rotation home" after a combat tour. Many simply flew until they died or were too injured to fly. (ACA collection)

By early 1965, the original, 352-strong 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron had expanded to eleven squadrons: Six in Vietnam, three at Hurlburt Field, one in Panama and another in Germany.⁶⁷ Additionally, four Air National Guard Groups had been re-designated Air Commandos.⁶⁸

Learning and adapting from field experience gained in its worldwide deployments, the Air Commandos recruited medics, combat controllers, combat weather teams, and forward air controllers, virtually all of whom underwent U.S. Army parachute training.⁶⁹ To consolidate and build on this wealth of hard-earned experience a Special Air Warfare School was established at Hurlburt Field in 1966, subsequently redesignated the USAF Special Operations School in 1969.⁷⁰ The intensity of training at Hurlburt field increased still further with the infusion of South Vietnamese aircrew and maintenance personnel to the base for training in A-1, T-28 and other types of Air Commando aircraft.

Impressive as the Air Commando expansion was, the force still represented only a minute fraction of Air Force combat power. More impressive still was the individual talent that continued flowing into Hurlburt Field. One measure of this talent can be gauged by the fact that between 1962 and 1965, the USAF recognized this small, fringe group of airmen with the Aviator's Valor Award (1962), the Mackay Trophy and Cheney Award (1963), and the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award (1964).⁷¹

The recognition continued in 1965, when the 1st Air Commando Squadron, flying the rugged A-1E Skyraider in South Vietnam, was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation, the first USAF unit since the Korean War to receive this level of recognition.⁷² But the price for flying and fighting "at the tip of the spear" was proving expensive for those who dared. Forty Air Commandos died during this period, the majority in Southeast Asia.⁷³

The early days in South Vietnam. A row of T-28 fighters line the ramp at Bien Hoa Air Base near Saigon in 1962. These fighters arrived with the first Air Commando deployment (Farm Gate) to Vietnam. (USAF photo)



¹⁵ One of the most combat and cost-effective Air Commando operations, the "Water Pump" school went on to train a bizarre variety of pilots ranging from U.S. and foreign mercenaries to Laotians, some of which had until then never even driven an automobile! The exploits of this operation are described in the *Chaophakaow!* story in this history.

Still further expansion would come to the Air Commandos, along with a shift in mission emphasis from training indigenous personnel to direct combat support for U.S. ground troops. Demonstrating an incredible diversity of capabilities, they fought with distinction throughout Southeast Asia from the beginning to the end; Close Air Support, Interdiction, Civic Affairs, Psychological Operations, Defoliant Operations, and much more.

In 1968 all Air Commando Wings and Squadrons were re-designated "Special Operations". The USAF Special Operations Force became the 1st Special Operations Wing and the 4410th Special Operations Training Group.⁷⁴ Throughout the incredible kaleidoscope of combat operations in America's longest war, the Air Commandos, whatever their name, could always be found . . . Anytime, Anyplace.



In South Vietnam's delta region a shark-mouthed Air Commando T-28 (above) sits in front of thatched buildings at primitive Soc Trang Airfield, 1963. (ACA collection)



CHAOPHAKAOW!

"Water Pump's" secret little school

When the 1st Air Commando Wing deployed Detachment 6 ("Water Pump"), to Udorn, Thailand in March, 1964, it appeared to be just one more Mobile Training Team (MTT) sent overseas by the very busy Americans. That appearance was highly misleading, and the deception was fully intended. In fact, "Water Pump" was totally dedicated to

Project 404, the code-name for highly classified, joint-U.S. operations against North Vietnamese intrusion into Laos.⁷⁵

In building the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos, the North Vietnamese violated the 1962 Geneva Accords (which they had signed earlier), intended to protect Laotian sovereignty from foreign intrusion. When diplomatic efforts to expel them failed (the North Vietnamese simply denied the existence of the Trail), the Laotian government turned to America for more tangible support. Soon a clandestine Special Forces/Air Commando force had raised and trained a Laotian army several thousand strong from the ¹⁶Hmong ("Free People"), a rugged hill tribe noted for its warrior tradition.

Brutal ground combat between the Hmong and the North Vietnamese became continuous as both sides saw-sawed back and forth across



A Buddhist monk blesses one of Water Pump's T-28s with good fortune before it is flown by Asian pilots in 1967. This was an important ritual to the Lao, Thai, and Hmong pilots who flew these aircraft. (Jerome Klingaman)

northern Laos. The Hmong commander, General Vang Pao, himself a pro-French veteran of the First Indochina War, understood that without airpower, his lightly-armed irregulars could never eject the more heavily armed and numerous communists.

Vang Pao's dilemma was not his alone, as U.S. Air Force and Navy reconnaissance jets now flying over the well-defended Trail raised the specter of an inevitable shootdown; and

¹⁶ The Hmong are frequently mis-identified by the derogatory Lao language term "Meo" in many western publications, a mistake not appreciated by the Hmong or the Americans who fought by their side.

the need for an armed search and rescue force. Combat airpower dedicated to Vang Pao, without American aircrews, seemed the solution. But how to accomplish this with the miniscule Laotian air force?

Det 6 was “designed” much as a sniper weapon is designed for one and only one use. Its particular target was the North Vietnamese army and its surrogate Pathet Lao (Laotian communist) forces opposing Vang Pao’s guerrilla army. Det 6 would become the “weapon” that produced the Asian combat pilots so urgently needed by the Laotian government to help General Vang Pao. It’s “schoolhouse” opened for students in April, 1964, with four T-28s and forty-one Air Commando cadre.⁷⁶

Almost immediately Det 6 was faced with an urgent problem that would have priority over all others. This problem also had a code name: “Doan 559”, the North Vietnamese logistics lifeline previously introduced as the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Without the Trail the North Vietnamese had no hope of sustaining their war effort in the south. They knew it . . . and so did the U.S.

Nearly three months to the day after Det 6’s startup at Udorn, the inevitable happened with the shutdown of a reconnaissance jet over the Trail.¹⁷ Other shutdowns would follow. But for the moment Water Pump had no Asian T-28 pilots ready to fly armed escort for the only available rescue assets available in Laos, the commercial Air America helicopters flown by U.S. civilians. Pragmatic solution? Train civilian Air America pilots with prior military experience in the T-28 to fly combat rescue support.

And that’s exactly what Water Pump was authorized to do to fill the gap.⁷⁷ An effective field expedient solution, it also brought undesirable political baggage. American “mercenary



Two poorly clad Hmong irregulars (above) of General Vang Pao’s army pose for snapshot. Usually better armed, they made up in toughness, courage, and knowledge of the terrain what they lacked in firepower. In the end however, even those qualities couldn’t keep the brave Hmong from being decimated by superior North Vietnamese firepower and numbers. (ACA collection)



General Vang Pao (wearing Air Commando bush hat, back to camera) and staff interrogate captured Pathet Lao officer. Later placed aboard a spotter aircraft, officer subsequently pointed out location of his unit, which was promptly bombed. (Charles Jones)

¹⁷ Navy Lieutenant Charles F. Klusmann was shot down flying a RF-8A single-seat jet on 6 June, 1964. Captured, he later escaped on foot to be retrieved by an Air America helicopter.



Det 6's (Water Pump) crudely-made shield is entirely in keeping with the crude conditions in which the Air Commando-run school trained its very unusual students. (ACA collection)

pilots", even part-time ones, hadn't been seen since the days of General Chennault's Flying Tigers in War II's China-Burma Theater. Worse yet, the T-28-qualified Air America pilots were frequently flying cargo flights elsewhere when needed for emergency rescue missions. While the American civilian combat pilots did prove effective when used, the long-term solution clearly lay with military pilots from other nations.

The U.S. wasn't the only country alarmed at the prospect of North Vietnamese expansionism. The Thai government offered a small number of its military pilots to Water Pump for combat over Laos.⁷⁸ Prior to their arrival in Udon, the volunteer pilots were first "sheep-dipped," a legal process by which they are officially discharged from the Air Force, subsequently becoming in effect mercenary pilots flying in combat for pay. Upon completion of their "civilian" tours they are reinstated to their parent service. Skilled pilots, the Thai mercenaries became a long-term feature of Water Pump and Laotian combat operations.⁷⁹

Like the handful of Royal Lao pilots in Water Pump, the Thais had previous military flying experience and could be checked out in the T-28 or C-47 in short transition courses. This was not true however of the pilot-candidates from the Hmong, who presented a challenge never seen before (or since) by the U.S. Air Force.

The Hmong, as noted earlier, were taking the brunt of ground fighting (and therefore casualties) throughout the country. During his visit to the U.S. in 1963, General Vang Pao toured the Air Commando base at Hurlburt Field, Florida, raising the possibility of including selected Hmong in the Water Pump training. The presence of Hmong pilots over their brethren fighting below would be a matter of considerable pride to Vang Pao and his people. Somewhat reluctantly, the U.S. agreed to support this request from its most effective ally in Laos, and tasked the Air Commandos to make it happen.



The T-28 fighter/bomber's simplicity and ruggedness made it an ideal strike aircraft for Water Pump students, some of which had never even driven a car until their arrival in Udon for flight training. Its two-seat configuration allowed for an interpreter or forward air controller if required, and its substantial munitions payload made it a weapon that could not be ignored by North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao troops. (ACA photo)

The Air Training Command (ATC) would not likely have been impressed with Water Pump's flight school, but on the other hand the Air Commandos had problems beyond ATC's worst nightmare. It's Hmong pilot-candidates had never so much as driven an automobile before and besides . . . they couldn't read or write English. So how *did* they learn to fly combat strike aircraft? One Air Commando recalls the Water Pump approach

*How do you teach . . . an illiterate Hmong . . . the theory of flight? You don't. You tell him, "When you push the stick this way, Bhudda makes that wing go down, and that turns the aircraft."*⁸⁰

Another problem was the small size of the Hmong, which prevented them from seeing out the T-28's cockpit when their feet were on the aircraft's rudder pedals. Air Commando solution: Wire small blocks of 2X4s to the rudder pedals and add thick pillows to the pilot seats.⁸¹

Incredibly, the Air Commando instructors graduated nineteen Hmong T-28 ground attack fighter pilots in five classes. And like all T-28 pilots flying in Laos, they took the radio call sign "*Chaophakaow*" (Lord White Bhudda).⁸² The best of them, Ly Lue, went on to become one of the most famous strike pilots in all Indochina, a legend known to USAF and USN pilots throughout the region.

The Hmong pilots proved remarkably brave and skilled. They were the pride of their people, but they were not invincible. Whereas their American counterparts finished their one-year tours with a boisterous



Thai mercenary fighter pilots in Laos following their T-28 training by Water Pump instructors. Like their American counterparts, they have been "sheep-dipped" to civilian status for their combat tour. Note T-28s in background. (Jerome Klingaman)



Cocky smiles and young faces from five Water Pump T-28 graduates disguise the cruel realities of the airwar over Laos. Only "Ringo", third from the left, is known to have survived the war. (Jerome Klingaman)

Hmong pilot Ly Lue's legendary skill and courage established his reputation as one of the premier combat pilots in all Indochina. The death of this seemingly invincible warrior devastated the morale of General Vang Pao's army and the Air Commandos. (ACA collection)

party and medals, the Hmong flew until they died. And the maelstrom that virtually annihilated the Hmong population on the ground took the same toll in the air. By the end of the war, sixteen of the nineteen Hmong pilots were dead.⁸³ Amongst the casualties was Ly Lue.

Water Pump continued in operation throughout the war in Laos, continuing to support *Project 404*, itself literally the "first in and last out" American military operation in the Kingdom of the Elephants. Det 6 later became part of the 606th Air Commando Squadron in 1966, which in turn became the 56th Air Commando Wing the following year.

Much later, in the 1970s, the 56th would train Water Pump's sights on another high priority target. This time it would be a classic Foreign Internal Defense mission against the genocidal Khmer Rouge in the Land of Angkor Wat.

THE STINGING BUTTERFLY

Combat Controllers in Laos

*Wars are to be fought and won,
not to justify contemporary doctrine*

- Butterfly 44



MSgt. Charlie Jones, aka "Butterfly 44," coordinates upcoming airstrikes with Hmong General Vang Pao at Long Chieng airfield in northeastern Laos in 1966 (Charlie Jones)

One of the most striking differences between mainstream Air Force and Air Commando combat operations during the war in Southeast Asia was the relative usefulness of contemporary doctrine and high technology systems to their respective efforts. Nowhere was this more evident than in the secret war in Laos, where Air Commandos flew, lived and sometimes died far removed from mainstream Air Force theology; at airstrips and camps so remote and crude that only the simplest tactics and weapons (World War II-vintage propeller-driven aircraft) would prove effective.

At the bottom of this doctrinal and technological "food chain" in Laos were the Air Commando Combat Controllers. These all-volunteer, parachute-qualified sergeants were hand-picked from conventional Combat Control Squadrons throughout the Air Force for intensive training in unconventional warfare at Hurlburt Field beginning in 1961.

Armed only with rifles and radios, with no armor protection thicker than their cotton fatigues, Combat Controllers were (and still are) trained to parachute into austere or enemy-controlled territory. Once on the ground they set up assault or parachute landing zones for the follow-on, main force units. In Laos, they worked closely with General Vang Pao's irregulars, fighting a "no quarter given or asked" kind of war against the North Vietnamese. It's not the kind of work favored by the faint-hearted, which accounts for the all-volunteer requirement for Combat Control duty.

Not surprisingly, CSAF General Lemay's start-up of the Jungle Jim Program in April, 1961, attracted independent-minded ("stubborn as a mule" is also close), individuals looking for fresh challenges. One of the first to respond to the call for Combat Control volunteers was Captain Lemuel Egleston, nicknamed the "Gray Eagle" for his hair color.

Egleston soon proved a key figure in establishing the all-critical trust between the aircrews flying their aircraft into blacked-out airstrips at night, and the Air Commando Controllers, often only an unknown voice guiding the pilot over his radio. A measure of this trust can be judged by the fact the Controllers were frequently limited to using only flashlights with cut-out, styrofoam coffee cups taped to them, as directional beacons for aircraft landing on Eglin Reservation's remote strips at night.⁸⁴

Captain Egleston's imagination and initiative led to his next move, a step that proved visionary, if somewhat unorthodox and definitely unauthorized.

Combat Control Team (CCT) NCOs Harry Genes and James Procter control follow-on, main-force parachute assault by Vietnamese paratroopers in April, 1966. This was the first combat jump made by CCT personnel. (USAF photo)





Air Commando medic MSgt Frank Dean, in civilian clothes for his tour in Laos, assists in off-loading wounded Laotian Forces Armie Royale (FAR) soldier following battle in Pakse, Laos, in 1969. (Jerome Klingaman)

of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and by extension their violation of Laotian sovereignty. The U.S. replied in kind by not disclosing its interdiction campaign against an infiltration route that didn't politically exist!

As American military personnel other than the Embassy Attaches were not officially allowed in Laos, Jones and other combatants were promptly "sheep-dipped", much as were the Thais. For TSGT Jones, this meant surrendering all military identification and uniforms, substituting instead civilian clothes and papers identifying him an employee of a civilian agency operating in Laos. "Mister" Jones had arrived. And waiting for him was a major problem tailor-made for his skills.

Strike pilots attacking the Ho Chi Minh Trail and other targets in Laos had a particularly difficult time in pinpointing

their targets in Laos' rugged, forested terrain. Jagged mountains and low-hanging clouds all combined to weaken the effectiveness of the aerial interdiction campaign, even when targets could be identified. Target identification in particular was proving especially difficult for the pilots of high-speed jet aircraft. Meanwhile the North Vietnamese gunners kept getting better, and more numerous, every year.

What was missing was a coordination link between the



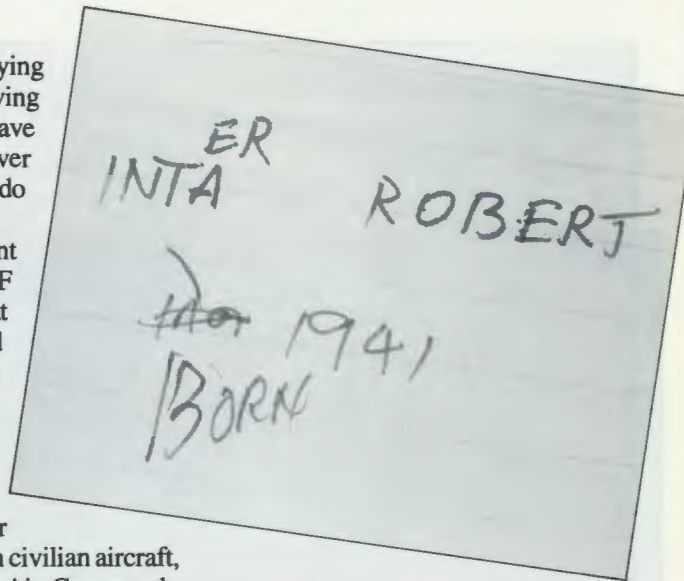
Well camouflaged trails in Laos could hide dangerous numbers of North Vietnamese Army or Pathet Lao troops and were difficult to spot from the air even in good weather. From a fast moving jet fighter attacking through haze or ground fog, they were virtually invisible without a colored smoke marker from a Butterfly or Raven Forward Air Controller. (Lewis Dayton, Jr.)

fighters and their targets, someone intimately familiar with the terrain, flying something slow enough to pick out targets all but invisible to fast-moving tactical jet aircraft. Unfortunately, the United States Air Force didn't have any such pilot or aircraft in Laos, and wouldn't for some time. It did however have Mr. Jones, soon to prove an unusual character even by Air Commando standards.

What Jones had going for his plan was imagination, initiative, excellent (if unauthorized) training to control airstrikes, and a lack of USAF regulations spelling out the limitations of young sergeants in Laos. What he needed was an aircraft from which to operate. Enter Air America and Continental Air Services, two U.S. civilian firms operating small, propeller driven aircraft and helicopters in support of the Laotian government. And their aircraft were available to carry out Jones' plan.

Thus began the "Butterfly" concept, so named for the radio call sign of the airborne Combat Controllers. As the first Butterfly, Mr. Jones became "Butterfly 44", with other Controllers subsequently using other Butterfly numerical designators. Flying in civilian clothes, operating from civilian aircraft, the Butterflies soon became adept at controlling both propeller-driven Air Commando aircraft operating over Laos, as well as U.S. Air Force and Navy jet fighters coming from bases in South Vietnam, Thailand and aircraft carriers of the 7th Fleet.

Even foreign pilots were controlled through the Butterfly net. Royal Laotian, Hmong, and Thai mercenary pilots were vectored to targets, with the Butterfly talking continuously with the strike pilots, the civilian pilot sitting next to him, perhaps friendly troops on the ground, and the Laotian or Thai interpreter sitting behind him. As unorthodox as it was, it



Attempted Hmong spelling of dead U.S. pilot's name from his dogtag. Unable to extract the body due to enemy presence, Hmong patrol leader gave note to Thai mercenary who forwarded it to Air Commando TSgt Charlie Jones. Body was later recovered at Jones' request and, with positive ID, led to burial in U.S. with full military honors. (Charles Jones)



Napalm strikes called in on targets marked by Forward Air Controller "Mister" Charlie Jones, using radio call-sign "Butterfly 44". (Charles Jones)



As dangerous as the skies over Laos were, it could prove just as dangerous for the Air Commandos on the ground. The twisted wreckage of Laotian T-28s at Louang Phrabang airfield in northern Laos in 1966 is all that's left following a night attack by enemy sappers against the base. (Jerome Klingaman)



The "Golden BB" in Laos. A single 7.62mm assault rifle bullet, travelling at 2330 per second, hit the helmet visor of Raven FAC John Mansur while flying his small observation plane over Laos. It exited the visor (see second hole) without injuring Mansur. (Jerome Klingaman)

also proved for that time and place, a very effective weapon.

May, 1966 found Mr. Jones discussing a particularly difficult operation with the Thai mercenary running field operations at Site 2, a mountain top camp 45 miles northeast of General Vang Pao's headquarters at Long Chien. A Hmong patrol had come in with the report it had found the body of a dead American airman some miles away, but were unable to recover the body due to presence of enemy in the immediate area.

The Thai commander could only give Butterfly 44 the Hmong note with an attempted spelling of what had apparently been the dead man's dogtag. At Jones' request the Hmong subsequently re-entered the dangerous territory, this time returning with the airman's body. With this recovery, confirmed identification was later made and next of kin notified for a burial with full military honors in the United States. A small touch of humanity in a war known for its atrocities.

Butterfly 44 left Laos in October, 1966, having flown 413 combat missions in six months from a variety of civilian aircraft.⁸⁷ Other Butterflies continued their operations wherever needed. Using standard USAF procedures familiar to the strike pilots, the performance of the Air Commando sergeants elicited no curiosity or complaints from the attacking air forces. Nor for that matter did the pilots or their commanders appear to even realize they were being controlled by enlisted personnel. This lack of awareness was not a matter of any particular secrecy on the part of the Air Commandos, but rather the simple fact that in this backwater, "secret" war, nobody found reason to ask.

Nobody that is, until the commander of 7th Air Force, Lt Gen William W. Momyer, flew up from headquarters outside Saigon to pay a visit to Air Commando leader Colonel Heinie Aderholt at Nakhon Phanom Air Base, Thailand, in late 1966. Upon hearing that Butterfly controllers were neither officers nor pilots, the General responded with "one of the more impressive temper tantrums of the war."⁸⁸ Describing the memorable meeting in his USAF Oral History Report,⁸⁹ Colonel Aderholt recalls

He (General Momyer) and I had not gotten along well, but I had lunch with him and mentioned the Butterflies. He asked about the FACs (Forward Air Controllers) in Laos and where they came from. I said, "The people FAC'ing airplanes in Laos are enlisted. "He went about 6 feet up and hit the ceiling. He said, "What do you mean? Who is flying the airplane?" I said "Air America pilots." He said "That will cease!"⁹⁰

Tough lunch! And the General proved as good as his word. The Combat Controllers were phased out shortly, to be replaced immediately by officer pilots.

To their credit the new group carried on the Butterfly tradition of bravery and tenacity, in the process achieving well-deserved fame in their own right as "Raven" FACs throughout the remainder of the war. Their respect for their Butterfly predecessors can be judged in part by their naming of Charlie Jones as "Raven One".

The phase-out of the Butterfly FACs did nothing to diminish the “can-do” attitude and initiative that characterize Air Commando operations. In the deadly, bizarre war that characterized operations in Laos, “The Kingdom of Elephants,” the Butterflies packed a sting so powerful that their demise only gave immediate rise to a similar organization with precisely the same mission.

Two Air Commando Skyraiders (below) loaded for bear await target identification from an airborne Combat Control Team NCO. Photo taken from civilian-piloted Continental Air Services aircraft. (Charles Jones)



The rugged, turbo-charged Pilatus Porter, flown by Continental Air Services pilots, proved an ideal forward air control platform for the Butterfly NCOs. (Charles Jones)



Two unidentified Air Commando Butterfly NCOs stand on either side of Vietiane AOC commander “Mister” Klingaman, in front of Continental Air Services aircraft, Laos, 1966. (Jerome Klingaman)

TIGERS AND EAGLES

The Propeller vs. Jet Controversy

A-26s of the 606th "Lucky Tigers" Air Commando Squadron (later 56th SOW) line the PSP ramp at NKP, Thailand, awaiting their night missions. (ACA collection)



When Thailand's politics couldn't allow U.S. "bombers" to operate from its soil, the re-designation of the "B"-26 to an "A" (for Attack) helped solve the problem. By any name, it was a lethal strike craft, as seen from the front in this photo of an Open House display at Hurlburt Field. (ACA collection)

As early as 1966 both the "Visitor" and "Home" teams (the United States Air Force and North Vietnamese Army respectively) had already defined the rules of a savage and still growing contest along the length of the Vietnam/Laotian border. Victory would be defined by the answer to one and only one question: Would North Vietnam's all-critical logistics lifeline to South Vietnam, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, remain in operation or be closed? Only the pricetag for victory was left to be determined, and both "teams" were pulling out all the stops for this contest of wills.

The North Vietnamese had no higher priority than keeping open their complex and camouflaged network of roads and bridges that made up the Trail. The United States Air Force¹⁸ was committed to closing the Trail with a massive interdiction campaign that would ultimately surpass all bomb tonnage delivered by American airpower in any previous world war.

The North Vietnamese Army and Laotian Pathet Lao would also attack northern and western areas of Laos, protecting the Trail by destroying the only potential ground threat to its survival, General Vang Pao's Hmong tribesmen. Both to avoid allied airpower, and to reduce observation of its continuously growing traffic flow, the North Vietnamese would ultimately move almost totally to night use of the Trail.

Responding to the North Vietnamese game plan, the Air Force began planning to move its limited night attack resources within striking range of the Trail. To carry the brunt of the night interdiction campaign, as well as support Vang Pao's irregulars, the Air Force was counting on a strong showing from the Air Commandos' propeller-driven, "junkyard air force".

Putting muscle behind the plan, HQ USAF directives in mid-1966 sent a menagerie of "Air Commando propellers" to Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Base (RTAB), overlooking

¹⁸ The U.S. Navy was a major partner in this effort as a number of excellent history books will testify.



Thailand's northeastern border with Laos. The 606th Air Commando Squadron included a wild mix of aircraft including T-28D fighter-bombers, C-123 transports, and UH-1 helicopters.

Arriving at about the same time in Nakhon Phanom were eight A-26A "Counter-Invader" light attack bombers undergoing combat evaluation under Project "Big Eagle". In December, 1966, these aircraft joined the 606th "Lucky Tigers", adding in the process a considerable punch to this modern-day version of "Richhoften's Flying Circus".¹⁹

And the Ringmaster was none other than the ubiquitous Heinie Aderholt. Incredibly, the 606th maintenance personnel kept this "junkyard airforce" flying and fighting, but the scene in the hangers couldn't have been pretty!

Pretty or not, the 606th²⁰ headed straight for the Trail . . . and straight into the two toughest opponents it would face in Southeast Asia: North Vietnamese anti-aircraft defenses, and senior USAF proponents committed to a totally modernized, all-jet Air Force. Taking first things first, the 606th sent its A-26s north to evaluate their capability for night interdiction along the Trail.

The much-used word "Trail" doesn't come close to describing what the Air Commandos faced every night as they flew north from Nakhon Phanom. Stretching through mountains and jungle for nearly 1,700 miles, the Trail was heavily defended at every key point by gunners awaiting the inevitable arrival of American aircraft. And that was just the terrain and enemy.



Precision night bombing by Air Commandos along the roads making up the Ho Chi Minh Trail could force North Vietnamese truck traffic to back up nearly bumper to bumper while road crews worked frantically to fill in the craters. Time and again the tactic presented mass targets for the A-26, T-28 and gunships quickly responding to just such an opportunity. (ACA collection)

¹⁹ World War II Air Commandos had, of necessity, also used an unheard of mix of aircraft types for its campaigns in the China-Burma Theater. Ironically, this Air Commando organization has proved a forerunner of the "Composite Wing" concept (re-) introduced to USAF in the early 1990s.

²⁰ Later expanded (March, 1967) to become the 56th Air Commando Wing (ACW).



In Laos the weather question wasn't "when is the monsoon season?" but rather "which monsoon season are we in?" The hoped for answer was "the hunting monsoon season," the period from November to May when passable roads brought out North Vietnamese convoys. And like sharks drawn to blood the Air Commandos sought out the convoys.

For a bite these A-26 "sharks" carried eight .50 cal machine guns in the nose, eight wing stations for munitions and 12 bomb bay stations; 10,000 pounds of conventional munitions altogether. Not only did they attack individually when convoys were found, they performed as forward airborne controllers for other aircraft called in to support the attack.⁹¹

The firepower, communications capability, loiter time over the target, and relatively easy target acquisition by the A-26 crew made the aircraft very popular with everyone (except of course North Vietnamese truck drivers). Innovative tactics helped too, as the following account by an A-26 pilot reveals

At dusk, one good road cut (one requiring immediate repairs) is made at a selected interdiction point . . . the supporting flareship then drops two flares with a forty-five minute burn time, departs the target area and, as a ruse, dispenses additional flares as though accompanied by attack aircraft. Prior to burnout of the initial flares over the road cut, the A-26 (blacked out) rolls back in on the target . . . Backed-up (North Vietnamese) trucks and road repair crews have been repeatedly surprised by this tactic.⁹²

Aerial reconnaissance of Ho Chi Minh Trail shows strong North Vietnamese confidence in 1967 by moving its truck convoys in broad daylight. When USAF and USN daylight bombing dictated a change to night convoys, Air Commando A-26s, T-28s and AC-130 gunships went to work on the trucks. As the North Vietnamese denied the very existence of this "Trail", the U.S. declined to publicly admit it was the target of the largest sustained aerial bombardment campaign since World War II. (USAF photo)

The A-26s did not emerge unscathed from these attacks, but an early switch to night-only attacks resulted in minimal losses while continuing to produce impressive results. This pattern encouraged the 606th Commander to recommend increasing the A-26 force at NKP.⁹³ HQ Pacific Air Force's (PACAF) Tactical Evaluation Center concurred, adding

Considering all STEEL TIGER sorties, it appears that a disproportionately small number of A-26 sorties destroyed the majority of vehicles for the period December 1966 through January 1967. With the STEEL TIGER truck traffic on the increase, augmentation of the SEA A-26 fleet should receive priority consideration.⁹⁴

Commanders of jet units argued that only jets could survive in many areas of Laos,



The Air Commando base at Nakhon Phanom (NKP), Thailand, was both austere and colorful at the same time. Relentless night strikes were launched from NKP and other bases with increasing ferocity against the Ho Chi Mihn Trail . . . and still the frequency of North Vietnamese truck convoys increased (Joseph Murphy)

and that the addition of more propeller-driven aircraft would add to maintenance and logistics burdens. The Joint Chiefs of Staff entered the “propeller vs jet” debate with an ambiguous message

Propeller aircraft are approximately nine times as effective as jet aircraft per sortie in destroying trucks and watercraft in Laos . . . loss rates for propeller aircraft (of all types) operating in Laos are approximately four times greater than the comparable loss rates for jet aircraft.⁹⁵

Official combat records show that during their first eight months of combat, the 10 A-26s of the 606th were credited with 275 trucks destroyed, 246 more damaged; also hit were 1,223 truck parks resulting in 1,033 secondary explosions.⁹⁶

In addition a considerable number of road cuts were accomplished, as well as structures, guns sites and boats destroyed. The pricetag: Twenty-five A-26 missions recorded battle damage to the aircraft, and three of the light attack bombers were lost in combat.⁹⁷

The “propeller vs jet” debate finally boiled over in a very personal way for Colonel Aderholt²¹, when A-26 advocate and U.S. Ambassador to Laos, “Air Marshall” William H. Sullivan chose to press a very reluctant 7AF Commander, Lt Gen General Momyer, on reinforcing the battlefield successes achieved by the A-26 fleet at NKP.

Colonel Aderholt had recently experienced General Momyer’s wrath for pointing out the superior battle damage assessments achieved by the A-26 over the F-4 jet fighter when the latter was used in the ground attack role. This had been done in an earlier brief to Ambassador Sullivan and a visiting congressman (who happened to represent the district in which the F-4 was manufactured).

“Heinie” still recalls feeling very much on the endangered species list as he sat in the briefing room in Udorn, Thailand, in November, 1967, while Ambassador Sullivan pressed



Just like the Air Commandos themselves, enemy gunners who survived the continuous fighting just kept getting better. This badly mauled A-1E is propped up on 55 gallon drums awaiting replacement parts. (USAF photo)

²¹ Now Wing Commander of the 56th ACW. The 56th would be re-designated the 56th Special Operations Wing (SOW) in the summer of 1968.

General Momyer for more A-26's in Laos. His instincts were right, as he recalls

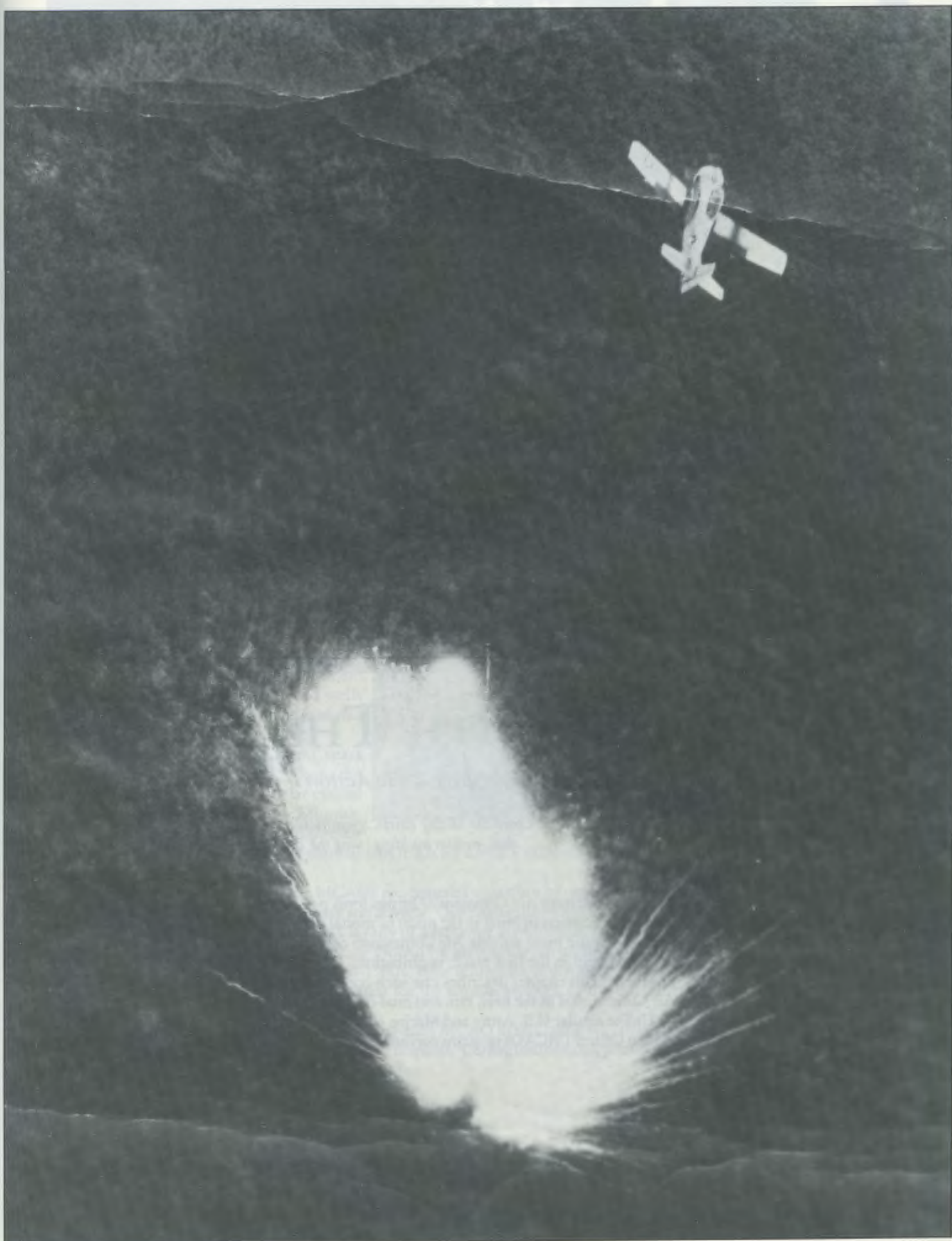
*After hearing the Ambassador out, General Momyer looked at me, then turned back to Sullivan and said 'The colonel is not familiar with all the Air Force requirements. The -26s he has requested are deployed to SOUTHCOM.' Old Sullivan looked at him (Momyer) and said, 'Well, Spike, I didn't know they had a war in Panama.'*⁹⁸

One week after the meeting (and four months before the scheduled end of his wing command tour), Colonel Aderholt's replacement arrived at NKP to take command of the 56th Special Operations Wing. The Panama-based A-26s stayed in Southern Command (SOUTHCOM). In 1969 the last of the A-26s were withdrawn from combat for lack of spare parts and attrition. The last of the aircraft were flown straight to the aircraft boneyard at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona. Another era had passed.

Not much room for error when dropping napalm cannisters. The superior bombing accuracy of propeller-driven aircraft over modern jets in ground attack operations stirred considerable controversy between Air Commando supporters and proponents for an all-jet Air Force. (USAF photo)



While the propeller-driven T-28 (far right) was more vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire than jet fighters, its relatively slow speed also made the T-28's bombing accuracy far superior to the much faster moving jets. (Bob Adams)





FIGHTING WITH THE HEART

Military Civic Action in Thailand

*Once the killing starts, it's difficult to remember
that 'nation building' was the original plan*

Apparently still refusing to give anything but "name, rank, and serial number," this young recipient doesn't appear too grateful for the medical attention. More important from the perspective of the pragmatic Military Civic Action Officer is the appreciation of the mother. (ACA collection)

Just the term *Air Commando!* brings forth popular images of daring missions and courageous airmen fighting in the midst of mortal danger. These heroic images however, tend to obscure more durable Air Commando contributions made to the people the U.S. sought to help in the first place; contributions appreciated long after the last Americans have left. This chapter describes one such contribution, Military Civic Action, made by Air Commandos in the heat, rain and mud of rural Thailand.

Unlike similar U.S. Army and Marine efforts in Vietnam, the Air Force Military Civic Action Officer (MCAO) program conducted in Thailand during the war in Southeast Asia

received relatively little publicity. In retrospect, this probably facilitated their success. Using an intentionally low-profile approach, hand-picked officers, assembled and trained in small teams, labored throughout the 1960-70s in duty that often seemed more appropriate to the Peace Corps than the United States Air Force.

But unlike the Peace Corps, the humanitarian programs of the MCAOs were motivated by a much more pragmatic rationale than altruism. With continual patience and ingenuity they implemented a classic Foreign Internal Defense program that proved exceptionally effective in reducing the insurgent threat to U.S. airbases in Thailand.

Once in country the MCAOs quickly prioritized the areas they needed to influence, with basic security considerations to the large airbases determining which areas came first. Those villages within a sixteen kilometer radius of the airbase got top priority for available civic action resources. Why 16 kilometers? Sixteen kilometers is the maximum effective range of the deadly, Soviet-made 122mm rocket, used so effectively against U.S. airfields and bases in neighboring South Vietnam. But important as this determination was, identifying this "security ring" was by far the easiest part of the MCAO program.

To the casual observer the ingredients for a successful civic action program appear deceptively easy. What could be more basic than building roads, hospitals, schools? Add to that some combined Thai-U.S. mobile medical teams giving vaccinations, engineers for digging wells, and perhaps a few Civic Action volunteers for supporting the local orphanage, and the program would seem well positioned to claim success.

In reality, the complex geographic and cultural demands placed on any would-be MCAO were (and remain so today), so extreme that a worldwide catalogue of major civic action projects attempted would list far more failures than successes. The mere presence of more schools, dams, and wells does not necessarily translate into good will between two very different cultures.

The Soviets for example, spent years building Egypt's giant Aswan Dam, the largest in the world, only to be later ejected by the Egyptians for their offensive behavior. Fortunately for the Air Commandos, their flair for picking the right people for unusual jobs made for a totally different type of Civic Action story in Thailand.

In Thailand's remote villages the MCAOs encountered a mixture of oppressive heat, unsafe drinking water, widespread disease and poverty. Quite naturally these circumstances took their toll on the village population's loyalty to a far-away government. More to the point, they also created a potential recruiting ground for anti-American insurgents. With the arrival of the first MCAOs in the mid-1960s, both insurgents and Americans soon squared off in a subtle but high-stakes contest for the elusive loyalties of these remote villages.

The most urgent and complex problem facing each MCAO in this battle was the need to determine the *real* agenda of the various key participants. Cultural differences, personality



The arrival of the Air Commando's medical truck in a rural village was one of the most visible, and appreciated, demonstrations of American military civic action in Thailand. The most effective visits were those that supported existing Thai efforts to establish long-term hygiene programs. (ACA collection)

differences, profiteering, local politics, old animosities, all combined to place a nearly impenetrable curtain of confusion between the MCAO attempting to assess the needs of the villagers, and the villagers themselves. Amidst this confusion the MCAO often had little to rely on but his American instincts, and whatever resources he could cajole out of frequently harried American base commanders wrestling with a thousand other problems.

The MCAO would also learn that while insurgents might be the most deadly threat, aspiring entrepreneurs with an eye on his Civic Action budget were more numerous and equally ambitious. Captain Daniel Jacobowitz' 14-month tour in Thailand included MCAO duty in Nakhon Phanom with the 56th Special Operations Wing. In his 1975 end-of-tour "lessons learned" report he observed

50 percent of an alert MCAO's time is spent trying to outsmart his contractors, who are spending 100% of their time trying to outwit him. Frankly, paranoia can become an occupational hazard.⁹⁹

With "friends" like this . . . !

Fortunately there *did* exist a substantial pool of dedicated local and regional Thai officials and military commanders through which the MCAOs could establish new programs, or better yet, support existing programs identified by the Thais themselves. And this the MCAOs did, compiling some astonishing statistics that highlight not only their successes, but the scope of the problems they faced even around major towns like Korat.

In his Monthly Activity Summary for November,¹⁰⁰ 1974, MCAO Team Chief Captain August G. "Greg" Jannarone notes a highly successful on-base fund raiser for both Korat's city/province orphanage and the Khon Khaen Leper Colony, on-going construction at numerous new schools and health centers, and completion of similar projects at other schools, clinics, and water systems.

In the same month Jannarone also generated the first-ever rotation of Thai Army hospital doctors and medics in weekly Medical Civic Action Patrols through the nearby villages¹⁰¹--with a predictably positive response from the population. Not so predictable but very encouraging was the news that Korat's anti-American publisher of the *Korat Daily* praised these activities in his paper.¹⁰² And these developments represented just one MCAO office, in one town, in one month!

The payoff to successful MCAO programs such as those around Korat and the co-located airbase became increasingly evident to most echelons of USAF command. They proved incredibly cost-effective when compared to the massive American expenditures seen when insurgencies escalated to the levels seen elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Noting a 1975 U.S. government proposal to prop-up neighboring, war-ravaged Cambodia for *four months* with a \$220 million aid

package, MCAO Jacobowitz observed "This (amount) would run the present Thailand MCA program for *four hundred years!*¹⁰³

Personnel from the 311th Air Commando Squadron look over local handicraft at a trade fair in a remote village. The self-help project was started by USAF Captain Charles Ruble, to raise money to buy supplies for the village school. (USAF photo)

Occasionally the MCAO would be urged by the American Embassy to undertake a program of considerable long-range, bi-lateral political importance, but of little military value to the local Air Force base commander; also known as the MCAO's performance rating officer. The MCAO caught in such a bureaucratic power struggle had a major problem, especially if he believed in the Embassy proposal.

And this is precisely where MCAO Captain Jannarone found himself in July, 1975, when both the U.S. Embassy and the U.S. Military Assistance Command-Thailand wanted the Ban Bu Phram Bridge built in Prachinaburi Province. Ban Bu Phram presented two challenges for the solution-seeking Jannarone.

First, it was stranded from outside food, medical support or other government services for long periods of the rainy season by encircling river waters that rose more than 10 feet above normal. It really *needed* the bridge!

The second challenge was tougher still. "Unfortunately" for Ban Bu Phram, it was located about 114 kilometers *beyond* the 16 kilometer security ring needed for the nearest American airbase. Without building its own 122mm rocket factory complete with Red Star on the roof, tiny Ban Bu Phram wasn't going anywhere on the Air Force's "threats to airbase" priority list.

Other than cutting off the village from access to school, market and highway, the waters also brought to the village an unusually high malaria rate. The latter factor was of major interest to the Southeast Asia Organization (SEATO) medical laboratory in Bangkok. Ban Bu Phram was also considered politically sensitive, in part because of the history of Thai and Cambodian insurgent recruiting success in the area. Clearly something had to be done.

In fact the bridge for Ban Bu Phram did eventually get built, but only because the savvy MCAO overcame a tangle of U.S. and Thai bureaucratic obstacles. At the end of his tour Captain Jannarone concluded that a MCAO becomes optimally effective only after completing eight-to-nine months of the one-year tour that was standard policy for American servicemen in Southeast Asia.

While this policy had an obvious impact on experience levels in every field, nowhere was this more of a handicap than in the civic action arena. In an Asian culture that traditionally measures *short term* gains by the *generation*, Yankee impatience and military rotation policy proved a continual handicap.

As Captain Jacobowitz observed it is extremely difficult for the MCAO to assess the enduring success of his programs. The local population, local officials, USAF and Thai military, and the U.S. Embassy each have very different agendas by which they judge Civic Action activities. Unfortunately, the most valuable judge of the MCAOs' effectiveness, the insurgents themselves, are not prone to participate in these "voter survey" reports.

It is however a matter of record that during the USAF's long stay in Thailand, not a single major attack was ever mounted by insurgents against the dozen or more U.S. airfields and communications stations. This success is due at least in part to the valuable flow of local intelligence that continued to come from the grass-roots level in which American MCAOs and their Thai-counterparts struggled year after year.

Beyond these observations, the impact of the basic humanity the MCAOs demonstrated to those in need, the reduction in disease, illiteracy, infant mortality, and poverty are difficult to satisfactorily measure. Amidst the death and destruction of war, the Air Commando struggled, endured, and emerged with something that, like these imponderables, can never be adequately measured in a computer; the satisfaction of helping others help themselves.



Among the saddest casualties of war were civilians and children in particular who picked up or stepped on un-exploded munitions. MCAOs continually strove to warn non-combatants of the dangers of these grenades and mines. (August Jannarone)

RANCH HAND

Defoliant Operations in SEA

In early November, 1961, Tactical Air Command was notified by HQ USAF to modify six C-123 Provider tactical transports for Project RANCH HAND, the name given herbicide spray operations in South Vietnam. Volunteer crews were solicited from the list of non-selected volunteers for the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron ("Jungle Jim") recently activated at Hurlburt Field, Florida.¹⁰⁴

Ranch Hand's first three aircraft and crews arrived at Tan Son Nhut Air Base near Saigon, South Vietnam, on 7 January 1962, for what was expected to be a 120 day tour. A successful test mission was flown on 10 January, with the first operational missions beginning three days later. The goal of the herbicide missions was to deny the communist Viet Cong the continued safety of their traditional strongholds in Vietnam's thick forests and jungles.

During the early spray missions, an Air Commando C-47 (from the original Farm Gate Detachment) preceded the spray missions by dropping thousands of leaflets, and conducting Vietnamese language voice broadcasts to the villages below. The communications explained to the population what the defoliant flights were, and why they were necessary. Within three months of their arrival the Americans would also be reminded this was no simple "Forest Service" operation.

On 2 February 1962, a Ranch Hand crew became the first Air Force fatalities in Vietnam. Captain Fergus C. Groves II, Captain Robert D. Larson and Staff Sergeant Milo B. Coghill were killed while on a training mission. Although there was no evidence the aircraft was struck by ground fire, Air Commando T-28s were tasked to fly armed escort on future missions. Ranch Hand operations continued unabated throughout the rest of the year.

Between January and June 1963, Ranch Hand was additionally tasked to transport cargo, munitions and personnel throughout South Vietnam. In August, the unit deployed to Thailand on a humanitarian mission at the request of the Thai government. Once there the Ranch Hand C-123s effectively sprayed crops in Thailand with an insecticide developed to combat a plague of locusts.

In December 1963, Ranch Hand began testing the feasibility of night defoliant operations in Vietnam. If night missions proved practical, they would seem to provide greater scheduling flexibility and reduced risk to enemy small arms fire. With one aircraft dispersing flares overhead for illumination, the lower-flying spray plane's runs were declared highly successful on the first night's test.

But the second night's mission was greeted by heavy small arms fire from an obviously alerted Viet Cong. As a result, night defoliant operations in the future were conducted only on a random basis. Whatever their tactics, the Ranch Hand crews found that as their skills increased with experience, so did enemy gunners who quickly grasped the defoliant spray mission flight patterns. By 1964, the Air Commandos were being greeted by heavier and more effective ground fire virtually everywhere they flew.

In July, 1964, Ranch Hand was assigned to the 309th Air Commando Squadron, 315th Troop Carrier Group (later redesignated the 315th Air Commando Group). In 1965, the 309th's aircraft were re-designated UC-123s to differentiate them from standard cargo versions of the Provider. In December, 1965, the unit moved from Tan Son Nhut to Bien Hoa airfields (both near Saigon), and their Area of Operations expanded to include parts of Laos for the first time. Increased defoliation requirements created a demand for more

Flying so low as to be well within range of even Viet Cong assault rifles, a flight of Ranch Hand UC-123 Providers from the 12th Air Commando Squadron clears the thick foliage beneath them in April, 1968. Fighter cover and night flights were later added to reduce the threat to the vulnerable transports. (USAF photo)







With the vegetation stripped away by Ranch Hand defoliant operations, Viet Cong trenches 22 miles from Saigon are exposed for the first time to aerial observation in 1967. The absence of similar operations during the First Indochina War led to communist ambushes of French troops in similar terrain at point blank range, invariably leading to appalling French losses. (USAF photo)

aircraft and crews, and in May, 1966, eleven more UC-123s were authorized and scheduled for arrival before the end of the year.

In June, 1966, Project Ranch Hand recorded its first combat loss. Two Providers flying a defoliant mission over Quang Tri Province in South Vietnam's northern sector began taking sporadic hits from enemy ground fire on their runs. On their fifth pass over the

target area, one of the twin-engine aircraft took a fatal hit in an engine and crashed. A U.S. Marine Corps helicopter nearby responded almost immediately, rescuing the three crewmen near the burning wreckage. A second aircraft was lost in October; its crew also rescued.

On 15 October, 1966, Ranch Hand became the 12th Air Commando Squadron, in the 315th Air Commando Wing. Three months later, the squadron lost a third aircraft to ground fire, this time over Laos and this time with no survivors. In February, Ranch Hand was ordered for the first time to fly missions over the De-Militarized Zone (DMZ) separating North and South Vietnam. These missions helped uncover infiltration routes from the north and expose stockpiles of supplies hidden in the DMZ. By June, 1967, the number of UC-123s had increased to 20, but in July, a fourth aircraft was downed with the loss of all four aboard.

During 1967 the Ranch Hand squadron typically flew 18 to 27 sorties each day, with three to four aircraft per spray mission. Each aircraft had a 1,000 gallon herbicide tank, feeding to dispersal spray booms mounted under each wing and the tail. Spray missions were flown at 130 knots and as low as possible, leaving a herbicide path more than eighty yards wide and up to ten miles long. Ranch Hand Providers normally carried a crew of three or four in addition to a Vietnamese observer. The Vietnamese was, ostensibly, the aircraft commander as required by the Rules of Engagement.

In January, 1968, Ranch Hand flew 589 sorties before standing down for the traditional Vietnamese Tet holiday. This brief respite ended abruptly on 31 January, when their airbase at Ben Hoa (and every other city in South Vietnam) was attacked by Viet Cong forces in the largest coordinated enemy offensive of the war seen to date. In response the Ranch Hand crews flew 2,866 emergency airlift sorties throughout the country.

Defoliant missions resumed two months later and in May, a fifth Ranch Hand aircraft was downed with all hands lost after encountering heavy fire. Also in May, the first UC-123K arrived. The K-model boosted the -123's twin piston engine power with an additional two, J-85 jet auxiliary engines mounted under the wings; much appreciated insurance as it improved the odds for survivability in the event of single-engine loss.

On 1 August 1968, the 12th Air Commando Squadron became the 12th Special Operations Squadron (12 SOS), and in February 1969, all operational Ranch Hand aircraft were moved north from Bien Hoa to Phan Rang in anticipation of another Viet Cong Tet offensive. In spite of increased enemy activity the unit continued to fly herbicide missions without loss.

By April 1969, all Ranch Hand aircraft had been modified to the K-model version. Ground fire was still a problem, however, and in July, new escort tactics were adopted. Propeller-driven A-1 Skyraiders would provide flank protection while F-4 jet fighters orbited overhead to attack enemy positions after the spray pass. The new tactics proved successful in reducing the number of hits Ranch Hand aircraft took on when escorted in this fashion.

As 1969 wound down, so did Ranch Hand missions. From an average of 400 sorties per month in 1969, the number of sorties decreased to only 43 in the last quarter of 1970. The 12th SOS was inactivated on 31 July 1970, with the UC-123Ks becoming "A" Flight, 310th Tactical Airlift Squadron. Ranch Hand flew its last mission defoliant mission on 7 January 1971, passing out of existence later that month.

In nine years of defoliant operations, Ranch Hand aircraft and crews had dispensed between 17.7 and 19.4 million gallons of herbicide in Southeast Asia. Just over half, approximately 10.6 to 11.7 million gallons, was the controversial herbicide "Agent Orange."

President Gerald Ford issued Executive Order #11850 on April 8th, 1975, renouncing first use of herbicides in war by the United States, except for control of vegetation on and around the defensive perimeters of U.S. bases. With this order, President Ford ensured that an operation like Project Ranch Hand could never happen again.



“PUFF THE MAGIC DRAGON”

AC-47 Gunships Spit Fire

As late as 1961, Vietnamese communist (Viet Cong) forces operating throughout South Vietnam could still attack their targets even during daylight hours with little to fear from Vietnam's poorly trained and equipped Air Force (VNAF). Remote government outposts routinely fell to attacking Viet Cong (VC), as did outgunned pro-government villages whose leaders frequently suffered follow-on atrocities at the hands of their "liberators".

The large-scale introduction of reliable, two-way radios to these isolated forts in 1962 temporarily improved the VNAF response to beleaguered army units. But as the VNAF still had no night combat capability, the VC soon switched to night attacks and the dismal rate of government losses resumed. Clearly something needed to be done. But even the first contingent of Air Commandos that began arriving in 1963 ("Farm Gate") to train the VNAF brought no effective night-strike capability with them.

What the Air Commandos did bring however was a small number of tactical C-47 and C-123 transports; and a license to use their imagination. If the Air Commandos couldn't yet effectively defend hamlets under siege at night, they could at least drop illumination flares from a transport circling overhead, exposing the attacking VC to the defending troops. This was done, at first with 750,000 candlepower flares and later with three million candlepower flares.¹⁰⁵

The results were gratifying. To everyone's relief (everyone except the VC at least), the flares frequently had a spoiling effect on the attack, with the VC sometimes withdrawing simply on hearing the flareship approach.¹⁰⁶ When in November, 1963 widespread VC attacks attempted to exploit the confusion generated by the military overthrow of Vietnam's president, the C-47s and C-123s dropped over seven thousand flares in night defensive operations.¹⁰⁷

According to a Newsweek magazine article of the day, the flares terminated VC attacks seventy percent of the time.¹⁰⁸ But again the VC adapted to the latest American tactic, simply waiting until the flare ship left the area before resuming the attack. The limited number of flare ships available in the early days precluded all-night coverage over a single outpost.

It was only a matter of time until some imaginative soul thought of a way to improve the orbiting flareship's effectiveness. And when Captain Ronald W. Terry from Wright-Patterson's Aeronautical Systems Division did just that, he also revolutionized the Air Force concept of close air support.

Returning from field observations made during a 1963 trip to Vietnam, Captain Terry concluded that if a C-47 flare ship could effectively expose the attackers, why couldn't it also control available artillery and airstrikes as well? Better yet, why couldn't an *armed* flareship do all these functions

In response to reports of Viet Cong movement, a flareship drops a string of high-intensity flares, each over a million candlepower, on the outskirts of Saigon in December, 1965. (USAF photo)



Without the night vision sensors found on later AC-119 and AC-130 gunships, the AC-47 used million candle power, magnesium-burning flares to turn night into day in the target area. The only USAF enlisted man to win the Medal of Honor in Southeast Asia saved his entire crew by throwing one such armed flare from a battle-damaged AC-47 only moments before it exploded. (John Bessette)



In pre-gunship 1963 it came down to moats filled with water and fire-hardened bamboo stakes to help defend outgunned militia posts against Viet Cong assaults. A little help from above would soon make a big difference. (USA photo)



The smoking ruins of a government fortified outpost just 30 miles north of Saigon the night after a Viet Cong attack. Without flares and gunships, this story was repeated in every Province of the country in 1964. (USAF photo)

while helping the defenders still further with very accurate gunfire of its own?

The subsequent experimental effort, appropriately designated *Project Tailchaser*,¹⁰⁹ developed a concept that would go on to save countless allied lives throughout America's ten year war in Southeast Asia.

But first *Tailchaser* had to save itself from strong opposition from the corporate fighter pilot community, represented by USAF's Tactical Air Command. Leaving no doubt in anyone's mind as to his opposition, General Walter Sweeney, Jr., head of Tactical Air Command, claimed

*This concept will place a highly vulnerable aircraft in a battlefield environment in which I believe the results will not compensate for the losses of Air Force personnel and aircraft . . . its employment might . . . be disastrous in a future conflict.*¹¹⁰

Not surprisingly, this view soon formed the general opinion within the Tactical Air Command headquarters, which happened to be the very Command directed to employment of the Gunship!¹¹¹

Fortunately for Captain Terry and the Air Commandos, the Air Force Chief of Staff overruled General Sweeney.²² The show was on and in the best Air Commando tradition, it started off with the simple expedient of poking side-firing machine guns out of window holes on a World War II vintage, C-47 "Gooney Bird". Re-designated the AC-47 ("A" for Attack), and officially renamed "Spooky,"²³ this "new, improved" Bird had some impressive talons.

²² The Chief of Staff's (CSAF) decision may have been influenced at least in part by a short but persuasive briefing by gunship advocate Captain Terry to the CSAF himself. In a classic demonstration of "bet your career" nerve, the young Captain literally conned his way through the CSAF's outer office in a moment of administrative confusion, to deliver his pitch.

²³ The AC-47 was also known as "Puff the Magic Dragon", a reference to the continuous sheet of flame and noise produced by the thousands of minigun tracer rounds pouring forth from the night sky directly onto the heads of their hapless victims. "Puff" was the radio call sign used by the AC-47s in their early days with the 1st Air Commando Squadron.

Each of Spooky's three 7.62mm miniguns could selectively fire either 50 or 100 rounds *per second*. Cruising at 120 knots in a 3,000 foot circular orbit over its target, the AC-47 could put a bullet into every square yard of a football field-sized target in 3 seconds.¹¹² And, ammunition holding out, it could do this intermittently while loitering over the target for hours. On February 8, 1965, a Spooky flying over the Bong Son area of Vietnam's Central Highlands demonstrated both capabilities in the process of blunting a VC offensive. Flying from 1850 to 2310 hours, it fired 20,500 rounds into a VC hilltop position, killing an estimated 100²⁴ of the enemy.¹¹³

As in every army in every country, there's always somebody who doesn't get the word. A year later a Viet Cong company attacking a thirty-two man Vietnamese Popular Force outpost shouted to the defenders through a loudspeaker "We are not afraid of your firepower!"¹¹⁴ The *four* AC-47s overhead promptly dropped 75 flares and 48,800 minigun rounds into the VC ranks, then at first light called in two F-100 fighters with napalm. Apparently re-considering their boast, the surviving VC broke off their attack.¹¹⁵ Available reports do not mention whether they took their loudspeaker with them.

So successful were the early Gunships that in 1965 the 4th Air Commando Squadron was activated (*Operation Big Shoot*) with 20 AC-47s (sixteen plus four for command support and attrition¹¹⁶) at Forbes AFB, Kansas. The 4th deployed the same year to Vietnam.¹¹⁷ In May, 1966 it moved north to the coastal enclave at Nha Trang to join the 14th Air Commando Wing, itself activated only two months earlier.²⁵ Just prior to this move, one of its Gunships fought in one of the most harrowing air-ground battles of the war.

In March, 1966, one of the 4th's Gunships joined with the A-1 Skyraiders of the 1st Air Commando Squadron to support yet another endangered Special Forces outpost. One of the Skyraider pilots emerged from the battle with the Medal of Honor. The AC-47 crew met a different fate. The site was the

A Shau Special Forces camp, barely two miles from the Laotian border and under heavy siege from a regimental-sized North Vietnamese force.

With a 500 foot cloud ceiling keeping the United States Air Force off their back, the communists were on the verge of overrunning A Shau's perimeter when a single AC-47 broke through the cloud deck and attacked at tree-top level with its miniguns. On its second pass both the tenacious AC-47 and the alerted North Vietnamese were firing literally thousands of rounds at each at point blank range. Enemy rifle and



Death and destruction hang over the remains of Dong Xoai fort in the summer of 1965, after being overrun by the Viet Cong. No fort protected by an Air Commando gunship is known to have ever been overrun. (ACA collection)

²⁴ A prisoner of the VC who escaped them shortly after the battle estimated VC casualties at closer to 250; the discrepancy accounted for in part by the standard VC tactic of removing their dead from the battlefield to hide their true losses from the government.

²⁵ The 14th Air Commando Wing was activated March 8, 1966.



From inside "Puff the Magic Dragon", its three electrically-driven miniguns were impressive. Outside the gunship, these three guns firing together could put a bullet into every square yard of a football field in 3 seconds. (USAF photo)

machine gun fire literally tore the right engine from the Gunship's wing. All six crewmen survived the crash, but two were killed almost immediately as the North Vietnamese assaulted the remaining survivors.

A USAF helicopter attempting an emergency extraction of the four surviving crewmen came under heavy ground fire itself on its final approach path. Worse yet, the sound of the approaching helicopter provoked a final assault on the trapped Americans. Time had just run out for the survivors. At this moment the Spooky's co-pilot, Lt Delbert R. Peterson, broke cover and charged directly into the oncoming enemy, sacrificing himself to ensure the successful extraction of the last three survivors. His body was never recovered.¹¹⁸

The next day A-1E Skyraider pilot Major Bernard Fisher pulled off one of the class acts of the entire war, landing his two-seat fighter on the littered A Shau airstrip in a hail of enemy fire to extract another Air Commando downed moments earlier in his aircraft. (His story is told in the Medal of Honor section of this History) On the 10th of March, A Shau fell. Two years would pass before the Americans returned to deadly A Shau valley.

In October, 1967, a second AC-47 unit, the 14th Air Commando Squadron, was formed at Nha Trang, also assigned to the 14th Air Commando Wing. The superb work of the two AC-47 squadrons, flown by aircrews younger than the aircraft they flew, was undoubtedly a key contributor to the award of the Presidential Unit Citation to the 14th Air Commando Wing in June, 1968.¹¹⁹

From November, 1965 to the last Spooky flight on 1 December, 1969, the 4th and 14th ACSs compiled an incredible combat record. Perhaps the statistic most important to AC-47 veterans is that after four years of intense combat in Vietnam and Laos, no outpost under protection of Spooky was ever overrun. Having served valiantly again in yet another war, the time had long-since come to replace the worn-out C-47 with another airframe.

A time-delay photo of "Puff the Magic Dragon" firing from an overhead orbit at a Viet Cong position on the outskirts of Saigon. The beautiful but deadly red tracer rounds seen in this photo represent only one of every five bullets impacting the target area. (USAF photo)





THE SHADOW KNOWS!

AC-119s Crash the Party

When uninvited guests drop in, call for "The Shadow."

We provide: Lighting for all occasions
 Beaucoup 7.62

We defend: Mortar Suppression
 Special Forces Camps
 Air Bases
 Outposts
 Troops in Contact

Who knows what evil lurks in the jungle canopy?

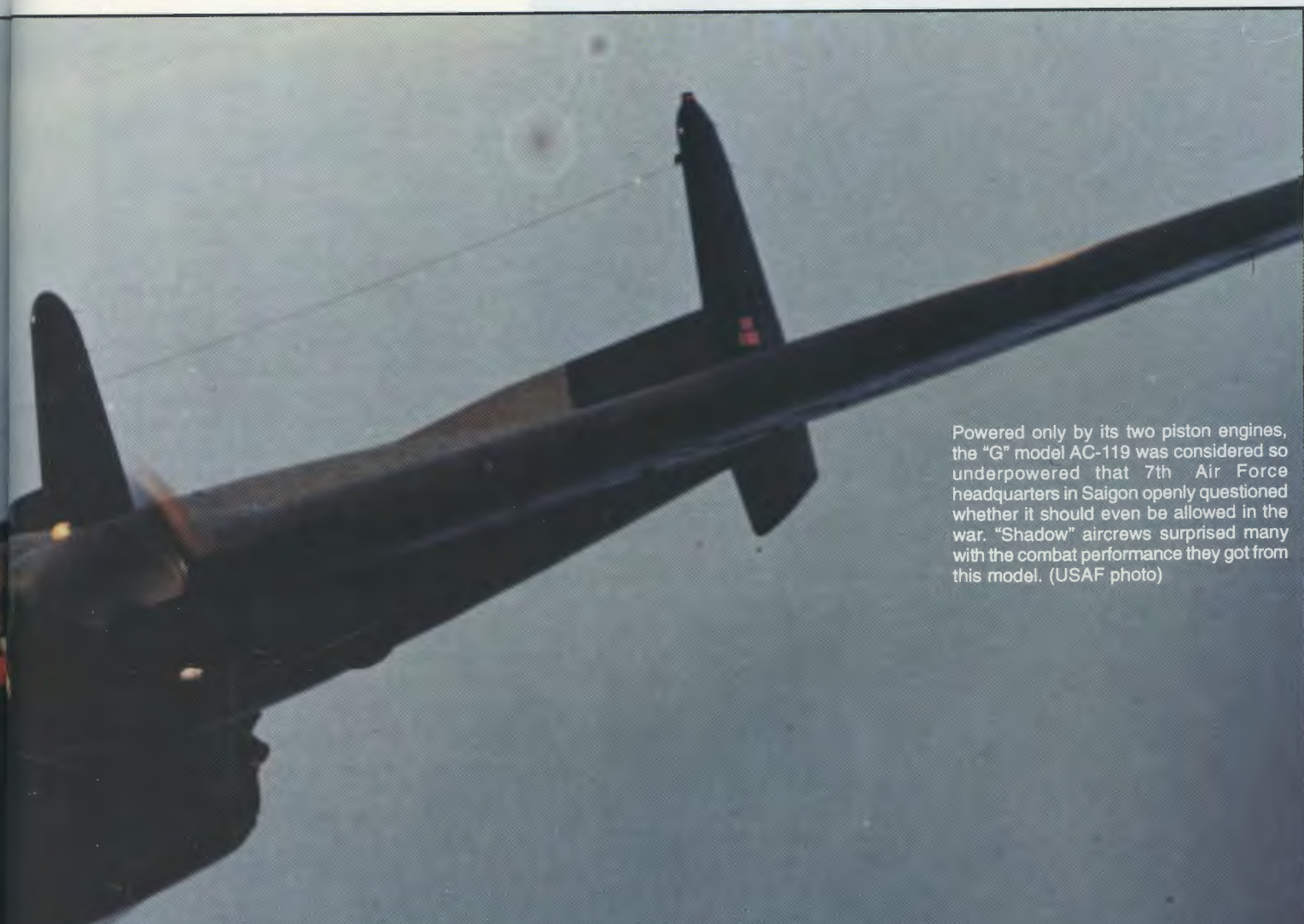
The *Shadow* knows!

(AC-119 "business card" circa 1968¹²⁰)



T

wo years before the final Spooky mission in 1969, the Air Force had already narrowed down the replacement for the old C-47s to either the 1950s vintage, twin-engine C-119 ("Flying Boxcar"), or the new, four-engine C-130A Hercules. While the advantages of the latter over the former were clear to all involved, the cost of diverting scarce C-130 resources for Gunship duty would severely penalize the already overtaxed airlift forces. The ready availability of C-119s in Air Force Reserve units finally decided the issue in favor of the "Boxcars", at least as an interim measure until sufficient AC-130s could be brought on line. The next step proved far more controversial.



Powered only by its two piston engines, the "G" model AC-119 was considered so underpowered that 7th Air Force headquarters in Saigon openly questioned whether it should even be allowed in the war. "Shadow" aircrews surprised many with the combat performance they got from this model. (USAF photo)

Because the "G" model C-119's twin, piston-engine performance was so marginal at combat gross weight, the Air Force intended from the beginning to upgrade selected "Gs" to a newly-designated "K" model configuration. The "K" bolstered the piston engines with two, wing-mounted J-85 jet engines.¹²¹ The difference was no small thing. While "single engine out" rate of climb was 500 feet per minute for the C-119K, the "G" model performance under the same conditions was listed simply as "Unsatisfactory at combat gross weight."¹²²

Overriding strong Air Force concerns in June, 1967, Air Force Secretary Harold Brown, citing modification costs and deployment delays, chose to go with the "G" model as the AC-47 replacement. Later, in February, 1968, the Secretary relented marginally with his approval for a mixed C-119G/K fleet, with sixteen of each type in two squadrons and an additional ten of each type to absorb attrition losses.¹²³ The addition of a "K" squadron however did little to alleviate Air Force apprehension over the all-piston "G". In mid-1968 the Gunship-hungry Seventh Air Force (7AF) Headquarters in Saigon openly questioned whether the "G" should even be allowed into combat.¹²⁴

In what must have seemed to some like crashing a party uninvited, the C-119Gs of the 71st Special Operations Squadron finally arrived in Vietnam in January, 1969, to begin a three-month combat evaluation.¹²⁵ An ill-considered attempt by 7AF to assign the radio callsign "Creep" to the 71st did at least give the squadron an early opportunity to



Like a fortress wall with its cannon, the lethal side of the AC-119K "Stinger" was just as deadly as it appeared. The 7.62mm miniguns were augmented with two additional 20mm cannon. The large weapons radar dome in the rear fuselage guided the firepower to target. (USAF photo)

flag to the United States, leaving some of its "G" models and two-thirds of its personnel in Vietnam to fill out the 71st's replacement, the 17th SOS.¹²⁹ The first "K" model Gunships (call sign "Stinger"), began arriving in Phan Rang Air Base, Vietnam in October, 1969. By the following January the second C-119 Gunship squadron, the 18th SOS, was also combat ready. By the end of 1969, the 14th Air Commando Wing had sixteen C-119G and twelve C-119K Gunships operating from five different air bases throughout Vietnam.¹³⁰ By this time the Shadows were already well into establishing their formidable reputation throughout Southeast Asia.

The brief respite given the Shadow and Stinger crews by a relative lull in enemy activity in early 1970 terminated abruptly in May, with large-scale attacks against isolated government militia camps at Dak Pek and Dak Seang. Flying 147 sorties in seven weeks the AC-119s expended over two million rounds of minigun ammunition and nearly 22 thousand 20mm cannon shells defending the camps.¹³¹ The camps held.

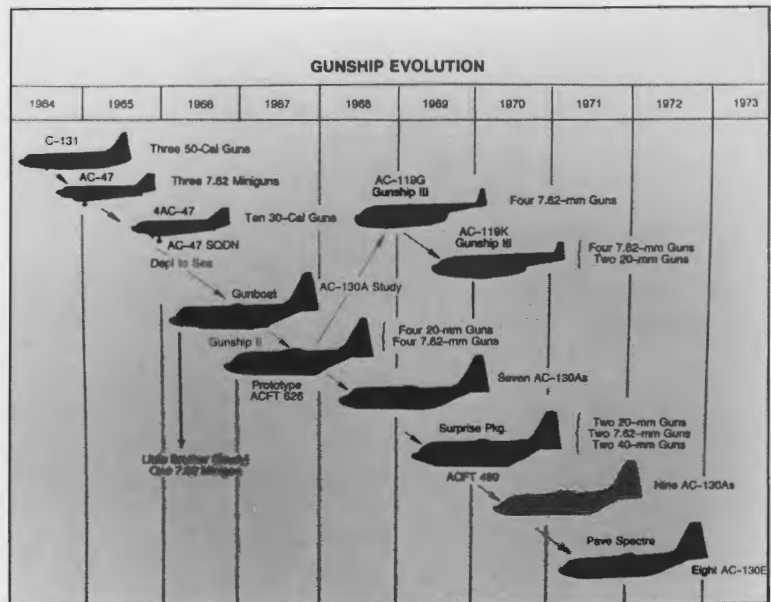
Dak Pek and Dak Seang also reminded everyone that the Gunship concept offered far more than just gun support. After three Army C-7 Caribou transports were shot down attempting to resupply the camps, the Gunship and Caribou pilots agreed to try a very unusual tactic.

This tactic called for the orbiting AC-119 to maintain suppressive fire until the Caribou reached the initial point for its parachute resupply drop. At precisely this time the AC-119

demonstrate its fighting mettle to the headquarters staff. Following a "howl of indignation"¹²⁶ from the squadron, the callsign was promptly changed to "Shadow".

The 71st displayed the same mettle in these early combat evaluations. During nightly armed reconnaissance missions the Shadows flew at five hundred feet, using night observation systems to detect ground targets. Once a target was acquired the Shadow popped up to 3,500 feet, established an orbit and pummeled the target with one or more of its four²⁶, 7.62mm miniguns.¹²⁷ Just two months after the arrival of its lead elements, all assigned aircraft were in country and the 71st SOS was declared "combat-ready".¹²⁸

In June, 1969, the 71st SOS returned its



The continual progression of the Gunship concept (right) provides an excellent demonstration of two other combat concepts as well. Reinforcing success and adapting to battlefield realities made the gunship one of the most effective and accurate air-to-ground weapons system in the USAF inventory. (USAF photo)

²⁶ Each of the "G" model's 7.62 mm miniguns could fire either 3,000 or 6,000 rounds per minute. The "K" model had the same four miniguns, plus two 20mm cannon. Like the miniguns, the 20mm cannon featured a six-barrelled, gatling-gun type system.



lit up the drop zone like a night Super Bowl game with its powerful illuminator. Immediately after dropping its cargo, the C-7 called for the AC-119 to kill the lights, and the Caribou escaped into the darkness. It worked sixty-eight times in three weeks without a single Caribou being hit.¹³²

Immediately following the Dak Pek/Dak Seang battles the Stingers and Shadows supported U.S. and South Vietnamese forces crossing into Cambodia in 1970. They also flew armed reconnaissance and interdiction operations in Laos, frequently using fighter escort to suppress ground fire. But Gunship luck wouldn't hold forever. In April a single-engine failure on take-off killed six crewmen, and two months later a runaway propeller caused the crew to abandon the aircraft over the South China Sea.²⁷

Against these losses, superb airmanship from a Stinger crew operating over Ban Ban Laos in May, 1970, brought back a Gunship despite extensive combat damage. On fire and with one-third of its right wing missing, the cumbersome Flying Boxcar held together for a hair-raising return flight to Udom, Thailand. The Air Force Chief of Staff later presented the crew with the 1970 Mackay Trophy "for the most meritorious flight of the year." The crew could be forgiven for considering the Trophy "for the scariest flight of their lives!"

By 1972 the war was clearly wrapping up for the Shadow/Stinger squadrons. The AC-130s were coming on line in growing numbers and the 17th SOS was converting from a combat to a training squadron as they turned their aircraft over to the Vietnamese Air Force. The indisputable combat success of the AC-119s in Indochina, is a story of persistence and faith almost as much as one of valor. Continual program delays, modification cost overruns, and bureaucratic opposition to the AC-119 program from Washington to Saigon threatened their deployment at every step.

With the advantage of hindsight however, it can be argued that the truest testimony of the AC-119s worth is not measured on engine performance charts, but rather in the hundreds of burned out North Vietnamese trucks scattered across Southeast Asia, and the thousands of allied lives saved by the Shadow and Stinger crews who were always there when needed most.

Climbing through a darkening sky a "Stinger" from the 18th SOS clearly displays the twin jet engines that separate the "K" model from the "G" model. The addition of a J-85 jet engine under each wing on the "K" model AC-119 provided a substantial improvement in payload and single-engine performance for its aircrews. (USAF photo)



The isolated Green Beret camp at Plei Me was typical of the small forts from which Army Special Forces took the war to the Viet Cong . . . and to which the Viet Cong returned the favor with massed infantry and mortar assaults. In response to these attacks, Shadow and Stinger gunships called to assist the camps poured hundreds of thousands of rounds of machine gun and cannon fire along the camp perimeter to drive off the enemy. (USAJFKSWC photo)

²⁷ The crew was recovered safely. But much to everyone's alarm, the abandoned AC-119 continued flying for some time . . . straight towards China! It eventually disappeared from radar over international waters.



PREDATOR

AC-130s Prowl the Ho Chi Minh Trail

Spectre: (*spek'ter*), *n.* 1. a spirit of a terrifying nature.
2. some object or source of terror or dread.

From its very first combat field evaluations in Southeast Asia in 1967-8, the C-130A "Gunship II" alerted both Air Force and Army commanders they were on to something special; something far beyond mere replacement of the wornout AC-47 and AC-119 Gunships.

Despite their usefulness in armed reconnaissance missions, theater commanders saw both the AC-47 and its immediate successor, the AC-119, as most effective in defending isolated Vietnamese and Army Special Forces camps. In this role the AC-47 and AC-119s were defending allied troops from trouble. The Gunship II was to conduct a far more predatory mission, something that sent the huge Gunship actually looking for trouble.

So heavily armed that during early development stages it was initially designated *Project "Gunboat,"* the C-130A could hardly be considered anything *but* a predator. Compared to the three miniguns on the AC-47, or the four found on AC-119 Shadow, the Gunship II boasted four miniguns *and* four 20mm cannon. Later models added a modified Army 105mm field howitzer, the largest gun ever placed in an aircraft. And that was just the armament.

The Gunship II's advanced electronic sensors stripped the night away from the enemy as had never been done before.

The Night Observation Device (NOD) was an image light intensifier that magnified moon and star light to provide a clear view of ground activity to the NOD operator on all but the darkest nights. Another night device was the Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) system, a sensor that picked up heat emissions from both the human body and vehicle motors regardless of light conditions.

The prototype C-130 Gunship II began its first combat evaluation in late 1967. Flying armed reconnaissance over both Laos and Vietnam, the testbed Gunship was an instant success, especially as a truck killer. Air Force Major General William G. Moore, Air



This early AC-130 gunship prototype depicts the sophisticated sensors for target acquisition as well as different caliber weapons. Soon after the unauthorized publication in a U.S. defense industry magazine of the details of the then-classified sensors, gunship crews fighting over the Ho Chi Minh noticed new North Vietnamese countermeasures intended to defeat the sensors. (USAF photo)



To simply say the 20mm gatling gun fires thousands of rounds per minute doesn't adequately convey the massive shock a burst of this weapon creates on its target. The *size* of each of these high explosive rounds helps complete the picture. (USAF photo)

Force Deputy Chief of Staff, Research and Development, concluded the C-130A Gunship II "far exceeded fighter type kill ratios on enemy trucks and other equipment."¹³³ A still bigger compliment came from the senior "customer" in Vietnam, Army General William Westmoreland, so impressed he proved very reluctant to let the testbed aircraft leave the country even for a much-needed overhaul!¹³⁴

With an all-out effort expediting completion of the modification/overhaul, the testbed C-130A returned earlier than planned to Southeast Asia in February, 1968. And just as promptly proceeded to repeat its spectacular early successes. By November 1,000 trucks had been sighted, of which 228 were destroyed and a further 133 damaged; of thirty-two

sampans sighted, nine were destroyed and eight more damaged.¹³⁵ The prototype was even sent to the Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Vietnam, in search of North Vietnamese helicopters.¹³⁶

A lengthy, follow-on USAF analysis divided the total financial costs of the prototype by the total number of "major events" (e.g. trucks/boats destroyed, secondary explosions caused, gunsites destroyed). The findings concluded "the Gunship II prototype to be one of the most cost effective, close support interdiction systems in the U.S. Air Force inventory."¹³⁷

What had started out as a search for a follow-on aircraft to the AC-47, had now grown into an extremely complex, mixed Gunship fleet operating in Vietnam, Thailand and Laos. By the end of 1968, the Air Force had four AC-130As (now using the radio callsign "Spectre"), operating from Thailand, as well as a mixed AC-47 and AC-119G/K fleet operating in the other countries mentioned. It would not be until the early 1970s that the Air Force Gunship fleet would be streamlined to only one type.

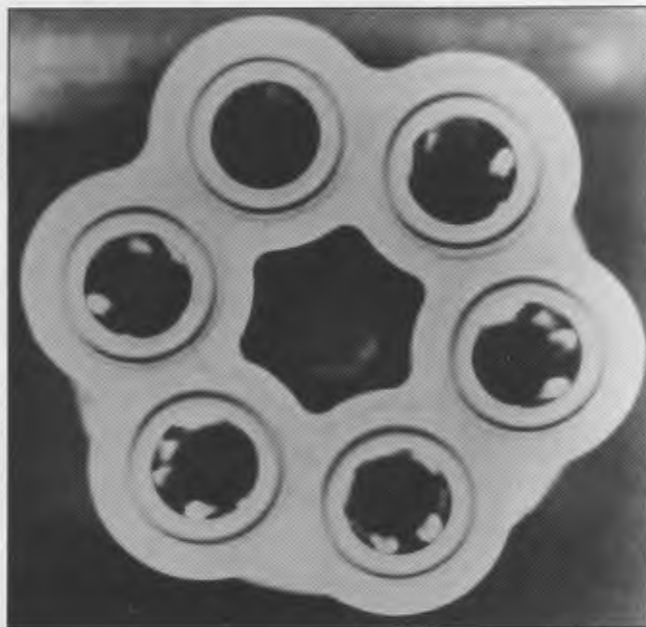
Gunships of every type were active around the clock during the communists' 1968 Tet Offensive.²⁸ This included the Gunship IIs which were deployed to Tan Son Nhut Air Base near Saigon. During this period the Gunships were organized into the 16th Special Operations Squadron, and the C-130 Gunship II was re-designated the "AC-130A".¹³⁸ In November of the same year, the 16th "Spectres" moved to Ubon, Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB), arriving with 44 officers and 96 airmen.¹³⁹

The Thailand-based 16th continued to wrack up high kill-ratios including, on May 8, 1969, a very unusual target. Flying over Laos in the early morning darkness a Spectre NOD operator spotted a slow moving object flying low-level toward a rectangular opening in the jungle. Ground reports of enemy helicopter sightings had been received before, but this was the first time one had actually been detected by an armed U.S. aircraft.

On this night the Gunship crew moved quickly to secure permission to attack, then put several 20mm cannon bursts into the clearing, hitting the helicopter directly and causing numerous secondary explosions nearby.¹⁴⁰ Unconfirmed accounts from Gunship crews stationed at Ubon at that time report the 16th crew spared no effort in describing their achievement (*ad nauseam!*) to the co-located fighter pilots unfortunate enough to be in the bar that night.

The fortunes of war swing both ways, and it was only two weeks after the helicopter shutdown that the inevitable happened to the Spectres. On May 24th enemy anti-aircraft fire from sites along the Ho Chi Minh Trail mortally wounded²⁹ the first AC-130A, killing one crewman immediately, and a second as the aircraft crash landed and burst into flames at its home base.¹⁴¹ The majority of the crew bailed out over Thailand, to be successfully recovered later. Nor were all the dangers to the 16th SOS found only over the Trail. Only two months after the shutdown, a communist sapper attack against Ubon RTAFB itself found the Gunships in their first perimeter defense battle.

The closing days of 1968 saw a vicious circle of combat becoming even more so over attempts to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The more the Air Force and Navy determined to cut the vital logistics lifeline, the more anti-aircraft defenses the North Vietnamese



Spewing thousands of rounds of high explosive 20mm cannon shells per minute from *each* of its Gatling guns, the AC-119 and AC-130 Gunships brought a brutal hammer down on North Vietnamese truck drivers or troops caught out in the open. (USAF photo)

²⁸ Beginning January 30th, the first day of the Vietnamese New Year, the communists attacked 36 of 45 provincial capitols, and destroyed nearly 400 U.S. and Vietnamese aircraft on the ground. Although a tremendous psychological victory for the communists, particularly in the U.S. television media, it cost the enemy massive battlefield casualties. Included in the bloodbath was the virtual annihilation of the Viet Cong, North Vietnam's surrogate forces in the south.

²⁹ Returning to home base with its hydraulic system shot away, the aircraft began a nearly uncontrollable climb. Only the aircraft commander's (Lt Col Schwehm) order to bring *all* surviving crew members to the AC-130's flight deck brought the aircraft's nose down to a controllable situation.



The introduction of shoulder-fired, heat-seeking SA-7 anti-aircraft missiles into the North Vietnamese inventory was soon felt by the 16 SOS "Spectre" gunships. This damage came from a SA-7 missile hit to an AC-130 in May, 1972. (ACA collection)

placed on the trail. The Air Force decided to up the ante once again, this time with a new tactic.

In December, 1968, a 7th Air Force study concluded that Gunships escorted by fighters could probably kill more trucks than could Gunships attacking alone.¹⁴² Results from the first test of this tactic came quickly. On the combined Gunship/Fighter team's first night mission, escorting F-4D³⁰ fighters destroyed or silenced two 37mm sites firing on the Gunship.¹⁴³ It was a winning combination, even though some areas remained too hot even for fighter-escorted Spectres.

With or without fighter escort, the Gunship remained firmly in the center of this dangerous air-ground brawl over "ownership" of Trail. In January, 1969, four Spectres with relatively inexperienced crews accounted for 28 percent of the truck kills along the Trail.¹⁴⁴ Two months later, the 16th accounted for more than 44 percent of all truck kills in a thirty-day period, despite flying only 3.7 percent of the allied interdiction sorties.¹⁴⁵

During the same period³¹ however, North Vietnam increased its anti-aircraft defense of the Trail by 400 percent.¹⁴⁶ The Trail was fast becoming a bloody example of the football cliché describing an "irresistible force meeting an immovable object."³² And it was about to become even more lethal . . . for both "teams".

In February, 1972, the first 16th SOS Spectre was equipped with a 105mm howitzer

³⁰ These fighters came from the 497th Tactical Fighter Squadron ("Night Owls").

³¹ November, 1968 to May, 1970.

³² Evidence that the North Vietnamese were indeed hurting came from prisoner interrogations and road watch team reports that on occasion the truck drivers were actually chained to the inside of their vehicle cab to keep them from abandoning the truck in the event of air attack.

that would destroy anything on the Trail from a safer stand-off distance than what the crews had enjoyed to date.¹⁴⁷ This time the North Vietnamese upped the ante; bigtime. That same month two Spectres were downed by enemy fire, one to a telephone pole-sized, surface-to-air missile (SA-2) on March 29th.¹⁴⁸ On May 5th North Vietnamese gunners fired five, heat-seeking SA-7s at an AC-130³³, the first time the shoulder mounted, missile had been encountered by Spectre crews.¹⁴⁹

During this period alone³⁴, allied aircraft destroyed or damaged 10,609 trucks in the Laotian panhandle.¹⁵⁰ USAF statistics confirm that the top three truck killers, in descending order, were the AC-130, AC-119 and F-4 fighter.¹⁵¹ And this was “just” Laos! In Vietnam Spectres beat back the attackers from the Ben Het Ranger Camp and on May 5th (the same day another Spectre was hit by the SA-7), another Gunship helped repel enemy infantry and tanks already into the defensive barbed wire of the Polei Kleng compound.

Fighting over the Trail continued to escalate, even as America’s direct involvement in Vietnam began to wind down through President Nixon’s “Vietnamization” program. By 1973 the AC-119s had been turned over to the Vietnamese Air Force and USAF Gunship efforts centered on the 16th SOS at Ubon. With a fourteen man crew on each AC-130, the 16th had become the single largest USAF combat squadron in Southeast Asia.¹⁵² The last Spectre combat mission in Southeast Asia was flown over Cambodia on 15 August, 1973.¹⁵³ Over the years six of the big Spectres had gone down in combat, taking with them fifty-two crewmen.¹⁵⁴

As difficult as it is to conduct “cost vs. benefit” analyses where the loss of human life is concerned, the combat reality is that losses to the premier truck killer on the Ho Chi Minh Trail were far below those predicted by detractors of the Gunship concept. Nor did the end of American involvement in Southeast Asia spell the end of the Gunship era.

The 16th SOS redeployed to the United States in December, 1975, with the “H” model AC-130s moving to Hurlburt Field, Florida, home of the 1st Special Operations Wing. The “A” models were sent to the Air Force Reserve 711th SOS at nearby Duke Field, home station for the 919 Special Operations Group. Five more years would elapse before an American disaster in the Iranian desert brought renewed Pentagon interest in their unique capabilities.



A rare photo of an even rarer aircraft, the NC-123K “Black Spot” bomber on pierced-steel-planking ramp at Ubon Royal Thai Air Base, February, 1969. This experimental concept called for the -123 to find targets with its own sensors, then bomb them. Mixed field results finally persuaded the Air Force to concentrate its efforts on the AC-130s of the 16th SOS. (John Ford, III)



This destroyed 57mm mobile anti-aircraft gun gives some idea of the heavy weapons the North Vietnamese were using against the gunships over the Trail. There were a lot more where this one came from. (USAF photo)

³³ One of the missiles hit the aircraft’s tail section, but the Spectre was able to land safely. At that time the AC-130s had no ready countermeasure to the heat-seeking missiles; decoy flares would come later.

³⁴ November, 1971 to March, 1972



THE “GREEN HORNET” AND “DUST DEVIL” HELICOPTERS

“Air” Warfare Below Tree Top Level!

“Air” Warfare below treetop level adds a whole new dimension to the term. Experienced North Vietnamese and Viet Cong units had the disconcerting habit of waiting until the helicopter was in a hover, its most vulnerable position, before opening up at point blank range on the aircraft. Here an Air Commando CH-3E comes to a hover to insert a special forces team on a “Pony Express” mission “somewhere in Southeast Asia” in 1968. (USAF photo)

Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, interservice rivalry between the Army and Air Force over the role of airpower in general, and the helicopter in particular, led the Air Force to abandon its own plans to form a number of helicopter troop carrier squadrons.¹⁵⁵ Almost immediately the Army pressed ahead with its operational testing of the helicopter, especially the now-famous turbine-engine UH-1 “Huey” medium transport.

Ordinarily, this would have settled the issue for some time. But these weren’t ordinary times. And the escalating conflict in Southeast Asia would eventually grow to demand so many of these weird-looking machines that it would eventually be described by many as the “helicopter war”.

In June, 1965, Air Force headquarters in South Vietnam (2nd Air Division) initiated a

request for 25 twin-engine, single-rotor CH-3C helicopters and aircrews. The helicopters would provide USAF vertical airlift support to rural locations deep in enemy territory, to Air Force Combat Control Teams and airfield survey teams, casualty evacuation, and to air rescue requirements.¹⁵⁶ Five months later, the 20th Helicopter Squadron was activated at Tan Son Nhut Air Base (Saigon), South Vietnam, with fourteen of the medium-lift CH-3C helicopters.

The 20th began combat operations two months later, and by March was flying an average of nearly 1000 sorties per month from Tan Son Nhut, as well as the northern coastal enclaves at Da Nang, and Cam Ranh Bay. The 20th was later assigned to the 14th Air Commando Wing after the latter's activation at Nha Trang in March, 1966.¹⁵⁷

In June, the 20th joined its parent Wing at Nha Trang, where it began to concentrate on the unconventional warfare role. A detachment of CH-3s, nicknamed "Pony Express," were deployed later that summer to Nakhon Phanom Royal Thailand Air Base, to support Thai counterinsurgency (COIN) efforts. But whether from Thailand or Vietnam, classified missions into Laos soon took precedence as the 20th's crews performed a diverse combination of combat support to General Vang Pao's irregulars, airlift for refugee and civic action projects, and even transport for explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) teams and crash investigators.

Summer, 1966, was significant to the 20th as it was also during June that its H-3s flew their first infiltration mission from South Vietnam into North Vietnam, inserting the reconnaissance team just north of the Demilitarized Zone separating South from North Vietnam. By the end of 1966, the H-3 crews had flown a total of 315 infiltration sorties.¹⁵⁸ And the pace was about to pick up.

Flying from Thailand in 1967, Pony Express was able to penetrate still further north into enemy territory. Although thirty-seven penetration missions were scheduled, only eight were successfully completed. The single biggest obstacle to success was the inability of the helicopters and the small Special Forces teams to link-up. However a successful recovery of a reconnaissance team in September, 1967, boosted the morale of both the Special Forces teams and the helicopter crews.¹⁵⁹

In June, 1967, the helicopter squadron's organizational strength was augmented with the addition of fifteen, single-engine UH-1F/P helicopters. These "Hueys" came from the 606th Air Commando Squadron at NKP, where they had supported the previously mentioned Thai Army and Border Patrol Police COIN operations; occasionally into Laos. It had been a memorable "visit" to Thailand. On one occasion a 606th UH-1 with a three-man crew once lifted 34 stranded flood victims (on one flight!) from danger in Thailand, one of many civic action missions performed by the helicopter section. On their return to Vietnam, the UH-1s brought to the 20th the name that remains with the squadron to this day, the "Green Hornets".¹⁶⁰

20th aircrew also flew occasional missions with the civilian crews employed by Air America, a U.S. commercial company with private contracts in the area. On such flights the 20th personnel often flew in civilian clothing to ensure "plausible denial" (of military involvement) for the U.S. should their aircraft be shot down.¹⁶¹

The Green Hornet F-model UH-1s were flown as troop-carrying "slicks". Inserting Special Forces teams both within and across Vietnam's borders, their door gunners in the



The 7.62mm minigun on a 20th SOS gunship could spit out 6,000 rounds per minute. This Green Hornet UH-1F helicopter is photographed on operations in South Vietnam, 1967. (USAF photo)

A wounded and thirsty H-53 chases after a C-130 tanker trailing a refueling hose from its left wing, over hostile terrain in June, 1972. Although armored with steel plating in critical areas, helicopters remain extremely vulnerable to enemy ground fire due to mission requirements that frequently put them, literally, "down in the weeds". (USAF photo)



rear cabin were originally armed only with infantry model M-60 machine guns, suspended on a short "bungee" cord. Later P- model UH-1s boasted a pair of GAU-2B/A mini-guns and two LAU-59/A 2.75" rocket pods mounted on either side of the fuselage.

The miniguns could be locked to forward fire positions and fired by the pilot, or could be aimed and fired by the door gunners in the cabin. The P-models were used primarily as Gunships, flying escort missions for the "slicks". Green Hornet helicopters had all markings removed except for aircraft serial number on the tail and nose. In place of the national star insignia on the tail boom, 20th UH-1s wore a stenciled hornet, painted in green or black.¹⁶²

Whatever their paint schemes, the Green Hornets' mission took the "airwar" quite literally down to the ground. And they paid a price for these near point-blank range shootouts. In 1967 and 1968, the Green Hornets lost four UH-1s to enemy fire. 20th aircrew earned six Silver Stars and eleven Purple Hearts just in the last half of 1968 alone. The Air Force Cross was awarded to six 20th crewmen in 1967-8. And 20th helicopter pilot 1st Lieutenant James P. Fleming was awarded the Medal of Honor for bravery under enemy fire when he rescued a six-man Special Forces patrol in November, 1968.¹⁶³

Along with all Air Commando units, the 20th Helicopter Squadron was re-designated the 20th Special Operations Squadron in August, 1968. Operations continued unabated and by early 1969, hostile fire had claimed five more helicopters. Forays in Cambodian airspace all but ceased, with the 20th shifting to equally dangerous Gunship support missions for Vietnamese H-34 helicopters. With no rotation policy from combat duty (or place to go for that matter), the unequalled combat proficiency attained by the surviving Vietnamese pilots frequently led to their selection for the most dangerous cross-border missions; and the Green Hornets were frequently tagged to escort them.

In January, 1969, Pony Express H-3s flew 539 sorties to evacuate more than 5,000 of General Vang Pao's irregulars and their families, trapped behind communist forces in Laos. The effort required the helicopters haul their own fuel in drums to the forward pickup point, located at 4,700 feet elevation.¹⁶⁴ Hampered still further by early morning fog and hazardous terrain, the difficult evacuation was skillfully completed with accident or loss of life.

Six months after this large-scale evacuation, the Pony Express H-3s and their mission



were transferred to the 21st Special Operations Squadron at NKP, Thailand, leaving the 20th with only its UH-1s. In 1971, the 20th replaced these single-engine UH-1F/Ps with the more powerful twin-engine UH-1N, while still maintaining its original unconventional warfare mission.¹⁶⁵

Following the de-activation of the 14th Special Operations Wing in 1971, the 20th was reassigned to the 483rd Tactical Airlift Wing.¹⁶⁶ The following year the 20th itself was de-activated as the U.S. involvement in Vietnam continued to draw down. By this time the Green Hornets had lost 19 Hueys in Southeast Asia, 13 from enemy fire. With the demise of the 20th SOS, it was the 21st SOS that carried the unconventional air warfare mission. Appropriately, the 21st's radio callsign was "Knife".

The 21st Helicopter Squadron was activated 30 June, 1967, as part of the 56th Special Operations Wing based at Nakhon Phanom. The 21st "Dust Devils" CH-3Es brought a considerable expansion of capability to the 56th SOW. The helicopters were armed with an Emerson electric gun turret mounted on each sponson. The Emerson turret contained a General Electric minigun fed from an 8,000 round hopper. Its guns could swing through an arc of more than 180 degrees, and were fired by gunners stationed in the left forward cabin window and the right-hand personnel door.¹⁶⁷

The 21st mission included seeding the Ho Chi Minh Trail with seismic sensors (part of *Project Igloo White*), infiltrating road watch Special Forces teams into Laos, and Special Forces "Prairie Fire" reconnaissance teams into both Laos and Cambodia. In August, 1968 the 21st was also re-designated a "Special Operations Squadron". The following year it took over the aircraft and mission of the 20th SOS, which included TACAN site support, night reconnaissance, and insertion and extraction of intelligence teams trying to locate POW camps containing downed allied aircrews.¹⁶⁸

In October, 1969, two Dust Devil H-3s carrying troops were shot down by enemy fire near Muong Phine in southeastern Laos. 21st pilot Major Phillip J. Conran ordered the machine guns removed from the crashed choppers, and in the ensuing six hour firefight, used them, the troops he had been carrying, and his crew to fight off enemy attacks until Air Rescue Service choppers could reach them.¹⁶⁹

The 21st performed routine airlift missions as part of the job, with some very "unroutine"



"Knife" H-53 lands in North Vietnam in 1971 to extract sixteen fully armed "defectors" (to right of helicopter) guarded by one "friendly"; the other guard having been killed by the same defectors the night prior to pick-up. Although pick-up was organized by American sources on the ground, one miscue on either side could have lead to an instantaneous bloodbath for everyone in the clearing. (Jerry Gilbert)

exceptions. In January, 1970 for example, the 21st was again tasked to evacuate Laotian refugees, this time from the Plain of Jars, where they had been encircled by communist troops. From 4-15 January, the 21st moved more than 4,000 refugees, along with their livestock and belongings, to safety.¹⁷⁰

In August, 1970, CH-53C "Super Jolly Green Giant" helicopters began arriving to augment the battle-worn and underpowered H-3s. With the larger, more powerful choppers, the 21st began flying troop-carrying missions in airmobile assaults, primarily supporting Laotian army and Vang Pao's Hmong irregulars. Three months after the arrival of the "Super Jollys" in the 21st, its crews lifted 2,000 troops onto the Plain of Jars in an offensive intended to drive the North Vietnamese and Laotian Pathet Lao forces out. Code-named Operation Leapfrog, the mission

was only a temporary success and by early 1971, the more heavily armed communist forces were back in force on the Plain.¹⁷¹

The last major air assault in Laos took place on 20 January 1973. Seven 21st CH-53s and two Air America CH-47s moved 1,000 Laotian troops in an operation intended to re-open the highway between the Laotian capitol of Vientiane, and the city of Luang Prabang some 120 miles to the north. The assault successfully ended the isolation of Luang Prabang by the communists.¹⁷² Just a month later, on 22 February 1973, missions by the 21st SOS (and all other allied forces) in Laos were ended by international agreement. The Laotians and the Hmong irregulars were on their own.

The 21st remained in Thailand after the cease-fire and the subsequent U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam in 1973. It was placed on alert for the evacuation of the Cambodian capitol, and assisted in the evacuation of Saigon as it fell to the communists in late April, 1975.

With the assistance of two Air Rescue Service HH-53s, the 21st evacuated 1,479 Americans and Vietnamese, as well as 249 U.S. Marines from the American Embassy in Saigon. They were later tasked to sling-load former South Vietnamese A-37 and F-5 fighters, flown by their pilots from Vietnam to Thailand to prevent them from falling into communist hands, to the aircraft carrier *Midway*.¹⁷³ Scheduled for de-activation in Thailand in September, 1975, the 21st found it had one last mission to accomplish before retiring its colors.

In early May of that year, the Dust Devils participated in the costly attempt to rescue the crew of the American container ship *S.S. Mayaguez*, captured in international waters by Cambodia's new rulers, the Khmer Rouge. While the crew were eventually released unharmed from the Cambodian mainland, the bloody Air Force and Marine Corps assault on Koh Tang Island, thought to be the location of the incarcerated crew, proved to be one last bloody nose for America as it closed down the curtain on the longest war in this country's history.



May Day! Moments before, this single-engine Air America plane lost all engine power . . . obviously in broad daylight but not so obviously . . . right over the Ho Chi Minh Trail! Photo taken from "Knife" H-53 helicopter from 21st SOS as it followed the Porter down for *immediate* extraction of pilot and passenger from one of the most dangerous pieces of real estate in the world in 1971. (Jerry Gilbert)

"Knife" helicopter crewmen race to plane to pull two Americans from wreckage before enemy reacts to "golden opportunity" in its own backyard. The pilot remained in coma for five months, then recovered and resumed flying. The blood-spattered passenger returned to duty much sooner. The "Dust Devils" -53 had been in immediate area on unrelated ground reconnaissance team extraction mission when Air America plane went down. (Jerry Gilbert)



Two Hurlburt Field-based Air Commandos display early loudspeaker setup for U-10. Arguably the world's best propagandists, the communists proved extremely sensitive to its use against *them*. (ACA collection)

“THE *OTHER* WAR”

Psychological Warfare from Above

Americans traditionally have a hard time accepting “psychological warfare” (PSYWAR) as a legitimate weapon even in time of war. The “*planned use of propaganda and other psychological actions to . . . influence hostile foreign groups*”¹⁷⁴ demands in practice much more finesse and patience than the more quickly generated and visually impressive air strike. But when done right, PSYWAR can produce some astonishing results. Appropriately, it was the Air Commandos who were chosen from the beginning to lead the Air Force in Southeast Asia for what was frequently termed “the other war.”

With the arrival of the initial Farm Gate cadre in the Republic of South Vietnam in November, 1961, the Air Commandos brought four, twin-engine C-47 transports, equipped with belly mounted loudspeakers for PSYWAR missions.¹⁷⁵ On 4 December they flew their first mission, which soon revealed the flaw in their approach

*(The belly mounted speakers) . . . cost us about two years in redesign time. Like the train blowing its whistle as it comes down the track, the voice from the air kept changing pitch as the aircraft approached and departed, leaving no more than two or three intelligible words out of a complete sentence*¹⁷⁶

While design engineers were searching for a fix,³⁵ the C-47s switched to propaganda leaflet drops. It was on one of these missions, in February, 1962, that the Air Commandos lost their first aircraft to combat in Vietnam. The C-47 was dropping leaflets during Tet, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year, when downed by hostile ground fire.¹⁷⁷

With the introduction of improved, side-mounted speakers on the C-47s, voice clarity improved even when the aircraft flew at altitudes high enough to avoid most small arms fire. As one early observer recalls

*Programs broadcast from 3,000 feet high are clearly audible on the ground. Broadcasts are often pleas to the guerrillas in the jungle to surrender. It is an eery thing to hear a C-47 droning high overhead, from which a monstrous celestial voice is enjoining the sinners to repent.*¹⁷⁸

Almost to the month, four years passed between the arrival of the initial Air Commando C-47s, and the docking in Saigon of the *USS Breton*, a ship filled with seventeen disassembled U-10 Super Courier light observation planes.¹⁷⁹ Quickly assembled and flown to the northern coastal enclave of Nha Trang, the single-engine U-10s joined the four C-47 transports in a newly organized unit dedicated totally to the PSYWAR mission, the 5th Air Commando Squadron (ACS).

With only the 5th ACS and a handful of Vietnamese Air Force planes dedicated to PSYWAR, the former was soon spread thin throughout the country in small detachments. The missions were both difficult and dangerous for a number of reasons. Arguably the most experienced worldwide exponents of propaganda on Third World populations, the communists proved ultra-sensitive to its use against them by the Air Commandos.

A typical loudspeaker mission could last four hours, flying slowly at



A rare photo of U-10 and C-47 PSYWAR aircraft in formation in 1967. These are from "E" Flight, 5th Air Commando Squadron at Binh Thuy air base in South Vietnam. (USAF photo)

³⁵ The solution was found in the development of lightweight, door-mounted speakers that could fit in either the C-47 or the smaller U-10.



In 1966 the long-range C-130 was added to the Air Commando's PSYWAR effort in *Project Combat Spear*. The highly classified missions involved the dropping of both guerrillas and propaganda leaflets into Laos and North Vietnam itself, as well as enemy-controlled areas in South Vietnam. (USAF photo)

low altitudes over the same area. Of course this also gave the Viet Cong (VC) down below the opportunity to offer their "audience appreciation" rating of the broadcast

Effectiveness can be judged by the fact that the VC shot at the psywar aircraft more than at any other, except those of Ranch Hand (defoliant C-123s). They also banged pots and pans together in hamlet streets to drown out the speakers, and cut off the hands of villagers caught reading leaflets.¹⁸⁰

Taking in this in gratitude from the cockpit of the unarmored U-10, flying without escort, a long way from friendly territory, understandably made for a very long day "at the office." On other occasions the PSYWARRIORS could find themselves smack in the middle of a battle still in progress.

In January, 1966, Air Commando A-1E, AC-47 and C-123s joined to support the war's first, division-sized search and destroy mission, Operation Masher³⁶, a combined effort involving U.S., South Vietnamese and Korean army units.¹⁸¹ Flying and fighting around the clock, the Air Commandos brought in the 5th ACS to round out a rare display of virtually all Air Commando capabilities at the same place and time

As the (friendly) soldiers moved forward, the (A1-Es) struck . . . sniper positions on their flanks. From overhead a U-10 from the 5th ACS dropped leaflets and beamed messages through its loudspeakers. After each period of heavy fighting, the PSYOPS plane broadcast funeral dirges and wailing sounds to play on the enemy's superstitions.¹⁸²

North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong susceptibility to airborne PSYWAR surrender leaflets varied considerably throughout the country. But the leaflets *were* having an effect. In the same month as Operation Masher, over 1600 enemy became *Chieu Hoi* (ralliers) to the South Vietnamese government, using the PSYWAR leaflets as their safe-conduct pass.¹⁸³

³⁶ Wide media attention on the operation, and the "potentially negative (public) reaction" to the name "Masher" led the Army to change the name of the operation to "White Wing".

The Air Commandos also took PSYWAR straight to the enemy's "Great Rear Base" (North Vietnam), in stages. The first step began in 1964 with the training at Hurlburt Field of 7 Nationalist Chinese aircrews on specially equipped C-123 twin-engine transports.¹⁸⁴ In 1965 the Chinese crews flew 30 PSYWAR missions and inserted/resupplied 22 agent teams into North Vietnam under the auspices of *Project Duck Hook*.¹⁸⁵ The following year Vietnamese crews augmented the Chinese, but by 1967 the Air Commandos had taken over the growing operation, completing 67 PSYWAR missions¹⁸⁶ in support of the mysterious MACV-SOG.³⁷



An Air Commando O-2B Super Skymaster over South Vietnam in 1968 drops surrender leaflets as its three 600-watt amplifiers broadcast messages to enemy troops below. The Viet Cong's "audience appreciation rating" was usually delivered with all the weapons they could bring to bear against the low-flying aircraft. (USAF photo)

The escalation in 1966 of the strategic PSYWAR effort saw the addition of four C-130s (*Project Combat Spear*) to the six C-123s with which the program started two years earlier. Following the Air Commando-to-Special Operations redesignation in 1968, these missions fell under the 15th Special Operations Squadron, 14th Special Operations Wing, at Nha Trang.¹⁸⁷

By early 1967, the 5th Air Commando, the lone U.S. psychological warfare squadron in South Vietnam, had become thoroughly task-saturated. The squadron was split in two in March, with the 5th retaining coverage of South Vietnam's two southernmost regional Corps, and the newly formed 9th ACS covering the two northernmost Corps.¹⁸⁸ At the same time the PSYWAR C-47 and U-10s were augmented by a third aircraft, the O-2A, a twin-engine plane with one tractor and one pusher propeller.

The overall effectiveness of any PSYWAR program is invariably difficult to gauge. The cultural, subjective nature of the program, external factors beyond the control of the PSYWAR planner, and difficulties encountered when attempting to measure success with the always-popular computer analysis, all combine to complicate effective measurement. For all these problems however, it still remains a fact that literally thousands of enemy soldiers became *Chieu Hoi* over the years, many the result of 5th and 9th ACS missions dedicated to achieve exactly this result.



The effectiveness of psychological warfare (PSYWAR) leaflets varied considerably according to the message, timing and area of drop, and degree of Viet Cong control over the population. Unsure how to handle the natural death of Ho Chi Minh during the war, U.S. and South Vietnamese PSYWAR planners ultimately chose not to address the subject in their messages. (Earl Tighe)

³⁷ MACV-SOG, (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam - Studies & Observation Group), was one of the most classified operations of the war. Its "Studies & Observation Group" title was a deception ploy masking a theater-level, unconventional warfare force comprised of Air Commandos, Army Special Forces, Navy SEALs, and indigenous Asian personnel. Its Top Secret charter sent its teams throughout Indochina, wherever the enemy could be found or was thought to be.





REFLECTIONS

Any attempt to place the astonishing operations of the Air Commandos in perspective must begin with an understanding of the extraordinary environment in which they were placed. Only with this basic understanding can both their missions and their unorthodox tactics be understood. The final, and most important element in formulating such a perspective, is to be found with an understanding of the nature of the individual Air Commandos themselves.

In evaluating the environment in which the Air Commandos were placed, there is a natural tendency to become distracted by the extreme diversity of the operations recounted in this history. For all this diversity however, common threads run through these stories that combine to form a composite picture of a very dangerous environment. These include a lethal and unforgiving battlefield, physically harsh terrain and climate, limited resources, aging weapons, and almost always the knowledge that capture behind enemy lines meant probable torture and death. Even the psychological assurance of fighting in large numbers was frequently denied individual and small aircrews flying, often at night, frequently in areas which the U.S. denied even its presence. All these realities had to be faced . . . and they took their toll.

Missions undertaken in such conditions are by definition considered to be "high-risk/high gain" gambles. The price tag for failure has historically been worldwide embarrassment to the U.S. government at the highest levels; and worse for those attempting to carry out the mission. Both the nature of such missions and the near-mandatory requirement for the element of surprise in their execution, combine to demand creative, unorthodox tactics from those who would dare them. And this historical fact leads in turn to the inescapable observation that such performance can only come from those truly few amongst us who possess the exceptional courage, skill, and imagination to fight and survive at this level of performance.

One of the most enduring arguments *against* the formation of elite units such as the Air Commandos, is that "the best and the brightest" inevitably flow to them, at the expense of the remaining majority. Ironically, the distinguished performance of the Air Commandos simply lends credence to this argument. While most are allowed to make their daily contributions quietly, others have a different destiny.

The following stories portray the heroic actions of five Air Commandos, legends who have shown the way to those who would dare follow in their footsteps.



AIR COMMANDOS ABOVE AND BEYOND THE CALL

Five of the 12 Air Force Medals of Honor awarded during the Vietnam Conflict went to Air Commando/ Special Operations personnel. Considering that even at the peak of their strength in Southeast Asia, the Air Commandos never accounted for more than five percent of the total Air Force effort, this remarkable record of valor underscores as nothing else can, the dangerous world in which the Air Commandos fought and sometimes died "At the Tip of the Spear."



Major Bernard F. Fisher

*1st Air Commando Squadron*¹⁸⁹

In the early morning darkness of March 9, 1966, a remote 450-man Special Forces camp near South Vietnam's mountainous border with Laos came under attack by a North Vietnamese regimental-sized force. Mortar shells rained down on the camp, reducing critical defensive bunkers to rubble, and temporarily disrupting vital camp communications to the outside world.

The weather at the camp, located in the A Shau Valley, a box canyon high in South Vietnam's northwestern region, was usually of two kinds, either raining or raining with fog. Knowing what American airpower could do against them in clear skies, the North Vietnamese wisely scheduled their attack during the worst possible weather season.

Despite this precaution, a particularly determined Air Commando AC-47 still managed to get in under the weather after the initial assault, firing its mini-guns in the camp's defense. But the three hundred foot ceiling made the Gunship an easy target, and ground fire quickly disabled first one engine then the other before the Gunship crashed into a hillside near the camp.³⁸

Responding to the AC-47's last-minute distress call, fighters scrambled from Pleiku, Qui Nhon, and Nha Trang to join the fray. Major Bernie Fisher, 1st Air Commando Squadron, was piloting one of the first, propeller-driven A-1E Skyraiders to reach the camp. He and his wingman flew with priority orders to completely destroy the still partially-intact AC-47, to keep it out of enemy hands.

With the AC-47 demolished the two Skyraiders flew cover for two C-123 Providers carrying medical supplies and ordnance for A Shau's increasingly desperate defenders. Hit hard by ground fire as they made their drops, the Providers still managed to drop their bundles and escape from the valley. Major Fisher, low on fuel, was also forced to abandon the camp and return to base for refueling.

With the next morning's weather only marginally better, Fisher's flight was ordered back to the A Shau valley. Arriving just as the camp had been overrun, Fisher and two other A-1s began strafing and napalm passes right up to the small camp's remaining perimeter. The North Vietnamese picked up the Skyraiders' attack pattern, hitting the number three A-1 flown by Major "Jump" Myers of the 602nd Air Commando Squadron. With the Skyraider's massive engine dead and the aircraft on fire at very low altitude, Myers had no choice but to ride his plane in.

If the plane went into the jungle, Myers had little chance of surviving the crash. His only chance was the pierced steel planking (PSP) runway that served the camp . . . a runway now controlled by the North Vietnamese. Myers pickled his bombload into the jungle and made for the PSP runway. After skidding sideways nearly six hundred feet in a wheels-up landing, the crippled plane hit a bank and burst into a large ball of flame.

Overhead, Fisher thought surely Myers had died in the crash and reported this back to his airfield's command post. Just then, the smoke cleared momentarily and Myers ran out of the inferno. Fisher promptly asked a nearby Marine helicopter for a rescue pickup and returned to the fight. When ten minutes had passed without a rescue chopper appearing, Fisher asked for an estimated time of arrival. The choppers were at least 20 minutes away. But Myers was only twenty feet from capture, and twenty minutes might just as well have



³⁸ Read "Puff the Magic Dragon" for a more detailed account of this valiant but doomed AC-47 attack.

been twenty days.

Fisher made the snap-decision to make the pickup himself. Flying through smoke and fire, he broke into the clear just over the edge of the runway. In spite of the expended rocket casings and damage from mortar fire on the PSP runway, Fisher avoided a crash of his own. The plane skidded as he braked, coming to a stop near a fuel dump at the far end of the runway. Barrels and other battle debris had already damaged the A-1's wings and tail as Fisher turned the aircraft around and headed back up the runway toward the burning wreckage of Myers' aircraft. Seeing Myers jump up as Fisher passed the burning A-1, Fisher braked his plane.

Myers ran for the A-1E, but could not climb up on the wing because of the propeller wash. Fisher throttled back and Myers frantically clambered up the wing, falling head first into the two-place cockpit. Without taking time to strap in, Fisher turned the plane around again and jammed the throttle against the forward stops. Holding the plane down until the last possible moment, Fisher's A-1 raced down the runway before leaping for the sky and safety.

Major Bernard F. Fisher's bravery under fire as he risked his life to save a comrade from capture or death earned a much-deserved Air Force Medal of Honor. In the process Fisher also became the first recipient of the Air Force Medal of Honor in Vietnam.

Lieutenant Colonel Joe M. Jackson

311th Air Commando Squadron¹⁹⁰

On 12 May 1968, Lieutenant Colonel Joe M. Jackson of the 311th Air Commando Squadron, flying a C-123K Provider with the call sign *Bookie 771*, diverted his unarmed transport to the besieged Special Forces camp at Kham Duc after intercepting an urgent radio call for assistance. Having held out for two days despite repeated, punishing infantry, sapper, and mortar assaults by the North Vietnamese Army's 2nd Division, the camp was now dying in agony moments before annihilation.

Despite intense anti-aircraft fire, the last of Kham Duc's defenders had been airlifted out of the chaotic inferno just before Jackson arrived over the camp. Or so everyone thought until a frantic radio call sent a shock through the aircrews circling overhead. Three remaining members of an Air Force Combat Control Team (CCT), inserted earlier to organize the air evacuation of the doomed camp, had been inadvertently left behind in the confused scramble to board the last escaping aircraft. Now trapped in a small pocket near the runway, they faced certain death or capture.

Another C-123 ahead of Jackson's had already braved intense enemy anti-aircraft fire, as well as debris and the wreckage of a helicopter cluttering the runway, in an attempted last-ditch rescue of the CCT. Helpless to prevent heavy enemy fire from pinning down the CCT where they crouched, the transport crew had no choice but to abandon the attempt, taking off again through the curtain of enemy fire as they fled for their lives.

Jackson, watching the scene below while circling above at 9,000 feet, knew *Bookie 771* was the CCT's last hope. Dropping the C-123's nose sharply, he spiraled down in a combat approach that strained the design limits of the bulky transport. Pulling the nose of the straining aircraft toward the strip and flaring at the last possible second, he slammed the -123 onto Kham Duc's airstrip heading straight for what was definitely the



CCT's last chance. Standing on the brakes the two pilots brought the aircraft to a shuddering halt just as an enemy rocket landed on the runway ahead of the aircraft . . . and failed to explode.

Running literally for their lives, the three Controllers raced aboard the -123. With maximum power on the K-model's two piston and two jet engines, the transport accelerated down the runway as mortar rounds fell around the aircraft. Intense but fortunately inaccurate automatic weapons fire swept through the confusion all around the Provider, but the aircraft never took a hit. Jackson's cool nerve and superb flying saved the lives of the besieged Combat Controllers, and in the process, established another Air Commando legend.

Lieutenant Colonel William A. Jones III *602nd Special Operations Squadron¹⁹¹*

Lieutenant Colonel William A. Jones III, flight leader for four 602nd Special Operations Squadron A-1H Skyraiders just scrambled off Nakhon Phanom Air Base, Thailand, was a busy man on 1 September 1968. Coordinating with airborne rescue controllers, his flight, and the two Air Rescue helicopters he was escorting deep into enemy territory was much like choreographing a complex play. But this "play" would take place in North Vietnam, with a very hostile audience waiting and hoping Jones would make a fatal mistake. If he did, the price for that mistake could well be the lives of the two crewmembers of a downed F-4 Phantom jet the rescue force was enroute to save.

As the lead Skyraiders arrived over the estimated location, they discovered from the downed pilot they were too late to rescue the Phantom's backseater; he was already a North Vietnamese prisoner of war destined for harsh imprisonment. Using his handheld survival radio, the injured and shaken but still free pilot attempted to bring Jones' flight over his position. But dense foliage and low-hanging clouds hampered clear line of sight vision for both the downed pilot and his would-be rescuers.

Flying "Sandy 1", Jones led his flight down below the overcast towards the survival radio's beacon, only to find the terrain below as treacherous as the North Vietnamese gunners waiting for him. With the tops of some mountains hidden by clouds, Jones continued to be frustrated in his attempts to get visual reference to the downed pilot's location. A critical hour was lost in the search when the downed pilot's wingman directed the search eight miles in the wrong direction. When Jones finally made visual contact with the downed pilot, he also became quickly and painfully aware that enemy gunners had made visual contact with him as well.

Jones' A-1H was hit by a 37 millimeter shell almost immediately as he approached the downed pilot's location. As his Skyraider shook from the impact of the shell, the cockpit filled with smoke momentarily. Jones continued on, frantically zigzagging to avoid more of the heavy anti-aircraft fire exploding all around him. Jones was now so low enemy gunners in the hills were firing *down* at him. Jones' attempts to draw fire to mark enemy positions for a flight of F-4s overhead was a valiant and selfless act . . . and one that couldn't go on much longer.

Low on fuel and with his aircraft clattering loudly from the effect of numerous anti-aircraft hits, Jones, was still the only pilot so far to have pinpointed the downed pilot's



exact position. Then he spotted something much worse, a heavy anti-aircraft gun emplacement on a slope just above the downed pilot. Ordering the other aircraft in the area to standby, Jones wheeled his Skyraider over to bring his guns to bear on the target. Peppering the enemy position with 20 millimeter cannon fire and CBU-38 cluster bombs, he could feel his heavily-armored A-1 shuddering as enemy bullets found their mark again and again.

Smoke and fire filled the cockpit as the inevitable fatal hit struck, this one igniting the rocket motor in Jones' ejection seat. Jones jettisoned the canopy and triggered the ejection seat. When nothing happened he tried the secondary release. Again nothing! The flames were burning him as his wingman began shouting "Get out! You're on fire! Bail out now!"

Trapped in the fire of a dying plane, unable to escape, Jones continued attempting to point out the survivor's exact position to his wingmen. By now the Skyraider was enveloped in flames, leaving a trail of smoke across the sky. Jones was in extreme pain, but still trying to orient the rest of the rescue force to the downed pilot. Only when fire destroyed his radio did he finally break off, to be escorted by his wingman back to NKP and a straight-in approach to the runway.

Rolling the ruined aircraft to a stop, Jones was pulled from the cockpit, in extreme pain but still refusing medical treatment until he had passed on his information about the downed pilot. With this information the remaining force fought through the enemy fire to complete a successful rescue of the F-4 pilot later that day.

For his bravery under fire, Lieutenant Colonel William A. Jones III, was nominated for the Air Force Medal of Honor. Returning to the United States to a well-deserved welcome, Jones' good luck finally ran out. An aircraft accident took this valiant Air Commando's life before the Medal could be presented by President Richard M. Nixon. Nixon presented the Air Force Medal of Honor to Jones' widow on 6 August 1970.¹⁹²

1st Lieutenant James P. Fleming

20th Special Operations Squadron¹⁹³



First Lieutenant James P. Fleming, a UH-1F helicopter pilot with the 20th Special Operations Squadron "Green Hornets", was awarded the Medal of Honor for bravery under fire for his part in the rescue of a trapped six-man Special Forces reconnaissance team on November 26, 1968.

The Green Berets had just been inserted into a heavily forested area near Duc Co in South Vietnam's central highlands, and into a sharp firefight with a much larger enemy force. The team leader urgently requested an emergency extraction. It was this call, heard by a Green Hornet flight of five helicopters returning to their base for refueling and rearming. The two gunships and three transports ("slicks"), already low on fuel, immediately turned around and raced to the relief of the trapped patrol.

They arrived to find the team surrounded, under fire and trapped with their backs to an impassable river. The gunships attacked immediately with their miniguns. Just as quickly, one of the gunships was hit by enemy machine gun fire, and forced to autorotate to a forced landing in a small clearing. The lead slick followed the crippled aircraft down and rescued the crew only minutes before enemy troops arrived in the clearing.

The number two slick, low on fuel itself, was forced to withdraw, leaving only Fleming's slick and the surviving gunship to rescue the desperate Special Forces

troopers. After ordering the patrol to move the 20 yards separating it from the river bank and another small clearing, the gunship positioned itself between the enemy and the patrol as Fleming flared into the clearing, then poked the helicopter's nose over the river bank with the tail of the 48-foot long helicopter extending back out over the river.

Enemy gunners already firing to keep the team pinned down, now added Fleming's stationery helicopter to their targets. Seeing the team's escape route cut off, Fleming backed the chopper out as his door gunners kept the enemy at bay. Once in the clear, he climbed rapidly above the small arms fire to plan his next move.

Despite facing the heaviest enemy fire he'd ever seen, and keenly aware of his dangerously low fuel state, Fleming knew his helicopter was the team's only hope for escape. As he brought his aircraft around and headed back again into the deadly clearing on the river bank, he knew the North Vietnamese would be waiting and ready . . . and they were.

As Fleming nudged his helicopter into the clearing, the reconnaissance team was also ready. To help cover their withdrawal, the team had set up a series of Claymore mines³⁹ around their position to cover their escape. As they raced for the chopper in the clearing, with the enemy hot on their heels, the closest North Vietnamese set off the Claymores, bring a swath of death across their path.

The team leaped for the helicopter, "helped" aboard by adrenalin-filled door gunners even as Fleming was backing out over the river once more. As the slick climbed away from the river, gunfire shattered the windshield, miraculously missing Fleming, his crew, and the team. Returning to Duc Co with near-empty fuel tanks, Fleming landed his shot-up helicopter and a very grateful team of Green Berets.

Airman First Class John L. Levitow

4th Air Commando Squadron¹⁹⁴

The night of February 24th, 1969, found Airman First Class John L. Levitow, loadmaster aboard one of the 4th Air Commando Squadron's AC-47 gunships, in a combat air patrol over Tan Son Nhut, Saigon's major airport. When the nearby Army base at Long Binh called for assistance in fending off a mortar attack, the AC-47 diverted immediately . . . not even suspecting the frightening events about to befall them.

Defending camps was a gunship specialty, and the AC-47's multi-barrelled miniguns soon knocked out two of the mortar positions attacking Long Binh. Spotting other mortar flashes in the distance, the gunship turned in their direction. Suddenly a brilliant, violent explosion over the right wing rocked the aircraft, shredding the paper-thin fuselage with thousands of fragments and lethal shards of hot metal. A one-in-a-million mortar round had struck the gunship.

Levitow, standing near the open cargo door to drop illumination flares, was knocked to the cabin floor with more than 40 wounds in his back and legs. An already-activated magnesium flare he and a fellow crewman were handling was flung from their arms into a pile of spilled ammunition. Timed to ignite in seconds, it threatened to destroy the aircraft and all aboard.

Ignoring his pain and loss of blood, Levitow threw himself on the flare, already spewing highly toxic smoke throughout the cabin. Dragging it painfully back to the open cargo door, he shoved it out an instant before it ignited in a ball of flame.

A1C Levitow's heroic actions earned for him the Air Force Medal of Honor, making him the only Air Force enlisted man to be so awarded during the decade-long Vietnam conflict.



³⁹ A Claymore mine, in size fitting neatly into a shoebox, detonates with the effect of a huge shotgun shell, spewing a lethal pattern of hundreds of anti-personnel pellets in the direction in which the Claymore is pointed.

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- Major Frank Fabijan, (USAF, ret), former member Helicopter Flight, 581st ARCW.
- Major Robert F. Sullivan, (USAF, ret), former member Helicopter Flight, 581st ARCW.
- Carlos Branch, former USAF flight engineer with 581st ARCW and its successor, 322nd TCS.

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