Clearing

AFTER WORLD WAR TWO was concluded, only a select group of conventional aircraft types seemed to have longevity with the military. Some of the jet fighters that were coming into front-line status were almost obsolete before they were fully operational. The survivors included the Douglas C-47 Skytrain, a workhorse that laboured effectively through three wars and also the North American P-51 Mustang and Douglas B-26 Invader attack bomber which served well in World War Two and Korea (see page 102).

There was an aircraft designed by Ed Heinemann and built by Douglas that dominated the close air support role as the second half of the 20th century got underway. This was the AD Skyraider and its combat capabilities were astounding.

An A-1H from the 56th Special Operations Squadron, heads for home at last light after delivering all of its ordnance on a rescue mission. AL MARTIN

Serving with the US Marines and Navy in the Korean War, it could carry far more ordnance than World War Two vintage four-engine bombers and its fuel efficiency allowed it to

the Way

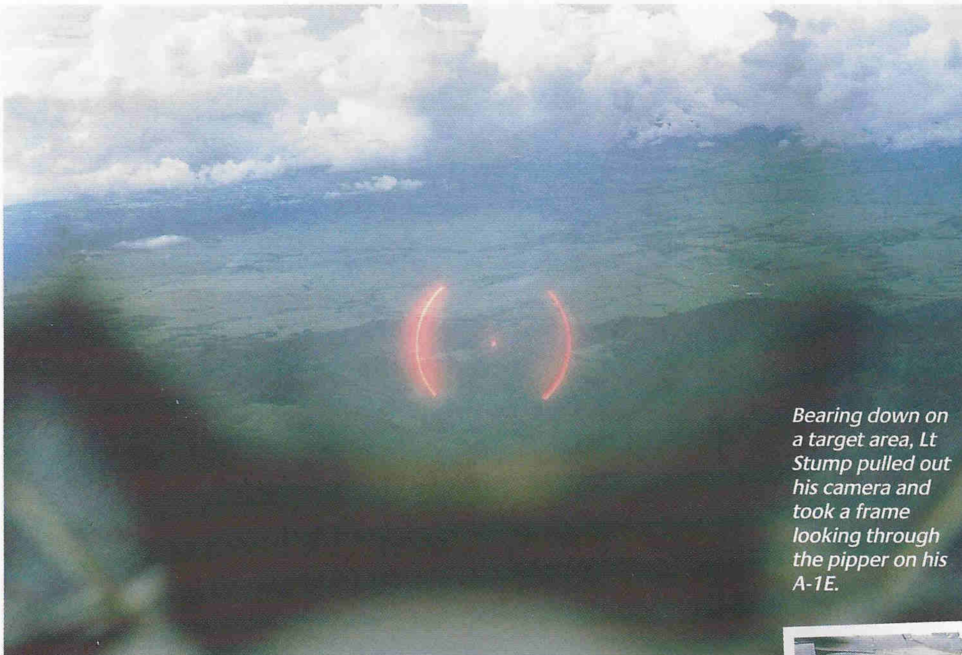
Apparently well out-of-date, the Douglas Skyraider proved itself to be a rugged warrior in the skies over Vietnam. Warren Thompson explains

loiter over target areas for hours. Basically, the various AD models were equipped to carry out four major missions: day attack, all-weather attack, airborne early warning and countermeasures.

During the Korean War, the Skyraider ranked in the top five attack aircraft because of its ability to deliver the 2,000lb (900kg) bombs in the dive mode. When the new integrated-co-ordinated attacks against the North Korean bridge complexes were being carried out from the USS *Essex* in January 1952, it was the AD that delivered the decisive blows to the targets with their precision delivery of the big bombs.

PERFECT FOR 'NAM

In November 1961, the first efforts to aid the South Vietnamese were initiated by the Pacific Air Force. At the time, no jet aircraft were to be allowed within Vietnam airspace, so this left only a handful of two-seaters that would fit the bill; the A-1E Skyraider, the North American



Bearing down on a target area, Lt Stump pulled out his camera and took a frame looking through the pipper on his A-1E.

> **"By the mid-1960s, Bien Hoa was handling 16,000 aircraft movements per month."**

T-28 Trojan and the older Douglas B-26 Invader. The other strict rule enforced was that all aircraft flying combat over Vietnam had to have a Vietnamese pilot on board.

It didn't take long to realise the potential of the Skyraider in the constantly escalating situation in South Vietnam. The USAF called upon its Special Air Warfare Center at Hurlburt Field, Florida, to test and evaluate any aircraft or modified airframe that might effectively be used in Vietnam.

Scoring such high marks in this test, the Skyraider's future looked bright, but production of the aircraft had been halted in 1957 and the USAF had never been a prime user of the airframe. The only answer was to make arrangements to obtain whatever excess inventory the US Navy and Marines had on their ADs. These were modified by the USAF and officially designated as the A-1E Skyraider. The first A-1Es did not join the action until sometime in June1964.

Once this was accomplished and the crews began graduating from Hurlburt, the pace of US involvement in Vietnam accelerated at a phenomenal rate. A classic example of this was found in statistics released by the USAF in 1970. During the early days in Vietnam, there were three primary air bases used by the VNAF and USAF. One of the first air bases to house a wide array of US aircraft types was Bien Hoa. It was a relatively small base that had originally been built by the French forces after World War Two and located in close proximity to Saigon.

By the mid-1960s, Bien Hoa was handling 16,000 aircraft movements per month. Another was Saigon's Ton Son Nhut air base which processed 56,000 aircraft movements in 1961 and at the time, this was believed to be the absolute maximum traffic that it could handle. In 1964, before the war even came close to hitting its stride, the same base recorded 220,000 movements.

FIRE POWER WHEN NEEDED

Distinguished Flying Crosses were won by 1st Lt Thomas K Stump of the 56th Special Operations Squadron and Captain E A Gullion on August 10 and 11, 1970. A long-range reconnaissance team had been inserted into a dangerous area about 55 miles (88km) north of Da Nang. They were to monitor and pinpoint movements of North Vietnamese troops that were moving in and out of the area in strength and were a threat to the huge US base at Da Nang. When they had completed their mission and it came time to extract them, all hell broke loose!

The helicopter that was sent in to remove them was shot down with two of its crewmen listed as 'killed in action'. Two A-1Es (call-signs *Spad 01* and *Spad 02*) had been called in to assist in the operation and it was their fire power that kept the enemy troops at bay, but as they approached 'bingo' fuel, another pair of Skyraiders were called in to relieve them and keep the pressure on.

The recon team leader radioed that the enemy was closing the ring around them and

1st Lt Thomas K Stump by his fully-loaded Skyraider prior to flying a close air support mission sometime in 1970.

the distance between them was down to 65ft (20m). The situation was deteriorating rapidly.

As the relief element arrived (*Spad 03* and *Spad 04*), they were advised that they would have to put their ordnance right on top of the besieged friendlies in order to keep them from being overrun.

Tom Stump comments on his flight into the area to assist with the extraction and to protect the surviving crew members of the downed helicopter on that day:

The location of the fighting was on the 223 degree radial, 55 miles from

A-1E loaded with finned napalm that would slice right through foliage and explode at ground level, May 1970. ALL TOM STUMP

Da Nang. We had one helicopter shot down with two crew members killed in action. It was clearly a trap!

After many years, it was learned that there were security leaks and the North Vietnamese often knew the location and time of the infills of these Special Forces troops. It was further learned that they knew radio frequencies and force sizes.

On August 10, after almost three hours of providing cover for this team, we were leaving the area due to bingo fuel, but I continued to monitor our guys on the ground and the Forward Air Controller's communications. The A-1 had three radios; UNF, VHF and FMA which made this possible. FM was the radio used by the ground team.

Skyraider losses in Vietnam

1964	10
1965	29
1966	42
1967	15
1968	38
1969	29
1970	22
1971	9
1972	9
Total	**203**

20mm guns but with HEI shells we were able to cut them up pretty bad.

We only had enough gas and ammo for three passes, but it was more than enough. It was the last time the team would be threatened that day even though they had to spend the night before we could get another helicopter in and get them out the following morning.

PINPOINT ACCURACY

In the mission report that covered the August 10 mission, it was revealed that the two heavily-loaded Skyraiders (*Spads 03* and *04*) had carefully placed a variety of ordnance all over the enemy positions during several very low passes in which both aircraft took horrendous ground fire.

The original radio contact with the those trapped on the ground.

Upon returning to their base, the two pilots debriefed, ate and attempted to get some sleep. Lt Stump knew that he would be back on station at first light as a rescue helicopter would, once again, try to extract the team.

The maintenance and ordnance crews got straight to work on the aircraft as soon as they landed. Before their job was done, the Skyraiders would have to be refuelled, loaded with ammo and ordnance and any write-ups had to be corrected before the next morning. As it was with any squadron that was working under pressure, everyone worked as a team.

Tom Stump summed up the qualities of the Skyraider:

The Skyraider was a 25,000lb single-engine aircraft that had four 20mm cannons, firing high-explosive incendiary ammunition, mounted in the wings. In addition, the typical loads for the missions I flew out of Da Nang would include a 7.62mm mini-gun capable of firing 6,000 rounds per minute, six stations of anti-personnel bomblets, two stations of 500lb unfinned napalm, two stations loaded with 19 high-explosive rockets each and two stations with seven white phosphorous marking rockets each. The remaining two external stores were reserved for a centreline and auxiliary gas tanks.

With this amount of ordnance and gas, the A-1 was able to provide close air support for literally hours at a time. On the August 10 mission, I logged 3.8 hours of flight time and landed with only 200lb of fuel. Minimum fuel for the A-1 was 600lb!

An A-1E starts its take-off roll with a load of napalm and cluster bomb units.

"I heard the team leader, in a desperate voice, say they were pinned down. The NVA... were closing in for the kill!"

A pair of 602nd Squadron A-1Hs head north carrying a load of fragmentation bombs.

BOTH WIN DEPOORTER

As soon as we were out of the area, I heard the team leader, in a desperate voice, say they were pinned down. The NVA knew their exact position and they were closing in for the kill! The FAC called for more air support, but was told there was none available.

To this day, I believe that the North Vietnamese were monitoring the radios because they waited until they were certain the team would get no further air support before closing in. Checking with my wingman, I found he had 400lb of gas more than me because of the additional low altitude flying I had done in locating the team.

So, I knew if anyone would run out of gas it would be me and not him. At that point, I made the decision to return but with radio silence.

We caught many of the bad guys out in the open. It was only one of two times I actually saw the NVA in the open during my one-year tour in Vietnam. Because of the ground fire they obviously did not hear us returning! All we had left was our

friendly forces on the ground stated that the 'Sandys' (Skyraiders on rescue support missions) needed to put their ordnance within 65ft of their positions, but the final report stated that on some passes, they were as close as 16ft (5m)! This was taking precision bombing to a new level.

None of the Americans on the ground were hit. The final strafing passes carried out with below fuel minimums, had saved the day for

In my opinion, the Skyraider was the finest close air support aircraft to ever take to the skies!

SUPPRESS AND RESCUE

During the night, the men who were trapped on the ground behind enemy lines came under constant attack, but they were able to keep from being overrun.

Before dawn on the next day, *Spads 01* and *02* scrambled with a full load of ordnance. Their mission was to suppress any further efforts by the enemy and to prepare the area for a successful extraction of the team. Piloting *Spad 01* was Captain Terry F Bolstad, and Tom Stump was at the controls of *Spad 02*.

Having flown the day before, Tom was well aware of the deadly defences that had been set up around the small beleaguered force:

When we arrived over the area, we realised that the hostile enemy force had been repairing and replacing damaged and destroyed guns and crews all through the night. It was obvious that the enemy had prepared for a major defensive stand against any rescue attempts by us the following morning.

As we made a pass over the area, the team on the ground was engaged in a fire-fight with enemy forces that were only 50m from their position. We were unable to respond immediately, because the guys on the ground had been forced to move during the night and their new position had not yet been pinpointed.

As we descended down to a very low altitude to conduct a visual search of the area, our force on the ground reported heavy fire coming from all four quadrants directed at our two aircraft. We hesitated to attack any of these hostile positions until we had determined exactly where our guys were.

Two 'Sandy' workhorses, 1972: Skyraiders and Cessna A-37 Dragonflies. BYRON HUKEE

An US pilot, downed in the area shown, is hunkered down while a flight of A-1Es works over the area. AL MARTIN

Lt Tom Stump pulls in close to his wingman en route to a rescue of a downed pilot. TOM STUMP

Due to some heavy ground fog, both pilots had to make three passes each, at very low altitudes, to ascertain their situational awareness of where both sides were located on the ground. Once they had finished the third pass, they immediately set up for their relentless attacks on enemy positions.

"We hesitated to attack any of these hostile positions until we had determined exactly where our guys were."

Because of the nature of the terrain and the position of the team, they were confined to attacking only from west to east. This was definitely not in their favour because the rising sun was right in front of them, which also increased the capability of the enemy gunners.

Regardless of the cards being stacked against them, they aggressively pressed their attacks at tree-top level, jinking constantly to avoid the wall of lead that was being aimed at them. Despite the erratic flight, they were able to place their ordnance squarely on all of the vital enemy positions.

By using the terrain to mask their flight paths, they evaded the brunt of the ground fire and did not absorb any fatal hits. On one of their passes, they were requested to place their ordnance extremely close to the team and they responded with pinpoint accuracy.

This completely stopped the efforts to overrun the friendly position, forcing the enemy to withdraw. As the rescue helicopter waited at a distance, *Spads 01* and *02* made 13 passes each which succeeded in silencing the defensive fire

Once they had forced the enemy back to a distance that was safe for the helicopter to land, they continued to hit areas on the perimeter that housed the hostile forces. The only positive aspect of this entire operation was the determination shown by the rescuers. The terrain was mountainous, the weather was poor and the ground fire had been intense.

Nevertheless, the rescue was pulled off and its success was solely determined by the amount of firepower that the Skyraider was capable of delivering. This was not an isolated example of a successful 'Sandy' mission. The type pulled off countless rescues in the course of its tenure in Southeast Asia.

In the 'Sandy' missions, they usually engaged enemy troops at close range. This A-1 from the 56th Special Operations Squadron sustained heavy damage on the outer panels of its left wing. AL MARTIN