MY TOUR WITH SPOOKY

THE AUTHOR TRANSFERS FROM MODERN JETS TO THE DOUGLAS AC-47 "PUFF, THE MAGIC DRAGON" AND GOES TO WAR IN A HOSTILE NEW ENVIRONMENT - PART ONE

BY WILLIAM J. PRATT MAJOR USAF (RET.)

This is a story involving my tour in Vietnam as a combat pilot. It was a very unusual and interesting tour because I was in an Air Commando Squadron (ACS) and because most of my missions were in Laos — a campaign that our country was adamantly denying being involved with during that time period.

The Air Commandos do the same type of operations as the Army Special Forces, most small and quiet operations behind enemy lines. In our case, it was almost always a single aircraft flying low altitude at night without lights and often without radio contact. One advantage of this was that we were such a small unit (three aircraft in my detachment) that we didn't have all the restrictions, procedures, and paperwork that most units are burdened with.

Being as all of this happened decades ago, some small details may be in error but all events actually happened and are as accurate as I can remember.

When I was ordered to Vietnam, I was a Captain stationed at Offutt AFB, Omaha, Nebraska. My assigned duty was as a maintenance test pilot flying Cessna U-3s, Lockheed T-33s, and North American T-39s. I enjoyed my work but was getting tired of being in the Strategic Air Command (SAC) and was anxious to get back into the real Air Force.

In the meantime, the conflict in Vietnam was getting worse; what began with American non-combat advisors was becoming a small war (later a big war). One small unit already there was the 1st ACS with a few Douglas C-47 transports to haul supplies and personnel into remote jungle strips. They became tired of being shot at so they scrounged up a couple old Browning .30-caliber machine guns and put them in the door of one of the planes and, later, also added them to a couple more aircraft. This arrangement was so successful at making the old Gooney Bird an attack aircraft that the USAF decided to form a squadron of C-47s specifically configured for the job and I was an original member of this unique squadron.

The first plane to get a gun was given the name *Puff, The Magic Dragon* because many superstitious Vietnamese believed in dragons and were scared to death when they saw the tracer fire coming out of the sky. Collectively, we were known as *Spooky*, our radio call sign picked for the same reason but many referred to us as just *Puff*, the name of the plane.

Our training was conducted at Forbes AFB in Topeka, Kansas, by a detachment of the 1st Air Commando Wing (ACW), which was based at Hurlbert Field, Florida. When we arrived, we were assigned to one of two squadrons, some were assigned to the 4th ACS and the others to the 5th ACS. The 5th ACS was a psychological warfare squadron (we called them the "bullshit bombers") while the 4th ACS was the gunship squadron.

The training consisted of checking out in the C-47, low-level navigation, short and dirt field landings, air drops, and gunnery (4th ACS only). There were three types of pilots to be trained: Those already checked out in C-47s; those that had been trained in T-6 Texans; and younger pilots who had never flown a tailwheel aircraft. The Texan-trained pilots (I was in that group) had very little trouble but the younger ones had a difficult time getting used to a tailwheel, because of the inherent difficulties of directional control while on the ground.



Flight jacket patch for the 1st Air Commando Wing.



The AC-47s quickly became nocturnal flyers. As American airpower increased, the enemy troop and truck movements began to travel only at night. The AC-47s became a main threat to anything moving on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The strange glow from the 7.62mm mini-guns lights up the cabin of an AC-47.



Typical AC-47 crew standing next to the weapons on their aircraft. This particular aircraft has all three mini-guns firing out of the former passenger windows.

After shutting down, our instructor kept my copilot behind and they taxied back and forth just to get him used to a tail wheel. For training, the USAF borrowed C-47s from all over the country and no two were the same. A few had plush VIP interiors and fancy paint jobs, and others were unpainted trash haulers about to fall apart.

In low-level navigation, the navigator would stand between and just behind the pilots and help map read. I recall one time when I pointed ahead and said, "there is our turning point." Our navigator, who came from fast-moving jets, said "no, that can't be it because we aren't due there for another four minutes." It was about five minutes before we reached the point.

For short field and dirt field landings, we used some farmer's field that was complete with barbed wire and cow pies. I suppose the USAF had to pay extra for the pies. For air drops, we wold drop sand bags on cloth markers staked out in a field. When our instructor demonstrated the first drop, I commented that I could beat that so he bet me a drink that I couldn't. When I dropped, my sandbag hit the marker and rolled it up into a ball. That hit was pure luck but it paid off at the same time.

The guns we were to use in Vietnam hadn't even been made so some old .30s were bolted into a couple C-47s and off we went. It wasn't very realistic training because we were using a different gun with different ammunition, but it taught us the principles.

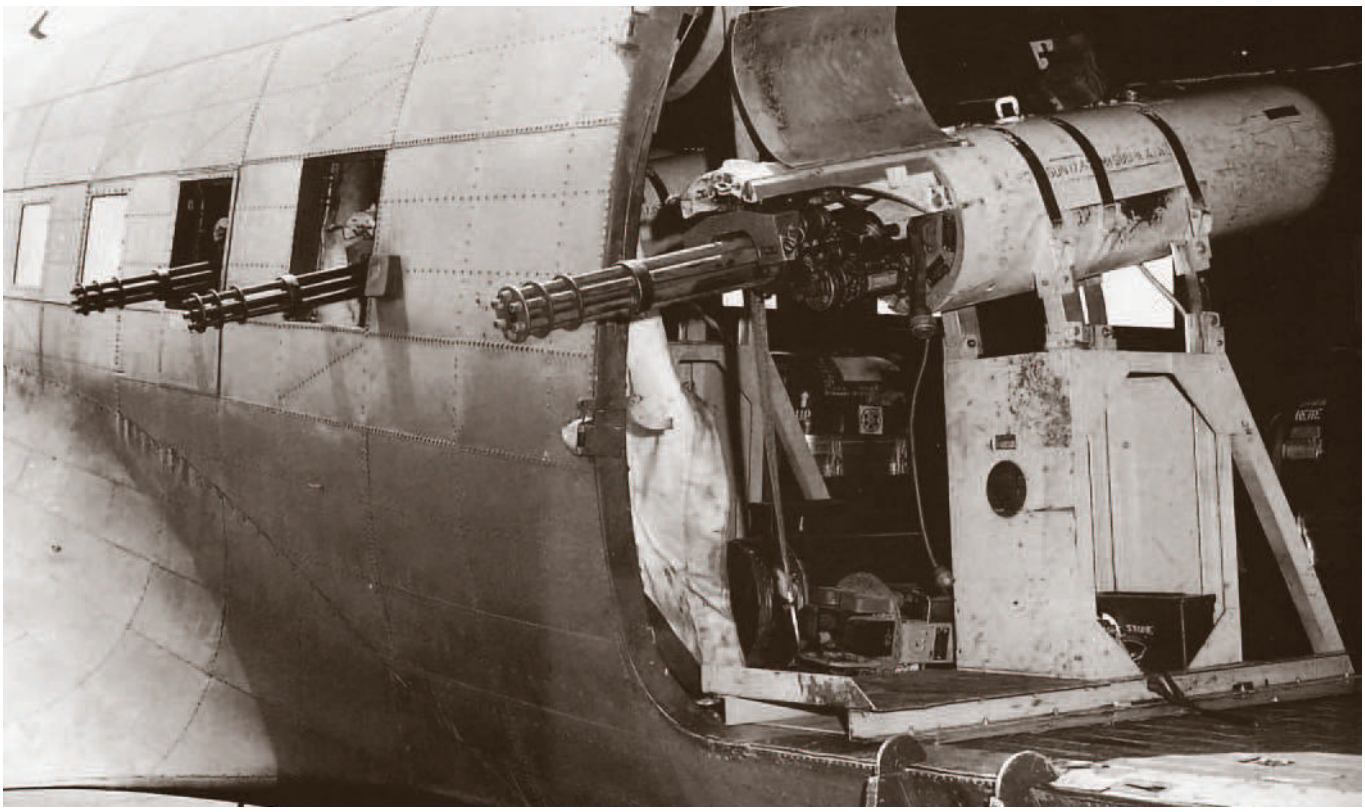
We also had ground training. A special forces detachment taught us basic infantry squad tactics, escape and evasion, and even how to use plastic explosives. They ran us many miles through the woods and, of course, we had to carry the heavy infantry rifle instead of the light M-16 we would have in Vietnam. They really seemed to enjoy their work. Very few USAF personnel get this type of training but we were slated to operate from small strips in the jungle so it was deemed worthwhile.

One day, we were attending a very boring lecture when the doors flew open and in rushed about ten Special Forces troops dressed in black, speaking Russian, and firing blanks (at least I think they were blanks) into the air. I don't care how boring the lecture was, this was enough to wake us up. They put laundry bags over our heads, loaded us into trucks, and hauled us off somewhere. When we got to the location, they had us sit on a cold concrete floor for two days. At random, they would make one of us get up and follow them. They then took off our laundry bag and sitting in front of us, in a dark and dingy room, was a big mean-looking guy wearing a Russian uniform. Wow, the fun was about to begin.

He would ask us questions and if he didn't like the answer (he never did) someone would throw a bucket of very cold water on us. After a while, he would



Today, few enthusiasts realize the USAF was still operating a large number of C-47 aircraft into the 1970s. The planes were used for every sort of mission — from VIP flights to "trash haulers." Thus, when it came time to create the AC-47 there were a large number of aircraft from which to choose.



Another mini-gun configuration with one of the weapons mounted on its cradle by the aircraft's large cargo door.

make us lean against a wall with only our fingertips touching the wall while the questions and water continued. This may not sound like much fun, but try it for a while!

This went on for two days, with about three interrogation sessions, and after a bit the novelty began to wear off. I was straining my brain to figure out how to resist when I got an idea. While sitting on the concrete floor, I began a fake shiver. A little at first, then gradually more and more. After a bit, someone kicked me in the rear (that was the only way they communicated) and asked if I was okay. I said yes, but kept up the act. Later, I was kicked in the rear again and told to get up and was taken to a warmer room and told to sit on the floor. I still had the sack over my head so I didn't know where I was but I was proud for having put one over on them. With hindsight, I probably wasn't being watched and could probably have escaped. To this day, I am mad at myself for not trying, but with the sack over your head and down to your waist, you have no idea if you are being watched.

Many do-gooders would say that this training was cruel, but most of us thought it was the best training we could get for what might eventually happen in Vietnam.

We were also scheduled to attend survival school in the Philippines, but the USAF was in such a hurry to get us into action that it was cancelled before we left the States. We later found that we could have used FAC (Forward Air Controller) training also, but this need had not been anticipated.

OUR AIRCRAFT

Even though the basic DC-3/C-47 was more than dated, our aircraft were pretty new. They had been built at the end of the war and many were put into long-term storage. Removed from storage, the aircraft were flown to a civilian outfit in Florida for overhaul, modifications, and very pretty camouflage paint schemes. The modifications consisted of installing modern avionics, wiring, and mounts for the guns and sights, along with plumbing for the long-range fuel tanks needed to get to Southeast Asia.

After modifications, our aircraft were designated FC-47s (F for fighter!). We were always saying that we were flying the newest fighter in the USAF (only 35-years-old). Someone realized how ridiculous this was so they were redesignated AC-47 (A for attack) and this was much more in keeping with our mission.

Our AC-47s were bare-bones aircraft in that they didn't have any insulation, soundproofing, or armor (except for a *flak* curtain along the left side of the cabin). We received them without guns or sights but with the long-range tanks installed. There were two large tanks in the forward section of the cabin and they were so large (200-gallons each, I think) that you had to turn sideways to walk between them. We only received the AC-47s a day or two before departure and never even got the chance to try them out.

THE CREWS

Our standard crew was made up of seven people: Pilot, copilot, navigator, flight mechanic, load master, and two gunners. The pilot, copilot, and navigator were commissioned officers and the others were enlisted. On in-country missions, we would usually have a Vietnamese officer to coordinate with the ground and to obtain permission from the local chief to shoot our weapons (really!).

Many of the original pilots had lots of C-47 flight time and were picked by the computer because of that fact. Problem with that was that most of the high-time C-47 pilots were close to retirement (that is why they gravitated to C-47s), thus they were "older and wiser." They were not the type to get in close and shoot it up. Also, the C-47 was built as a transport (Donald Douglas certainly



An interesting view taken during a daylight AC-47 operation. Using a rather simple gunsight, the pilot would fire the mini-guns. Every fifth round was a tracer and bullets can be seen striking a target near a bomb crater.



There were numerous flight jacket patches for the AC-47 crews and this one shows the plane's famous profile along with the barrel for the Gatling gun.

never envisioned the DC-3 being used as an attack aircraft) and that meant many of their hours were flown making gentle turns and altitude changes.

To be successful as an attack pilot, you need to be aggressive and to feel comfortable really honking the AC-47 around in a dark night (it often helped to not have good sense either). Because most of the old pilots did not have these attributes, they were gradually transferred to desk jobs in Saigon making room for the younger copilots to become full pilots.

Our Squadron Commander often flew with some of these pilots in an effort to light a fire under them. One night, I found a semi-tank truck and set it on fire. Wow, what a fire that was! Our CO was flying with another crew that had never found a truck (you can't see them from the altitude that crew flew at). The CO made them fly to the burning truck and then circle it a few times to see what an enemy truck looked like — especially when burning.

The navigators came from large "many motor" aircraft so also had some adapting to do. We (the pilots) didn't really need them to navigate in the usual sense, because we were always fairly close to home and we had TACAN (Tactical Air Navigation System) to navigate with, but they were very useful to have on board. They made many of the radio calls, did our paperwork, and by following where we were, they were able to keep us apprised of the local terrain features, etc. that we couldn't see in the dark night, and to give us headings to where we wanted to go next.

The flight mechanic kept an eye on the plane and systems, helped the gunners load the guns if they fell behind, and brought the pilots coffee and C Rations when they needed them (most important). Upon landing, he would insert the landing gear and flight control locks, inspect the plane for damage, and insure it was properly serviced. When we flew, he was the first to the plane and inspected it to make sure it was ready for flight.

The gunners loaded the guns and de-jammed them when necessary. This could really get rough because their area was blacked out and they could hardly see the guns, and they never knew when I was going to make an abrupt maneuver. The C-47 is not very maneuverable but if you are carrying a heavy can of ammo in the dark, it can seem very maneuverable! The pilot actually fired the guns but the gunners insured they were ready and selected which one(s) would fire.

The loadmaster launched the parachute flares and insured that our loading was always within the proper weight and balance limits. The flare launching will be discussed in detail later.

In addition to their regular duties, all crew members served as observers and informed me if we were taking fire, were hit, etc. I had a fantastic crew and could not of had a better one if I had been allowed to hand-pick them. They were not only very proficient and hard-working, but were always willing participants when I pulled the many shenanigans we will later discuss.

THE TRIP

Our first left of the trip to Vietnam was a non-stop flight to McClellan AFB in Sacramento, California. This long non-stop leg gave us a chance to feel out both the AC-47 and the long-range tanks. McClellan was a maintenance depot so the planes received a thorough inspection while there plus we were able to have any problems corrected before setting out across the Pacific.

The next leg was a non-stop flight from McClellan to Hickam AFB in Hawaii. This was the longest leg of the entire flight and lasted a little over 16 hours. We were crewed with three pilots, one navigator, and one flight mechanic for this long hop. The planes were dispatched single ship with departures at 15-minute intervals so we were never in sight of each other.

From Hawaii, it was on to Midway Island where we spent one night. Midway is a tiny island with hardly any facilities so one night was more than enough. One bit of humor happened while we were at Midway. The island is known for its colony of seagull-like birds that are called "gooney birds" and they are all over the place. The C-47 is, of course, nicknamed the Gooney Bird

because, like the real goonies, you have to throw a rock at it to get it to fly. One of the pilots started pestering a gooney (you can walk up to them and they just stare back at you) but when he bent over and got to close, it bit him on the nose causing him to get a few stitches.

The next leg was to Wake Island, which had even fewer facilities than Midway. After landing, some clown pulled a sack out of his AC-47 and out hopped a gooney bird. The bird immediately realized this was not his home — nor to his liking — so he flapped his big wings and eventually got airborne. After becoming airborne and reaching flight altitude, he flew two large circles around the place and then took off in a straight line. One of the navigators checked his heading with a compass and the gooney was within one degree of heading back to Midway. This is why

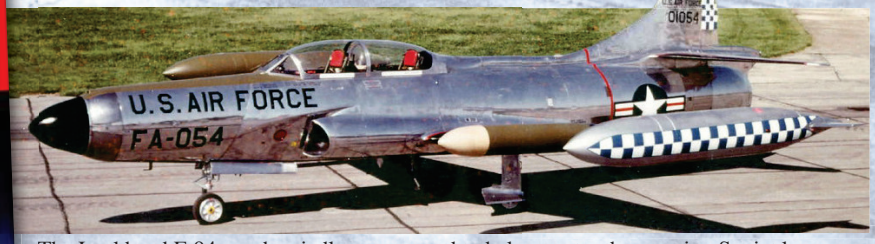


Publicity photo showing crewmen loading their AC-47 with 7.62mm ammunition and flares. For a brief period, the AC-47s were in high demand. On 11 October 1966, a Spooky defending an outpost in Kien Phong Province fired 43,500 rounds and dropped 96 flares. After it ran out of ammunition, it returned to base to reload and was back over the outpost in 30 minutes.



STARFIRE!

FIRST USAF JET ALL-WEATHER INTERCEPTOR



The Lockheed F-94 was hurriedly constructed to help counter the growing Soviet long-distance bomber threat. Using the F-80/T-33 airframe as a starting point, Lockheed engineers added an afterburning turbojet engine and Hughes radar and fire-control systems. The design was constantly evolving and peaked with the F-94C which featured a nose armament of 24 Mighty Mouse unguided rockets. The Starfire held the line until the more sophisticated and higher-performing NAA F-86D/L Sabre and Northrop F-89 Scorpion became available. High-quality paperback with 162-pages and hundreds of photographs and drawings. **JUST $42**

CHALLENGE AVIATION BOOK CLUB

Please send *LOCKHEED F-94 STARFIRE*
JUST $42 — postage and packing included

Quantity ..... _____
Price Each ..... _____
CA Residents (only) add 9% Sales Tax ..... _____
Total Due (US Funds Only) ..... _____

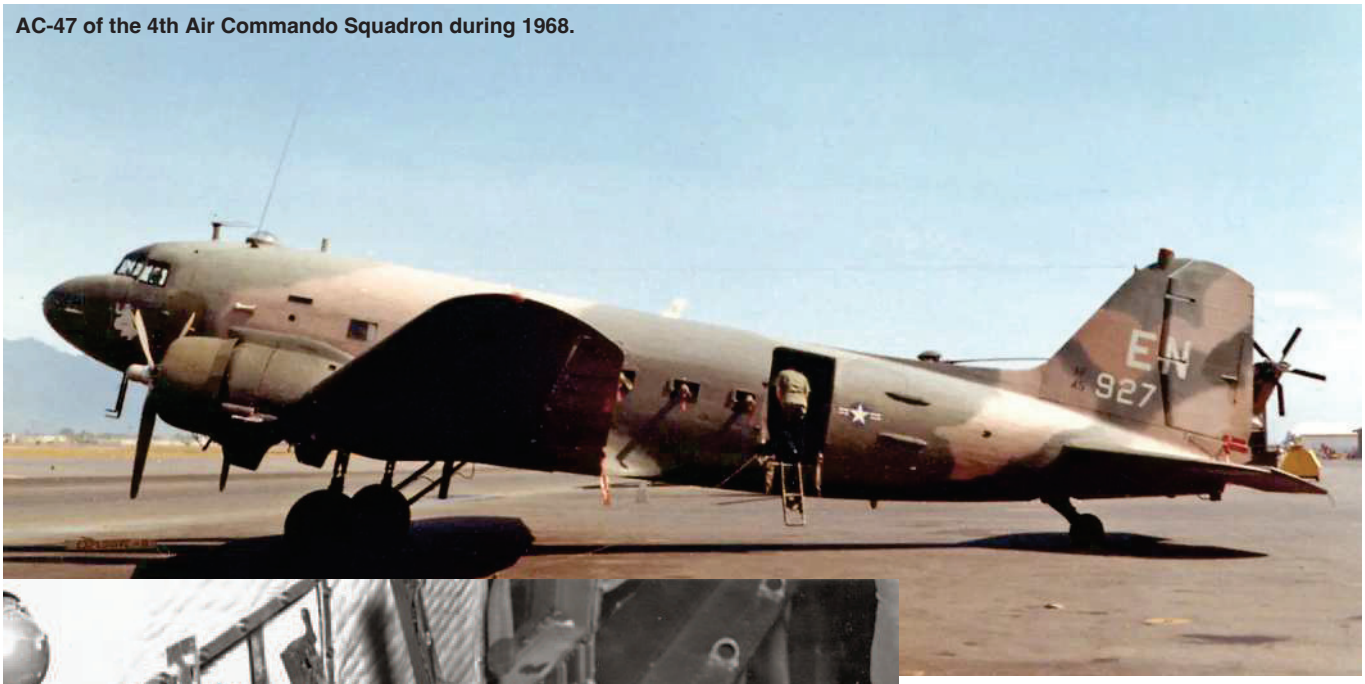
Name _____
Address _____
City _____
State/Zip + 4 _____
Phone Number (in the event we need to contact you) _____
Email Address _____

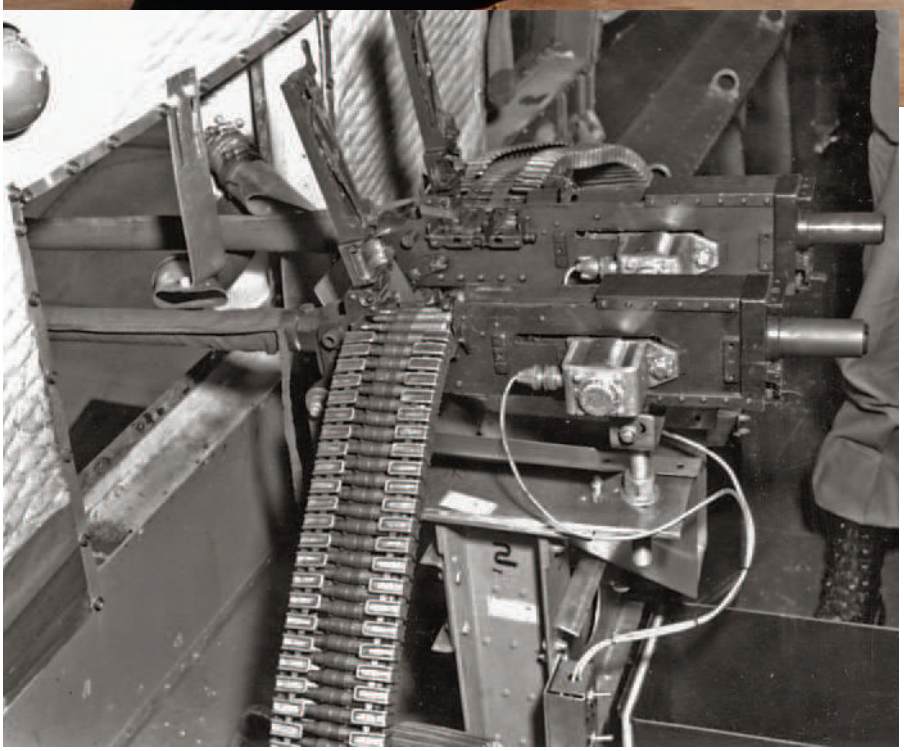
SEND TO: **CHALLENGE ABC**
9800-D Topanga Canyon Blvd., #368,
Chatsworth, CA 91311

or CALL: **(818) 700-6868**

Domestic postage is included in the price. — foreign orders please call 818-700-6868 or email *ed@challengeweb.com* for additional postage fee. Orders are shipped Media Mail

AC-47 of the 4th Air Commando Squadron during 1968.





Initially, the USAF experimented with the installation of .30-caliber Brownings aboard C-47s with a considerable degree of success.

we carried navigators with us; you never knew when you might need one.

From Wake it was on to Guam and then the next day to Clark AB in the Philippines. We spent a couple days at Clark while the crews removed the long-range tanks and the LORAN (Long Range Navigation) sets and then installed the guns mounts and flare launchers. After that, we flew to Tan Son Nhut AB at Saigon, Vietnam. We had finally arrived after 76 flight hours spread over ten days.

SAIGON

At Saigon, we were given the standard incoming briefing. In the first part, we were told of the dangers of being in Saigon, told to never be alone, not to go down side streets, not to go to shabby-looking bars, etc. (basically to not leave the base). After scaring us half to death, in the second part we were told there were no empty quarters at the base and that we would be here for several weeks, so go into town and rent an apartment or small house. By that point, we were really confused.

The next day, the ones that survived leaving the base looking for housing were lined up and given gamma globulin shots. Now, that was a real experience. I didn't know they made needles or hypodermics that big. They were nice enough about it though, after they had us drop our drawers and bend over, they did ask which side we wanted it in (neither side was not an acceptable answer). After about five minutes, we were able to walk again (slowly) so were taken to supply and issued a revolver, an M-16 rifle, lots of ammunition, jungle fatigues, and boots. I told the supply folks I was in the USAF and not the Army but they made me take it all anyway.

The next day, the few of us that were still alive after our mistreatment were assigned to detachments and sent on our way to our new homes. Most detachments were in the southern and central parts of South Vietnam and flew "in country" missions. My crew was set to Da Nang in the northern part of South Vietnam and almost all of our missions were "out country" (outside the Vietnamese borders).

THE FIRST DAYS

After arriving at Da Nang, we were told to start armed reconnaissance missions on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. When we asked where it was, we were told that it went through the middle of Laos and roughly followed the Mekong River. When we asked for some aerial photos, we were told that none were available. However, we were given some poor-quality maps of Laos and off we went to find the Trail.

We flew west until we found the Mekong and then flew around until we saw evidence of a crude dirt road. We

followed the road the best we could while the navigator made as many map plots as possible. When we returned to base, each navigator drew his plots of a large map taped on the wall. In this modern age of electronic marvels, this is how were learned where the Trail was.

As time went on, F-4 Phantom IIs trying to hit trucks on the Trail blew away more and more trees, so the Trail became more visible and the missing sections of the map were filled in. The trail was technically a collection of many trails, most of which were only foot paths, but our only interest was the main Trail, which was a crude dirt road. After a few weeks, we switched to mostly night flying because that is the only time the trucks ran and it was much safer because we were harder to hit at night.

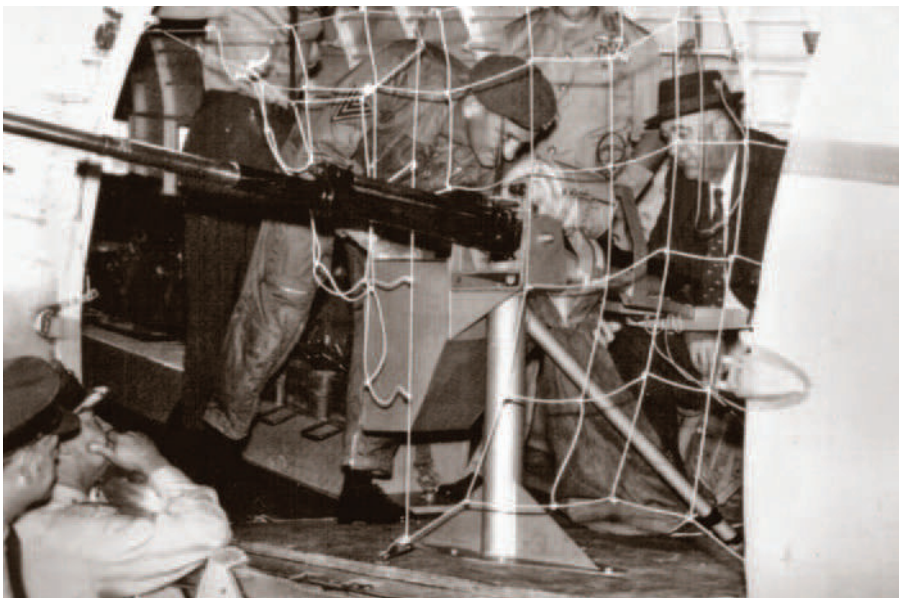


Different types of gun mounts were used on the early AC-47s including the podded mini-guns on locally-produced cradles that had a Mk. 20 Mod. 4 gun sight on the left cockpit window for the pilot.

THE GUNS

The AC-47s were set up to have three 7.62mm Gatling guns that fired 6000 rounds per minute each. They could be set to fire slower but we never did. Because the guns were new and still being manufactured, we initially only had one per aircraft. After a bit, we got the second gun, and eventually had all three. They were designed to be mounted externally under the wings of fighters, so we had adaptor cradles so they could be mounted in the fuselage. Because they were so new and so lethal, we had a thermite bomb taped on top of each weapon so it could be easily be destroyed if we bailed out or were going to crash. Our standard joke was that being as we had so much trouble keeping them working that we should let the Viet Cong (VC) have them; keeping the guns working would drive them nuts. At first, we had lots of





The USAF was not the only service to utilize the C-47 as a gunship. South Africa operated a large number of C-47s and various armament packages were tested. In this view, John Vorster, who would later become Prime Minister, checks out a 20mm gun mount.



Vorster with a twin heavy machine gun installation in a SAAF C-47.

trouble but with newer lubicants and better trigger techniques, they became quite reliable.

The problem with 7.62mm (about .30-caliber) ammunition is that it was originally created as an infantry round for use against troops and definitely not designed to be used against vehicles. It did not have enough energy to penetrate heavy truck parts and did not have enough velocity to enable the shooter to maintain a safe distance from the target. Our guns were of that caliber because the planes were only intended to protect in country outposts and villages from ground troops. It was very hard for a fighter to find and maintain contact with a vehicle, especially at night, so someone decided to see if we could do the job, inspite of our small weapons. We did a pretty good job so newer and larger gunships, with more and heavier guns, were developed to replace us. They did a much better job, but we were the pioneers.

The guns were side-firing and mounted on the left side of the cabin with the barrels sticking out the left windows and cargo door (or sometimes just the windows). Because they were side-firing, the pilot could circle around the target and fire or at least keep the target in sight the whole time. A fast fighter can only fire while he approaches the target and must turn around and find the target again before resuming fire.

The guns were aimed by a small optical sight mounted by the pilot's left window and fired by a button on the control yoke. The control yoke had the gun button on one side and a radio transmission button on the other side. Which one was on which side initially depended on which AC-47 you were in because, as previously mentioned, there was little similarity between the aircraft. This was corrected in short order for obvious reasons. The button only fired the guns and one of the gunners would select which gun(s) were fired when the button was depressed. I would just tell the gunners how many I wanted to fire and they would select them.

We normally fired only one gun at a time because they held a relatively small amount of ammunition, empties quickly, and required several minutes to reload. If you fired all three at once, you could end up with all guns empty at the same time and that was not a healthy condition in which to find yourself.

The weapons had a small ammunition capacity to reduce bulk and improve streamlining for the original intended external mounting. The ammunition was stored in a large rotary drum located behind the gun and to reload it, the gunner had to insert the end of a belt of ammunition and then use a speed handle to rotate the drum and suck the belt in. After I left the operation, newer model weapons were received that were made for inside mounting and these fed ammunition directly into the box. This greatly simplified operation and made for much faster reloads. The guns had an electric motor to rotate the mechanism and it drew so much starting current that each gun had a nickel cadmium battery to supplement the aircraft's electrical system when the guns fired. **AC**

(To Be Continued)

MY TOUR WITH SPOOKY

AS THE WAR IN VIETNAM HEATS UP, THE AC-47D GUNSHIPS GO INTO ACTION AGAINST ENEMY TRUCKS MOVING ON THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL - *PART TWO*

BY WILLIAM J. PRATT MAJOR USAF (RET.)



Earlier installation of a 7.62mm mini-gun in an AC-47D. On each mission, the guns would go through a prodigious amount of ammunition.

When flying Spooky, we did not have any standard tactics. Because the "wheels" had not anticipated that we would be flying trail interdiction missions, tactics had not been developed. We just made up our own as we went along and some worked out very well, while others were no good at all.

Basically, we would get over "The Trail" using TACAN, or visually when the moon was out, launch a parachute flare to light up the area, and shoot if we saw a target. The flares made instant daylight for about three minutes, which was often long enough to get the job done. We initially had pneumatic flare launchers but a few misfired causing the chute to snag on the horizontal stabilizer. A burning magnesium flare caught on the tail of

Douglas AC-47Ds during a daylight mission over South Vietnam. Gooney 43-49499 was assigned to the 4th Special Operations Squadron, 14th Special Operations Wing, flying out of Nha Trang Air Base. Note the gunner in the open half-door. This aircraft was destroyed on the ground at Phan Rang Air Base during a Vietcong rocket attack on 29 September 1968.



Rain of death. Time exposure of an AC-47D attacking Viet Cong targets near Siagon.

the AC-47D was not a good thing so we removed the launchers and threw the flares out by hand. We were supposed to fire from about 3000 feet but those of us who made kills operated at around 1400 feet so we could aim better and could see where the tracers were hitting.

Our 7.62mm gun had little effect on trucks because of the small rounds. The most effective procedure I found was to fire a few rounds, wait a minute and then fire again low enough for the tracers to bounce off the ground. The first burst would puncture the fuel tank and the delay let the fuel spread out, allowing the tracers to ignite it.

We were always experimenting with different tactics, partially to become more effective and partially for the fun of it. We scrounged sea marker flares (30+ minute burn) from the Navy and threw them out at prominent points on the trail so we could navigate visually by them. It worked okay but we knew the trail so well that it wasn't worth the trouble. We would often turn on our lights just to get the idiots to shoot at us; once they did we knew where they were and we zapped them. We tried flying behind Army Grumman OV-1C Mohawks equipped with infrared heat detectors that could detect a shut down truck, or even troops, hidden under the trees. That worked pretty good except the Army didn't have enough OV-1Cs. These experiments were not official; they were usually thought up



"When working with the Marines, they always hit the target, the Navy did a fairly good job, but the Air Force F-4s hardly ever hit anything"

MAJOR WILLIAM PRATT





As the USAF began to operate newer gunships, many of the AC-47Ds were transferred to the South Vietnamese Air Force. This example displays a *flak* hit immediately above the SVNAF insignia.



AC-47D displaying the Spooky insignia along with the name *SWEET PEE*. Note the gun sight mounted in the pilot's left window.

over some beers and died the same way.

One night a Marine Corps full colonel flew a mission with us. He wanted to know more about our operation so as to have a better feeling of how we could help the Marines. He laid down on the cabin floor with his head in the open doorway and stayed there for the whole six hours we were over the trail. He got as excited as a little kid and even yelled every time we scored a hit.

FORWARD AIR CONTROLLERS

Because of our small guns, we would usually shoot at the trucks but call in fighters to make the kill. We had no training or experience at directing fighters but that minor problem was solved by designating us "qualified" FACs (Forward Air Controllers). This was much simpler and cheaper than training us for the job.

One night we were working two Marine A-4 Skyhawks with their lights turned off (the normal procedure) when one called that he had just collided with his wingman. He made repeated calls trying to raise him and we launched numerous flares in a search effort but nothing was heard or seen (very deep and dense jungle). We had not made any errors but felt terrible about it just the same.

One thing we noticed in just a few days: When working Marines, they always hit the target, the Navy did a fairly good job, but the Air Force F-4s hardly ever hit anything. The Marines usually went below our altitude to drop, the Navy dropped from about our altitude, and the USAF dropped from so high that they barely could see the target. Note to any irate USAF F-4 pilots: I have about 700 hours in the F-4 so feel entitled to say this.

LAST IN LINE

One night we found a convoy of about 15 trucks approaching a river ford. While shooting at them, we called our control aircraft and requested fighters as the convoy was more than we could handle. The only fighter available at the moment was a Marine Vought F-8 Crusader with a 2000-pound bomb and we said we would take him.

Because of the large bomb, I decided to have him hit the ford. The ford was actually a solid road built just below the surface of the water, a common enemy practice because of the camouflage value. A direct hit on it would create a real bottleneck. After briefing the Crusader pilot to hit the river ford, dropping another flare, and marking it with our guns, we started getting the heck out of there to avoid the bomb shock wave. About a mile away, I turned parallel to watch the show (this was the first 2000-pound bomb we had seen) and, wow, what a show! Not only did the ford erupt in smoke and water but the shock wave gave us a real jolt. When the smoke cleared, we could see that the Crusader pilot had made a direct hit (typical of the Marines) and the convoy was stopped.

By this time, a C-130 flare ship and a couple flights of fighters had arrived and the turkey shoot began. While the flare ship created daylight conditions, the fighters rolled in one at a time and

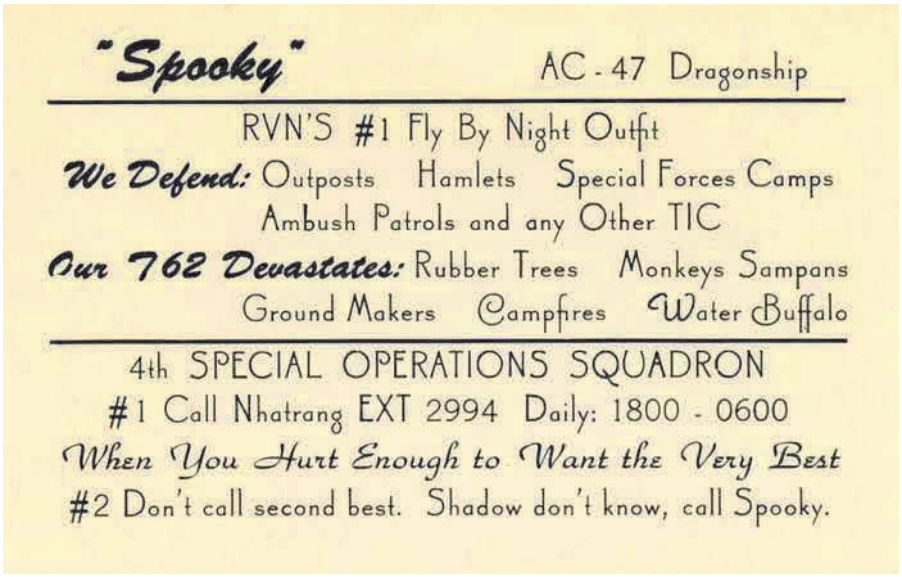
preceded to destroy the trucks and personnel.

While this was going on, we cleared out of the area to avoid being hit and to our amazement we saw another truck hauling down the road towards the melee (which could be seen at least 25 miles away). When the driver got to the burning convoy, he stopped with normal convoy spacing and waited for the fighters to get him too. Guess he didn't want to be chewed out for not being in place.

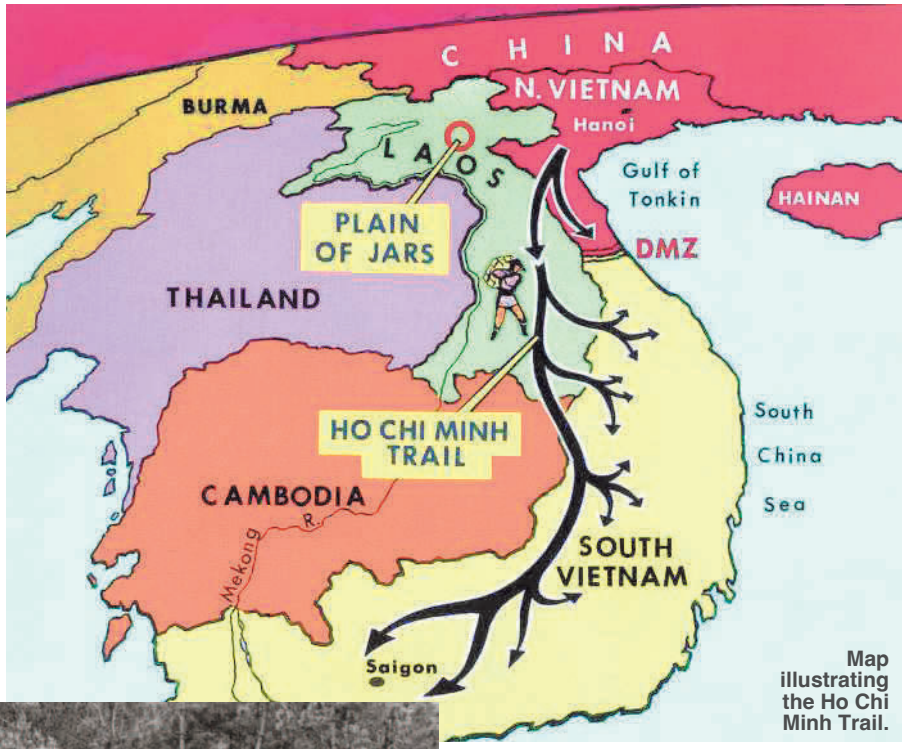
STEEP CANYON

One night we launched a flare over a canyon that had rather steep sides. When we looked down, we saw a convoy of about a dozen trucks creeping down the winding narrow road. I rolled over and started shooting at the first truck while the navigator called our control aircraft for reinforcements. In a few minutes, the first truck started burning so I shot the last truck and set him on fire also. This was too good to be true — twelve trucks trapped with nowhere to go.

When the fighters arrived, we assigned them targets and between fighter passes I would dash across the canyon and get in a few more shots myself. With all the exploding bombs, burning trucks, and stirred-up dust, the visibility in the canyon rapidly deteriorated and soon all you could see was a big smoke and dust cloud with flares dropping into it, causing the cloud to strangely glow. For some reason, the guys on the ground were rather perturbed because when someone flew over, tracers would come flying out of the cloud even though the bad guys could not see what they were shooting at.



"Business" card handed out by the AC-47D crews.



Map illustrating the Ho Chi Minh Trail.



Crews being briefed in front of their camouflaged trucks prior to heading out on the trail.

After a bit, we ran out of ammunition but were having such a good time that we weren't ready to go home yet so we flew over the canyon and threw out empty ammo cans aimed where most of the tracers seemed to be coming from. This may not be considered modern warfare but a steel box bouncing down a canyon wall must make a hell of a racket and it would really make your day if hit by it.

We finally returned to base and landed on fumes because we had stayed airborne for so long. The next day we got a report that photo reconnaissance showed every truck in the convoy had been destroyed and that the road was in pretty bad





As the sun sets, an AC-47D of the 3rd Special Operations Squadron, 14th Special Operations Wing, lifts off from Bien Hoa Air Base during August 1968.

> "If the Americans had been wise, they should at a certain point in time have cut a specific section of the trail and taken over that area. Then we would have been stuck. We would never have been able to fight and win as we did"
>
> GENERAL LE TRONG TAN
> senior commander in the NVA

shape. An RF-4C flew over and took photos before the dust cloud obscured visibility. I still have one of those pictures as a momento.

UNIQUE TRUCK KILLS

One full moonlit night I got the brilliant idea of getting a truck without a flare. I simply flew beside the trail at about 300 feet altitude until I saw a truck and then fired one gun while arcing up and around in front of him, firing the whole time. It worked and I bet he was one of the most surprised drivers on the trail for the few seconds he was still alive. Never did this one again though because it is not really recommended to fly at 300 feet at night in a mountainous area.

As mentioned before, we would mark targets for the fighters with our guns. One night I had a truck cornered and had a Martin B-57 Canberra from the 8th Bomb Squadron orbiting above and licking his chops. As he started his roll in, I marked one last time and, boom, the truck burst into flames. The pilot was really torqued off because this was the first live truck he had seen and he was hot to get it.

Another night we dropped a flare over a steep narrow and windy road going down the side of a mountain and there was a truck crawling along. When I started shooting at him, he started going faster and leaving a trail of dust. The flares burned for three minutes and every time we launched one my navigator would time it to insure I got another one out before the first went out. After a few more shots, he was really moving and I launched another flare but it was a dud and never ignited so it became dark. I immediately swung around and launched another but when it lit there was no truck to be seen. We did notice, however, that the tops of some trees off the edge of a tight curve were rustling as if something big had just gone off the road and through them.

We hit over 40 moving trucks but only one time did I see a driver hop out and this leads me to believe that they were chained in the trucks (the ground troops found them chained in trees). The one



As the author notes, the Vietnam War saw a wide use of C-47s in a variety of roles, and not just gunships. EC-47P 43-49013 from the 360th Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron was photographed taking off from Tan Son Nhut Air Base. The unit used the EC-47N/P/Q variants to intercept enemy radio signals. N and P differed in radio bands covered while Q replaced analog equipment found on the N/P with a digital suite, redesigned antenna equipment, and uprated engines.

that did hop out had a bad night though. I happened to be lower than usual, making the burst pattern smaller and more concentrated and also happened to be hitting to the left of the cab. About this time, the driver jumped out directly into the burst. He never fell over or anything like that, he merely vaporized like a person in the Star Trek transporter. Some 6000-rpm in a concentrated area will do things like that.

One thing the bad guys did helped us tremendously, and we could never figure out why they did it. Any time we killed a truck, all trace of it was removed and the area cleaned up as if nothing had happened. If they had left all the burned trucks along the trail, we would have a very difficult time determining if a sighting was a target or a hulk. The poor light and dancing shadows from the flare made for poor visibility on a dark night. One night we went back after a kill and found a crew dismantling the truck so I proceeded to dismantle them.

Another night we saw a small fire on a hilltop and after popping a flare saw it was a container of burning oil. I rolled over and gave it a short shot, which completely disintegrated it and splattered burning oil all over the place and then got the heck out of there. We never figured out what it was, or ever saw one again, but figure it was bait for a trap. We were not shot at, as far as we knew, but it could have had large guns that were too low to fire at us.

FOREST FIRE

The trail ran through rather thick jungle that afforded excellent hiding places for trucks, making them hard to find and hard to destroy. To remedy this, the USAF sprayed defoliant along the trail, kill all vegetation for about half a mile on both sides of the road. The only problem with this was that we found it just as hard to find trucks under dead trees as under live trees.

To correct this minor inconvenience, we came up with the brainstorm of setting fire to the dead vegetation. To do this, we set a few flares with a delayed opening time so that they were in the trees when they ignited, and dropped them into the dead foliage. This started some pretty good fires and one fire burned for about a week and was a little further down the road each night we checked it out. Trucks were much easier to find after that.



In Vietnam, regular C-47s performed more mundane tasks of hauling cargo and personnel but that did not make them any less of a target to the enemy. This C-47 returned to base with a large chunk of its left wing missing courtesy of communist anti-aircraft fire.

AIRCRAFT DAMAGE

We received many hits during the tour and our planes started to look pretty ragged by the time I left. One hit usually makes several holes so looks can be deceiving. I remember one of our first hits was through the belly near the side door. That one hit made one hole in the belly, made about four holes in the floor (because of the shell and pieces of metal torn loose), and about eight holes in the roof. At first, maintenance made nice neat patches and matched the paint, but after a while they just put on a piece of beer can (we had lots of them) with pop rivets and put some yellow primer on it.

If we knew we had serious damage we would land at Ubon, Thailand, because it was closer than Da Nang and we didn't have to climb over high mountains to get there… and because it was much nicer than Da Nang! When a unit there repaired our planes, they would usually put their unit stencil near the repair. It wasn't long before we had red Thai lions, yellow Aussie kangaroos, and little black-cloaked spies (from the RF-4C squadron) all over the AC-47Ds. This, with the yellow primer on the patches, made the planes look somewhat unique.

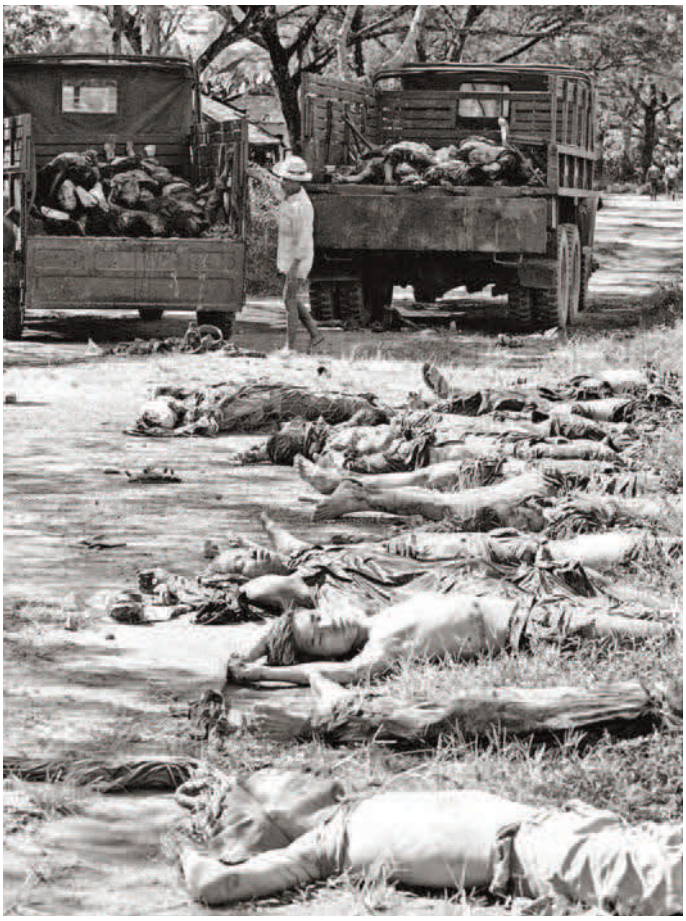
One day we were flying down the trail



To attack targets, the author would call in a variety of assets including Martin B-57 Canberras.

At its best, the Ho Chi Minh Trail was a crude dirt road but it enabled the communists to keep a supply of trucks heading south. These camouflaged vehicles inch their way past a bomb crater and a landscape that has been devastated by American air attacks.





The 7.62mm gun was relatively ineffective against the trucks but the AC-47D pilots would keep flying until they hit the fuel tanks. Human targets were another matter and the 7.62mm guns took a huge toll of communist crews and soldiers using the trail.



to become familiar with the area when we were suddenly shot at from a small hill and hit several times. We didn't take too kindly to this so we immediately called for fighters and started shooting at places the fire may have come from. When fighters arrived, we had them drop all over the hill and pretty soon it was no longer a tree-covered hill but just a flat top with no vegetation. While doing this, we called for another of our AC-47Ds that was only a few miles away and had him replace us while we headed to Ubon because of the damage. While waiting for the other AC-47D, one of my gunners scribbled a couple of notes saying, "Ha, ha, you missed us" and threw them out as we flew over. That made no sense but seemed kind of funny at the time. When we landed, we found a hole through the wing spar in addition to numerous minor hits.

Once when we landed at Ubon, I thought the elevator controls seemed kind of sluggish but didn't think much of it. Our flight mechanic was usually the first person out of the Gooney because he had to install the flight control locks and see that the wheel chocks were in place. This time he jumped out as usual but returned in about two minutes and asked me to follow him to see something. As we went around to the tail of the plane, you could see that about half of the right elevator was missing. We didn't even know we had been hit.

After another mission, we found a shell hole in the exact center of one of the propeller blades. This should have given a very noticeable vibration but we had not noticed any. We joked that the gunner had to be a darn good shot to hit that blade while it was turning so fast.

On a night mission we had the right engine hit. It started shaking pretty bad, the oil pressure dropped, and the oil temperature rose so I shut it down before the engine froze (if it did freeze, then the drag from the unfeathered propeller was tremendous). The only problem with all of this was that we were down in a valley and very heavy with fuel and ammunition. We were also a long way from anywhere to land. I remembered from the war movies that you are supposed to thow overboard non-essentials to save weight. This seemed like a fantastic idea so I gave the order.

I told the troops to start throwing everything out except the guns and they all ran forward where the ammunition was stored, grabbed a can, and ran to the cargo door to throw it out. The weight of the crew and the heavy ammo all going back to the cargo door at one time created such a shift of the center of gravity that I almost lost control of the AC-47D. After that, it was only one man with one can of ammo per time. After our return to Da Nang, the supply officer just couldn't understand how we could save much weight by throwing overboard our issue wrist watches, flight jackets (it was summer), and other things that he had to replace. We all kept a straight face when we gave him the list so he had no choice but to believe us.

INJURIES

I consider it miraculous but none of my crew was injured, even though our plane was hit many times. There were two incidents when we thought one of us had been hit but, fortunately, it turned out not



Ranch Hand Fairchild C-123 Providers would spray defoliant over the jungle, killing vegetation on the trail and making targets more visible for the AC-47Ds.

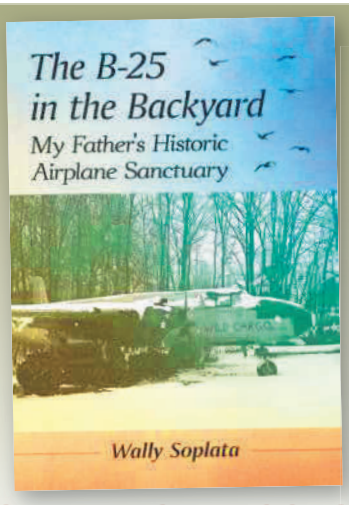
to be the case. When we were on a mission rescuing a group of Marines (discussed later), one of the gunners started hopping around and holding his rear while yelling "I've been hit!" After he calmed down, we looked at his rear and it was all there; no new holes or anything unusual. In a few minutes one of the troops found a shutter from one of the vents that sucked out the smoke when the guns were fired. It was on the cabin floor and had a bullet crease. Apparently, the shutter was hit, knocked from the vent, and then smacked the gunner hard in the rear.

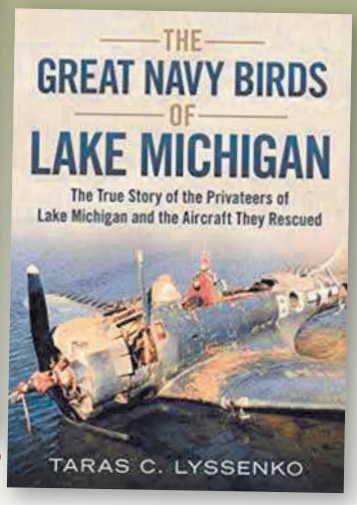
One night, we had a flare prematurely ignite as it was thrown out the door. The casing hit a gunner, tossing him against the inside wall of the fuselage and knocking him out. Being as it was dark, we didn't know what had happened and presumed he had been hit by an enemy round. I immediately broke off the attack, advanced power, and pointed the Gooney towards home. In a few minutes, he came to and was okay except for a headache and several sore spots. **AC**

(To Be Continued)



Lit by the blast from its mini-guns, a steeply banking AC-47Ds attacks enemy targets.





ORDER BOTH BOOKS AND SAVE $5

SAVING THE WARBIRDS

THESE TWO BOOKS ARE A MUST FOR ANY HISTORIC AVIATION LIBRARY

Wally Soplata's highly-personal **THE B-25 IN MY BACKYARD** tells of what it was like growing up in the Walter Soplata household where finding and transporting vintage aircraft — no matter the condition — to his father's property in Ohio was the main mission. Many family comforts were sacrificed in this unique quest to preserve aviation history. Paperback, 236-pages, illustrated. **JUST $42**

Taras Lyssenko was also a man with a mission — save sunken WWII Navy aircraft before it was too late. **THE GREAT NAVY BIRDS OF LAKE MICHIGAN** tells of his epic battle against the elements and bureaucrats to raise these lost warriors from the bottom of Lake Michigan. Paperback, 160-pages, illustrated. **JUST $31**

Challenge AVIATION BOOK CLUB

QUANTITY	TITLE NAME	PRICE EACH	TOTAL DUE
	B-25 IN MY BACKYARD	$42	
	GREAT NAVY BIRDS	$31	
	ORDER BOTH AND SAVE $5	$68	
		MERCHANDISE TOTAL	
		CA Residents add 9% Sales Tax	
		TOTAL DUE (U.S. Funds Only)	

(Domestic Postage is included in the purchase price. Canadian and foreign orders please call 1-818-700-6868 or email *ed@challengeweb.com* for additional postage cost by title.)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State/Zip + 4 _____

Phone Number _____

Email Address _____

SEND TO: **CHALLENGE ABC**
9800-D Topanga Canyon Blvd., #368, Chatsworth, CA 91311

or CALL: **(818) 700-6868**

MY TOUR WITH SPOOKY

*AS THE VIETNAM WAR ESCALATES, THE DEMANDS PLACED ON THE SMALL FLEET OF AC-47D GUNSHIPS RAPIDLY GROW - **PART THREE***

BY WILLIAM J. PRATT MAJOR USAF (RET.)



A crewman stands by the main cargo door of an AC-47D. Note the kill marks recorded for the second gun near the bottom of the fuselage.

THREATS

We were shot at with everything that would go into the air — rocks, rifles, pistols, machine guns, and probably even crossbows. The Ho Chi Minh Trail was very heavily defended and got worse as time went on. The bad guys, usually NVAs (North Vietnamese Army), in that area had 37mm and 57mm guns that could blow an AC-47D apart with one shell but we were usually so low that they seldom shot at us with those weapons (as an interesting historical fact, the very first USAF aircraft lost in the Vietnam War was a C-47B).

What they did have that concerned us the most were quad .50-caliber machine guns and they had lots of them. These weapons could fill the sky with lead at a very high velocity and the pieces of lead were one-half inch in diameter. The best thing we had going for us was that they were used to shooting at fighters all day thus they usually over led (shot too far in front) us and most of the stuff went sailing up in front of the windscreen. If they had stopped leading, once they were aligned, they would have us because we would then fly through it. Fortunately, they never caught on to that.



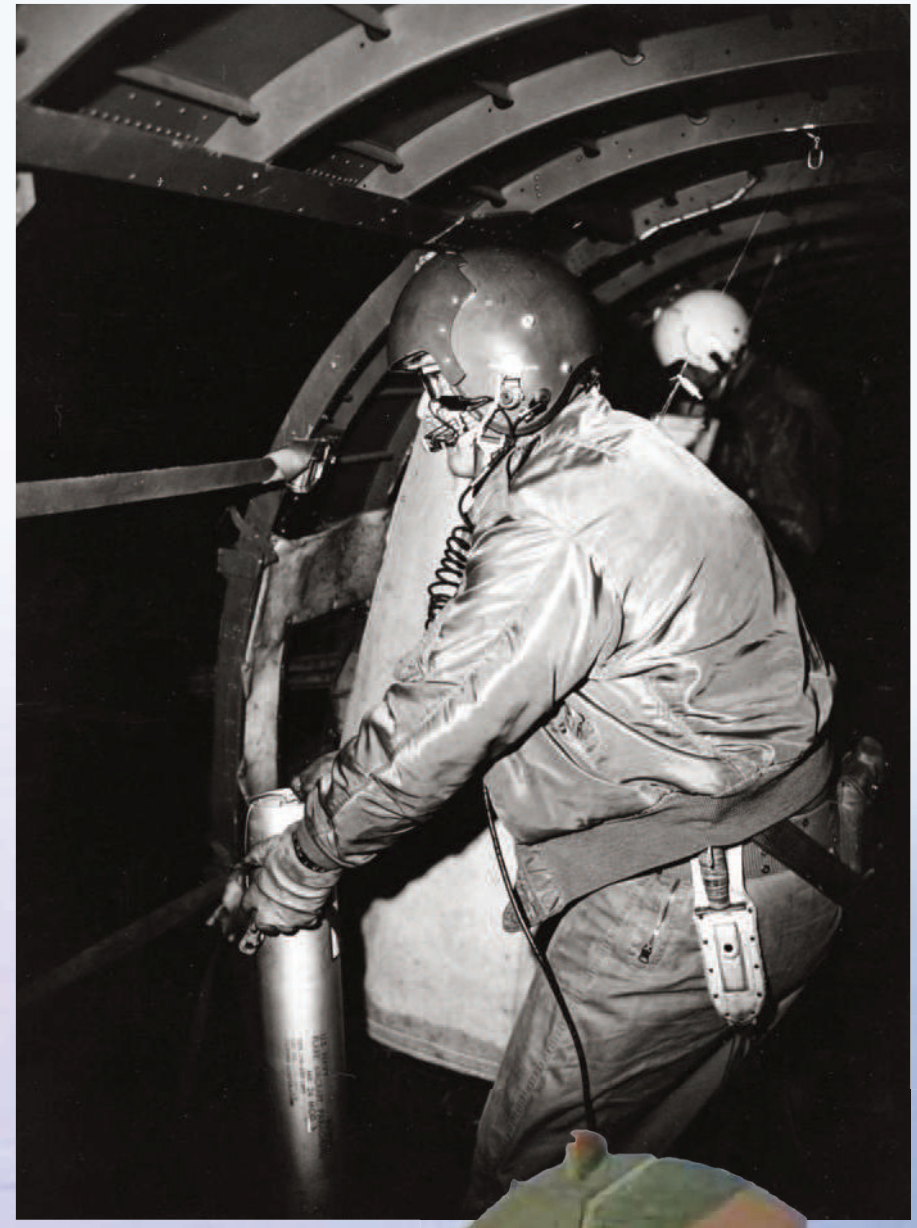
Evening sun highlights an AC-47D prior to a nocturnal mission over enemy territory. The aircraft has had its undersurfaces painted black — to the displeasure of high-ranking officers who thought the highly-reflective gray looked better during inspections. However, the gray reflected any light source and gave the enemy a much better target.

At low altitude, the bullets would still be going supersonic when they went by, thus we would often hear random popping sounds when shot at. I often wonder how close the shells had to be for us to hear them over the roar of the engines. I am still reminded of the sound every time I hear popcorn popping away.

We had absolutely no armor nor any other form of protection. Instead of wearing *flak* vests, we would place them under and around our seats. I think we would have sat on Sears catalogs if we had any. We did have a *flak* curtain on the left cabin wall to protect the troops in the rear but this was worthless because everything came in through the floor, not through the cabin wall.

When we launched a flare, it would burn below our flight level and our light gray belly would really stand out against the dark sky, making us a super target for the enemy. We wanted to paint the bottoms of the ACs black but the air-conditioned office types in Saigon turned down the request (something about the planes wouldn't look as nice if the general came through on inspection). We eventually did get the bottoms painted but I think the paint had to be scrounged from the SeaBees.

When we were shot at, I would jam the throttles forward but all that does to an AC-47 is to make more noise along with a brighter exhaust flame pattern for the bad guys to shoot at. The plane didn't go any faster (C-47s



Dropping flares was a hazardous task and the crew needed to take exceptional care to make sure that an activated flare did not fall back into the fuselage.



Eerie glow of flares dropped by an EC-47D over enemy positions.



After the target was illuminated by flares, Spooky would send down a hailstorm of 7.62mm fire.

never go faster, no matter what you do to them).

Our detachment of three aircraft and five crews lost a stunning four aircraft in the eight months I was there. This is a very high loss rate — especially being as we only recovered three crewmembers (out of 28). We proved that the side-firing gun ship was very effective, but also proved that a higher performance aircraft with heavier guns was necessary to survive in that environment.

WHISKEY AND KEEP THEM COMING

Being as almost all of our flying was at night, we depended on parachute flares to light the area for both hunting and attacking. The crewmember that threw out the flares was a loadmaster by training and AFSC (Air Force Specialty Code). The job certainly didn't require a loadmaster's skills but that is what the USAF assigned to the job.

My loadmaster was named Henry and a nicer person you never met. Henry didn't drink, smoke, use profanity, nor chase wild women like the rest of the crew but he was a nice guy anyway. When the rest of us were consuming alcoholic beverages, Henry would be the designated walker (we didn't have anything to drive) and would sip a soft drink while the rest of us made fools out of ourselves.

When I knew that I would soon need a flare, I would call "get ready Henry" over the interphone. He would remove a flare from the rack, attach a lanyard to the fuse, and stand in the open doorway ready to throw it. When I wanted it launched, I would give a short ring on the bailout bell as a launch signal. I used the bell to preclude the chance of any interphone chatter masking the launch command.

One night we had a minor disagreement with the people on the ground and they began shooting at us. We received several hits and one of them went between Henry's head and the top of the door frame (about a nine-inch space). Because we had received other damage to the aircraft, we aborted the mission after shooting a few thousand rounds at the enemy and flew on to Ubon AB.

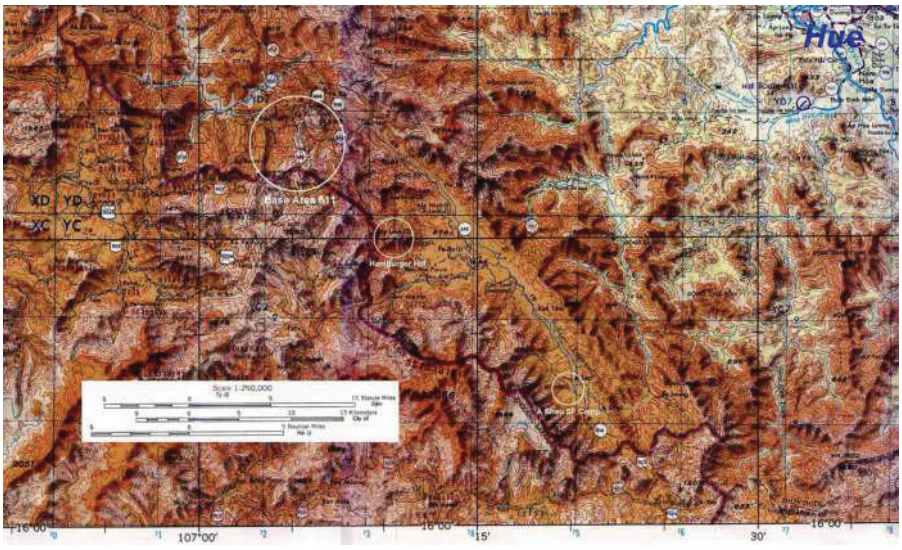
Once the paperwork was done, we went to the NCO Club (the enlisted

crew could not go to the Officers' Club) and ordered drinks. Much to our surprise, Henry threw down a $5 bill and said "whiskey and keep them coming." I am sure that was the first time he had even tasted the stuff but after making a horrible face, he started throwing them down like a veteran. He didn't stay with us very long and was soon flopped over on the table. Being as this was interfering with our orderly process of getting drunk, we picked him up, carried him outside and laid him down beside the building. When we left a couple hours later, he was still where we left him so we picked him up, took him to the transient barracks, and threw him in a bunk.

After that, Henry was no longer qualified to be the designated walker. In fact, he was never the same. I have often wondered what his mother thought when she saw what happened to her little boy after working for me for only nine-months.



The author notes the tremendous destruction wrought by B-52 Arc Light missions but also records the fact that the immense bomb loads often did not hit any targets of value.



Map of the A Shau Valley showing the Special Forces camp in the bottom center.

ARC LIGHT

Arc Light was the program where the Strategic Air Command would mass a huge glob of B-52s, point them in the same direction, and drop a long string of bombs — destroying everything and anything in its path. One morning when it became light, we could see a huge swath of destruction off to the west. Apparently, SAC had been there the day before. As we were fat on gas, I decided to motor over and have a look.

One can't imagine the destruction; it looked as if someone had bulldozed the trees to build a road or something. Only one problem: There were not any destroyed roads, buildings, trucks, or bodies (except for lots of monkeys) because it was at least 15 miles from the nearest VC or NVA.

I don't mean to be critical of the SAC crews because I do feel they were competent and probably dropped the bombs where they were supposed to. My criticism is aimed at the bunch in the basement of the White House that micromanaged the war. They were the ones that assigned most of the targets.

SAVING THE MARINES

About a week after arriving at Da Nang, we were scrambled to help save some Marines that had been surrounded. Normally, the fast movers (fighters) would do the job but this day the weather was so low that they could not get in so we were called. When we reached the area, we saw a group of VC approaching the area riding bicycles. We figured this must be a mechanized cavalry unit so we rolled over and started shooting. The bad guys were immediately engulfed in such a thick cloud of dust (remember, 6000-rpm per gun makes for a lot of dust) that we couldn't see them. We could see parts of bicycles and parts of people flying out of the dust cloud.

A few VC that were missed tried



Observing enemy action from a Special Forces camp.



Fighting in the A Shau Valley claimed many American casualties for little purpose or gain.

to make a run through a rice paddy. A person running through a shallow rice paddy leaves a wake just like a motor boat and makes a perfect target so we shot some more. We were receiving hits and were concerned about the flares being hit so we drove out aways, jettisoned the flares, and returned to the fray. After returning to base, we had steel plates installed under the flare boxes in all the planes.

One of my lasting memories of that mission is that while the battle was going on and we were shooting the hell out of the VC, about a mile down the road were coolies all bent over planting rice as if nothing was going on.

THE NIGHT WE LOST A SHAU

One very rainy night, the VC made an attack on the A Shau Special Forces camp, which was located near the Laotian border. It was normal for the VC to wait for poor weather because they knew that our airpower was much less effective in such a situation. Because of the limitation of fighters in this weather, we were sent out with the ACs to see if we could help.

We navigated to A Shau using TACAN and contacted the troops on the FM radio a few miles out. The situation on the ground was critical with the VC already coming through the outer defenses and on verge of overrunning the compound. We could not see the ground because of a complete overcast but when we would drop a flare using TACAN, the ground controller would tell us where to shoot in relation to the flare. Several times we hit so close that he said he could hear the bullets hitting the ground.

We were firing so much that the barrels of the guns, which stuck out in the cooling airstream, were glowing red and had swollen so much that many tracers were not igniting (they depended on friction with the barrel to ignite). In less than an hour, we had consumed all of our ammunition and had burned out a gun so we returned to base, radioing ahead to have ammunition and a replacement gun ready.

After a quick turnaround, we returned to the area and resumed shooting except this time we were speaking to a different person on the ground. After a bit, we again ran out of ammunition and had burned out two guns so we returned to base. This time our call ahead included a request for sandwiches, coffee, extra guns, and double load of ammunition. The command post suggested that we be replaced by a fresh crew but we argued that it was a very tricky situation and it would be detrimental to "change horses in the middle of the stream." I guess they bought our logic because they let us go back again.

Upon returning, the situation was even worse. A new voice told us that about half of the men had been killed and to please keeping shooting all we could. After a time, we were asked to shot at their position and not around them — they were dug in and the VC were among them. Shortly afterwards, we could no longer raise anyone on the ground but kept shooting until we ran out of ammunition for the third time.

During this episode, we received several urgent radio calls from headquarters in Saigon. Every call was to warn us that regulation number so and so prohibited firing through a cloud cover — not one call was to tell us to do whatever we could to save the lives of our troops.

WWW.AEROACCESSORIESINC.COM
AERO ACCESSORIES, INC.
San Antonio, Texas 210-735-9467
300 FREDERICKSBURG ROAD
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS 78201
RADIAL ENGINE ACCESSORIES AND CARBURETORS
OVERHAULS & REPAIRS
PHONE: (210) 735-9467
FAX: (210) 735-2819
VISA MasterCard DISCOVER
FIND US ON FACEBOOK
SALES@AEROACCESSORIESINC.COM

AIR FORCE CROSSES AT A SHAU

The Special Forces camp in A Shau Valley, about 50 miles northwest of Da Nang and near the Laotian border, came under attack by some 2000 North Vietnamese regulars on 9 March 1966. The defenders consisted of 20 US Special Forces troops and 375 South Vietnamese soldiers who were surrounded and forced to retreat to a bunker at the northeast corner of the outpost.

Air support and probably air evacuation were needed desperately – a difficult operation under ideal conditions of terrain and weather. But conditions were far from ideal. The camp was in a mile-wide valley surrounded by mountains. There was a 400-foot ceiling and a steady rain of mortar, rocket, and automatic weapons fire that tore up the landing strip and pinned the defenders in their bunker. They were in imminent danger of being overrun.

At 1120 on the morning of 9 March, Capt. Willard Collins and his AC-47 gunship crew, who had flown a mission the previous night, were dispatched from Da Nang to support the A Shau garrison. In the right seat of *Spooky 70* was 1st Lt. Delbert Peterson. Other members of the crew were: 1st Lt. J.L. Meek, navigator; S/Sgt. J.G. Brown, flight engineer; and S/Sgts. J. Turner and R.E. Foster, who manned the 7.62mm mini-guns.

Collins and Peterson made two unsuccessful attempts to get under the clouds. Finally, flying at treetop height, they found their way into the valley, located the outpost, and made a firing pass at the besiegers. Any element of surprise that may have existed was gone when Collins maneuvered *Spooky 70* into position for a second pass through the gauntlet of fire. As the AC-47D approached the bunker, the right engine was hit hard and torn out of its motor mount. Collins had no more than regained control when the left engine was hit and knocked out.

With superb airmanship, he and Peterson brought down the bullet-riddled gunship for a crash-landing on a mountain slope. All members of the crew survived with minor injuries except S/Sgt. Foster, whose legs were broken on impact. Collins and Peterson knew an enemy attack was inevitable. Since Foster could not be moved, they set up a defense at the crash site rather than leave the injured gunner and move into more favorable terrain.

The crew, confident that a rescue helicopter would answer their distress call, repulsed the first attack, which came 15 minutes after they crashed. Minutes later, a second attack was turned back, but Collins and Foster were killed in the firefight. With only four men left to defend a 360-degree perimeter, the chance of holding out until that chopper came in looked pretty bleak.

A third attack started as the distinctive sound of a USAF HH-43 competed with the din of battle. Muzzle flashes from a heavy machine gun that had been moved to within yards of the broken AC-47D gunship were clearly visible to Lt. Peterson, now in command of the crew. If the gun were not silenced, the helicopter would likely be downed before it could rescue the four remaining airmen.

Del Petersen knew it was up to him. Spraying bullets from his M-16 rifle, he charged the gun, which went silent as the helicopter dropped down to pick up Meek, Brown, and Turner – leaving Peterson and the two dead airmen.

Peterson was carried on USAF rolls as missing in action until February 1978 when his status was changed to killed in action. During that period, he was promoted to major. Both he and Collins were awarded the Air Force Cross posthumously.

Note: One of the survivors from that mission was the injured navigator that I said was severely wounded and "medically discharged and never flew again." Years later, I found that he was not injured as severely as we initially thought. He recovered from his wounds and returned to flying status. He completed another tour in Vietnam flying in B-26 Counter-Invaders. He was awarded the Silver Star for his actions during the mission.

This Special Forces camp was the same one that, several months later, we supported by firing through the clouds the night they were overrun and that headquarters was so concerned that we were "breaking a regulation" by firing through clouds.



Major Delbert Peterson held off attacking enemy troops until survivors of his crew could be rescued. When last seen, Peterson was alive and crawling behind the wrecked AC-47D to take up a position to secure the aircraft. About 20 minutes after the three crewmen were rescued, a Special Forces ground team arrived at the site. They found the bodies of Collins and Foster. In their search, they could not find Lt. Peterson but found a blood trail leading away from the crash site. It is probable that he was captured and later executed by the enemy. Both Peterson and Capt. Collins were awarded the Air Force Cross posthumously. That mission was one of the few instances in the Vietnam War when both pilots of an aircraft were awarded the nation's second-highest decoration for valor and was the only one in which the awards were made for extraordinary heroism in both air and ground combat.



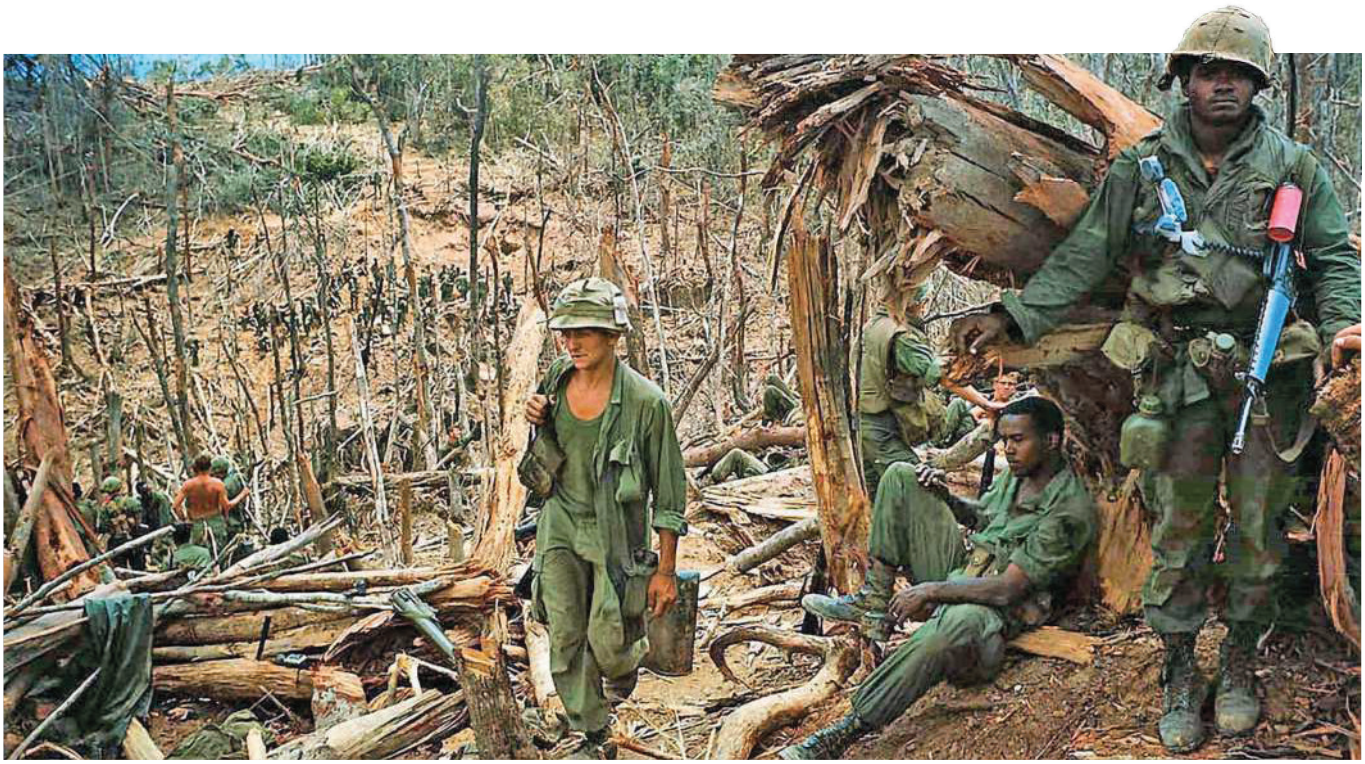
Captain Willard Collins would also be awarded the Air Force Cross for his heroic actions in attempting to save the Special Forces camp at A Shau.



An aerial view of the Special Forces camp at A Shau.



The strange looking HH-43 helicopter was an unsung hero of the Vietnam War and was responsible for rescuing the survivors of *Spooky 70*.



Vegetation in the A Shau Valley was shredded by the mini-guns of the AC-47Ds.

After that, the radio failed and we did not hear anything more from headquarters. Funny thing, the next day maintenance could not find anything wrong with that radio and it worked okay ever since. Maybe we accidently turned it off.

Never was I so affected by a mission. I was sick that the troops were wiped out and I was disgusted that the headquarters weenies in Saigon would rather see the camp wiped out than have someone break a regulation. Most of them needed to be taken out of their nice swivel chairs in their nice air-conditioned offices and shot at for a bit so they would know what it was like. I am sure that experience would have given them a new outlook on life.

We had two other dealings with A Shau during our tour. One of our early missions was a day mission to cover the planned evacuation of some small Special Forces camp near A Shau to A Shau itself. Being new to the war, we were really anxious to play with our guns so we asked if there was anyplace nearby that we could fire the 7.62s and maybe hit some VC. We were told to shoot into any of the hills around the camp because they were all full of bad guys, so we proceeded to have some good gunnery practice. The ground troops thought this was great because it would show the VC that survived that we had a new lethal weapons system in store for them.

On another attack on A Shau, one of our crews was shot down while trying to help and only three of the crew were rescued. The navigator was seriously injured from an M-16 (probably a VC using a captured M-16 but possibly "friendly fire") hit to his right armpit. One can hardly imagine the damage caused by this one hit — there was a crater where his shoulder blade had been. He survived but was medically discharged (see sidebar for further details). One of the rescued was a gunner who was not hurt. He was assigned to fly a mission with me a few nights later but objected. I guess my reputation had preceded me.

One of my lasting memories is from when we went to see the injured navigator when he was brought in. The injured were carried in on stretchers, which were placed on sawhorses for triage. This is where the Docs would pull off the bandages and throw them to the ground. After a bit, the pile of bloody bandages would get so high that they would move the sawhorses and another pile would be started. If I remember correctly, the fourth pile had just been started. **AC**

(To Be Continued)



MY TOUR WITH SPOOKY

*THE AUTHOR COMPLETES HIS TOUR WITH THE DOUGLAS AC-47D GUNSHIP - **CONCLUSION***

BY WILLIAM J. PRATT, MAJOR (USAF, RET.)

THE NAVY

When we first arrived at Da Nang, we would pull airborne alert duty. The name is very misleading because when you fly in circles for seven hours on a dark night you are anything but alert. The gunners and flight mechanic accumulated a lot of flying time while we snoozed in the back. Once, when we were awake, we decided to test fire the gun (this is when we only had one per plane). We called the radar control at Monkey Mountain (that really was its name) and requested permission to enter the emergency ordnance drop area and shoot. They immediately granted permission as a little action on a dull night is better than none at all.

We flew to the center of the area by TACAN and, after verifying our position by their radar, began to shoot. Shortly, one of the gunners yelled that we were being shot at. I didn't really believe it but when I looked back, I could see a stream of tracers behind us. Each time we turned the stream turned, which meant it was probably radar controlled and it was from a 20mm gun judging by the velocity and height.

We immediately told Monkey Mountain and they sent a flight of two airborne alert F-4 Phantom IIs to us. After briefing the F-4s, we flew back over whatever it was and launched a couple of flares. As soon as the flares lit up, they saw something in the water and rolled in on it with their bomb switches on. Just as the first one was about to drop, we recognized the target as a Navy destroyer and called off the bomb run.

We never did find out why the destroyer was there but he was definitely not where he was supposed to be. The area was a restricted area and permission from Monkey Mountain was required for entering that zone. The destroyer was never in any danger though because I never saw an F-4 hit anything… ever.

BREAKFAST

One night, we got into several small battles, received a few hits, and got home late.



AC-47D 44-77263 at Webb AFB, Big Spring, Texas, on 8 September 1967 while being used for training. The aircraft was written off on 11 May 1973 at Phan Rang while serving with the 817th Attack Squadron of the South Vietnamese Air Force. Note the aircraft still has its gray-painted undersurfaces.



Right side view of AC-47D 44-77263 at Webb AFB. It appears this aircraft stayed Stateside in the training role until being placed in the Military Assistance Program in July 1972 and transferred to the South Vietnamese Air Force.

Because of this we were tired and not in a really good mood. After the paperwork, we finally got to our quarters for some sleep. About six in the morning, the base was hit with a mortar attack and the sirens blew warnings to everyone to get into a shelter. My navigator and I both rolled over and tried to get back to sleep. After our night's activity, we were not too concerned about a mortar attack.

The exploding mortar rounds and people yelling and running were making so much noise that we couldn't get back to sleep so we got dressed and went to the club for breakfast. The club was completely empty, because all the sane people were in shelters so we started fixing our own breakfast. About that time, the all-clear was sounded and people started coming in and saw us sitting there eating our breakfast. A few days later, some colonel explained to us the importance of becoming scared and running to the shelters during mortar attacks.

TET OFFENSIVE

Tet is the Vietnamese Lunar New Year — an event of great religious significance to them. It was also the time that the North Vietnamese Army decided to mount a major offensive in our area. They fired so many mortars and rockets into Da Nang that almost all the aircraft and crews, except ours, was evacuated to other bases. Da Nang was declared to be "under siege," which didn't mean much to us except that we suddenly had armed troops everywhere and that many base exchange items like toiletry, tobacco, candy, and — most importantly — beer, were free.

The officers' club bar looked straight down the street past the main gate, which was less than a block



Interior of an AC-47D fitted with three podded 7.62mm mini-guns.



AC-47D 43-16368 in its revetment and showing the *Spooky* art on the nose. This aircraft was transferred to the South Vietnamese Air Force on 31 December 1969.



The large cargo door afforded a good look at the Southeast Asia countryside — at least during the daylight. A night it was usually pitch black except for tracer rounds being aimed at the AC-47D. The crewman is future Medal of Honor winner John Levitow.

away. You could sit at the bar and watch people shooting at each other on the far side of the gate. Someone would start to run across the street and — splat — they wouldn't make it. This was unreal and had to be seen to be believed. Every once in a while, a round would come through the bar area and we would hit the floor and then get up and watch some more. Much more realistic than looking at TV!

Once during Tet, we were pulling ground alert duty when the base came under another mortar attack. We immediately raced towards our plane only to be stopped by an armed sentry that was so scared that he was shaking. Obviously, six white men and one black man in flight gear racing from the alert shack to the ready alert plane and speaking English were a group of VC bent on destroying the base. As we stood there with mortar fragments falling around us, he stammered, "show your identification" but when I started to reach for my billfold he screamed "don't move." By the time we got this settled, the attack was over so we went back to the alert shack.

When the Tet Offensive was all over and the evacuees started returning, some wag put a chicken in a cage and stuck it up on the officers' club bar with a sign saying, "Welcome back our returning heroes!"

GETTING A HAIR-CUT

We had a small barber shop in our area staffed with a Vietnamese barber. Being as we didn't trust any of the locals, we would always make sure someone else was there when getting a hair-cut and especially when getting a shave (that long razor looked pretty sharp). While you were getting your hair cut, the other guy would sit there and give the barber a dirty looking while keeping a hand on his Colt .45 sidearm.

One night, the Marine aviation detachment near us was hit with a satchel charge attack. The next morning when the Marines were picking up the bits and pieces of the dead VC, one of them was our barber — the one that used to slide that long razor over our throats when giving us a shave.

It is interesting to note that a day before the attack, the Marines had relocated a portable building. One of the dead VC had a map showing the building in the new position. I wish our intelligence had been that good.

LIFE AT DA NANG

The officers ate at the Doom Club (Da Nang Officers' Mess) and it had fantastic chow. The club officer was from a restaurant family in Chicago so he really knew how to manage food preparation, plus he was quite an operator. The Navy unloaded and distributed all the supplies for this part of the country, but their club was rather stuffy so he let the Navy guys raise hell in our club in return for keeping us supplied with choice food.

We would pick out a steak, barbeque it while drinking beer, then go in and get a salad and corn on the cob. After downing that, we could pick out a nice piece of pie or cake. This was the only civilized way to fight a war. The barbeque pit was built of brick and concrete and was sturdy enough to stop a tank. Someone painted a nice sign on it saying "Made by Republic Aviation" since Republic was known for building solid but heavy planes.

What many of us missed most was milk and even our enterprising club officer never solved that one. When my copilot and I took leave, we landed at Okinawa on our way to Tokyo. As soon as were out of the plane, we went



Spent shell casings from a night's shooting. The author notes, "We were supposed to turn them into supply, but we found it easier to toss them into the ocean prior to landing."



GRUMMAN'S
BATTLING BIPLANES!

The Grumman F2F/F3F series of biplane fighters were the last such combat planes utilized by the US Navy. Today, these pivotal aircraft are largely forgotten but GRUMMAN F2F/F3F AND CIVILIAN VARIANTS brings these classics back to life. Author Richard S. Dann has done a masterful job in creating the complete history of the fighters that would lead to the famed F4F Wildcat. Printed on quality paper, this softbound volume contains over 500 illustrations — the largest number ever printed on the two types. There is an individual history of each aircraft built along with squadron assignments, crashes, and final dispositions. As an added bonus, there is complete coverage of the civilian variants produced by Grumman. It is a sobering thought to note that the F2F/F3F dominated US Navy fighter squadrons from 1935 to 1941 and the final F3Fs were assigned to training squadrons just two months before the Pearl Harbor attack. The 192-page monograph is a must for anyone interested in US Navy aircraft.

JUST $47

CHALLENGE AVIATION BOOK CLUB

Please send *GRUMMAN F2F/F3F AND CIVILIAN VARIANTS* JUST $47 — postage and packing included

Quantity ..... _____

Price Each ..... _____

CA Residents (only) add 9% Sales Tax ..... _____

Total Due (US Funds Only) ..... _____

Domestic postage is included in the price. — foreign orders please call 818-700-6868 or email *ed@challengeweb.com* for additional postage fee. Orders are shipped Media Mail

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State/Zip + 4 _____

Phone Number (in the event we need to contact you) _____

Email Address _____

SEND TO: CHALLENGE ABC
9800-D Topanga Canyon Blvd., #368,
Chatsworth, CA 91311

or CALL: (818) 700-6868

straight to the flight line snack bar and had a glass of milk *and* a milkshake. When Pan Am Boeing 727s would land at Da Nang to pick up troops going on R&R, we would smooth talk the flight attendants out of milk.

It may seem strange but after such a great meal we used to take C rations (combat meals) on our seven-hour night missions, especially on the morning ones. The only problem was that we could not get them at Da Nang because we were being paid to buy our meals and the Air Force would not give us food if we were supposed to pay for it. A strange Catch-22. Not to worry, most grunts (ground troops) always wanted more ammunition than they had. So, we would scrounge a pallet of ammo and fly to some Army base and trade it for a pallet of C rations. When airborne, we would remove a heater outlet cover and put in the cans that we wanted warmed. By the time we were ready to eat, the cans were just right. It always pays to be resourceful when in a combat zone.



The Tet Offensive was particularly brutal and the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong paid for the attack on South Vietnam with the heaviest losses they had ever suffered. Associated Press photograph Eddie Adams took this famous photo of Gen. Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a Viet Cong terrorist on the streets of Saigon.



The author has his photo taken next to an Air Police jeep.



Jane "whichever way the wind blows" Fonda looking particularly stupid as a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun fires a round. Fonda was probably the most despised of all communist sympathizers by USAF personnel.

One evening, a Marine band gave us a concert. They played wonderful music and you could close your eyes and imagine being almost anywhere. When you opened your eyes, you saw a bunch of young men with their instruments wearing fatigues that had mud up to their rears. Their rifles were stacked next to their folding chairs. They had been out in the rice paddies shooting VC all day and were now giving us a concert.

Just before Christmas, we were treated to a live performance by Bob Hope. We had to sit in the mud during a light rainstorm but no one complained. The show was fantastic — especially since Bob had real, live "round eye" girls with him so it would have been super even if he never said a word. Hope was really wound up and, even though many of his jokes could not be broadcast in the States, we thought they were great. Everyone respected Bob. Many of the USO entertainers would only entertain in Saigon. They did this to save their own hides as well as to relieve the "combat stress" that the headquarters



The author and some of his crew with their AC-47D.

types got from sitting in their swivel chairs all day. Bob got out into the jungle where the combat troops were.

We were quartered in "hooches," which were large H-shaped open bay buildings that had the bath facilities in the middle between the two wings. The walls came up half way and screens went rest of the way while bamboo pull shades covered the screens. The only trouble is that we flew at night so trying to sleep during the very hot days while the F-4s were taking off in afterburner was difficult. The base eventually received a few air-conditioned trailers and night-flying crews were given top priority for these units. It was a great improvement for us and we were finally able to get some sleep.

One evening, we were all sitting around in the hooch doing our various things when — boom — a gun was fired. After crawling back out from under our bunks, we found one of the guys had spotted a rat and shot it with a rifle. Nothing better to do.

I hate to admit this, but our enlisted crew members did not live nearly as well as we did. They had to eat in the "green powdered eggs for breakfast and Spam for dinner" mess hall while living in tents. In the tents, our enlisted crews had to put their bunk legs in cans of water to keep out the ants (which had a ferocious bite), but they did have a nice view of barbed wire and sandbags.

We had a small theater where not-too-old movies could be seen for only 25 cents. The Officers' and NCOs' clubs always had a good stock of cold beer and the BX (base exchange) was usually well-stocked.

Speaking of cold beer, one of the basic survival skills that you learned in the USAF was that a case of beer could be chilled by shooting a CO2 fire extinguisher right into the case. Apparently, some Marines learned of this closely-guarded secret because one day a Marine F-4 caught fire on the ramp and all the extinguishers in the area were empty. By the time a fire truck arrived, the F-4 was just so much melted aluminum. Just think of how many refrigerators the government could have bought for the price of one F-4.

ATTITUDES

Almost everyone I met had a positive attitude about the Vietnam War — we felt we should be there and we were doing some good. We resented the draft dodgers, Jane Fonda in particular, the war protestors, and the fact we were not being supported by President Lyndon Johnson or, especially, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, whom many considered to be a traitor.

All of us resented the fact we were not allowed to win the war. Johnson would not allow us to bomb Haiphong Harbor, where the enemy received most of their supplies. The airfields where the MiGs were based — the MiGs that were shooting down our aircraft — were never bombed or even strafed, all on orders from politicians. SAM missile sites could not be hit while they were being built but only attacked after they had become fully operational — making it very difficult and dangerous for the pilots that had to attack these sites. We had two- or three-day cease fires every couple of months so that the North Vietnamese could resupply their forces without interference from the Americans. It is kind of hard to keep a positive attitude while being shot at when this is the type of support we were receiving from American politicians and top military officials.

I was constantly amazed by the way the mind adapts to protect and to meet the situation. I am basically a gentle person that feels bad when I hit a bird or prairie dog while driving, but it did not



One of the many hits the author's AC-47D took during its attack missions.

bother me one bit to shoot Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army regulars — and to mow them down in large numbers. We used to make games out of everything like throwing ammunition cannisters out of the plane to land on enemy encampments. We even tossed out messages to the enemy. We saved our C ration garbage and dumped it on Tchepone, Laos, when flying over the area. Those are not rational things to do while being shot at but they are certainly better than worrying and brooding over the situation.

We were not concerned about being killed or even seriously wounded, because that is something that "always happens to the other guy." Another example of the mind adapting. Although not worried about being killed, we were very concerned about the possibility of being captured. Very few, if any, airmen got back from Laos after being captured. That was another major reason why we showed no mercy to the enemy.

Air Classics readers probably have noted that I was not too impressed with headquarters in Saigon. As mentioned, some of the Saigon desk types were more worried about us breaking a regulation than they were worried about the loss of troops on the ground. I guess if you live in a plush hotel, eat in nice restaurants, and work in an air-conditioned building, it is kind of hard to remember that a war is going on. I feel that if painting the bellies black would reduce the loss rate of our AC-47Ds, then some wheel should have had the guts to approve it — regardless of what the regulations stated.

MY CREW

My AC-47D crew was a great bunch. We started training at Forbes AFB in October 1965 and arrived in Vietnam in December 1965. I had to leave early on emergency leave in October 1966 and the rest of the crew left in December 1966. Our *Spooky* crew consisted of:

Capt. Bill Pratt (me): Pilot
Capt. John Baker: Navigator
Lt. Stu Fenske: Copilot
T/Sgt. Henry Elton: Load Master
S/Sgt. Charlie Cox: Flight Mechanic
S/Sgt. Jerry O'Mera: Gunner
A2c Bill Grant: Gunner

JOHN LEVITOW: MEDAL OF HONOR

OUR SQUADRON WAS UNIQUE IN AWARDS PRESENTED TO CREW MEMBERS. WE HAD THE ONLY ENLISTED MAN PRESENTED THE MEDAL OF HONOR DURING THE ENTIRE VIETNAM WAR AND TWO CREWMEMBERS THAT RECEIVED THE AIR FORCE CROSS (SEE LAST ISSUE)

John Levitow, age 23, was an Airman First Class serving as a loadmaster aboard *Spooky 71* on the night of 24 February 1969. *Spooky 71* was called to the aid of besieged troops at Long Binh Air Base a few miles northeast of Saigon. It was his 181st combat mission.

After arriving at the scene, going into an orbit, and engaging the enemy, an 82mm mortar shell exploded inside the gunship's right wing. The rear compartment was ripped apart by shrapnel. All five of the crew in this compartment were hurled to the floor and were bleeding from numerous wounds. Levitow had just armed a Mk. 24 flare, which burns at 4000-deg Fahrenheit and it was flung onto the AC-47D's floor with an activated fuse.

Levitow, with 40 shrapnel wounds in his legs, side, and back, saw one of the crew lying perilously close to the open cargo door. As he dragged the wounded man to safety, he spotted the armed and smoking flare rolling on the floor. In a matter of seconds, it would ignite and the intense heat would turn the interior of the stricken gunship into an inferno.

Weakened from loss of blood and partially paralyzed by his wounds, Levitow tried to pick up the flare as it skidded around the floor. Finally, in desperation, he threw himself on the flare, dragged it to the open door, a trail of blood marking his path, and pushed it out just as the flare ignited in a white-hot blaze. Levitow then lapsed into unconsciousness.

Ambulances and a medical evacuation helicopter were waiting on the flight line at Bien Hoa, *Spooky 71's* home base, when the battered Gooney Bird landed with its five injured crewmen — two of them, including Levitow, seriously wounded. Levitow was flown to a hospital in Japan where he recovered from his wounds. He would eventually return to combat and fly 20 more missions before returning to the States. On Armed Forces Day, 14 May 1970, President Nixon presented the Medal of Honor to Levitow in a ceremony at the White House.



Levitow while flying a *Spooky* mission.



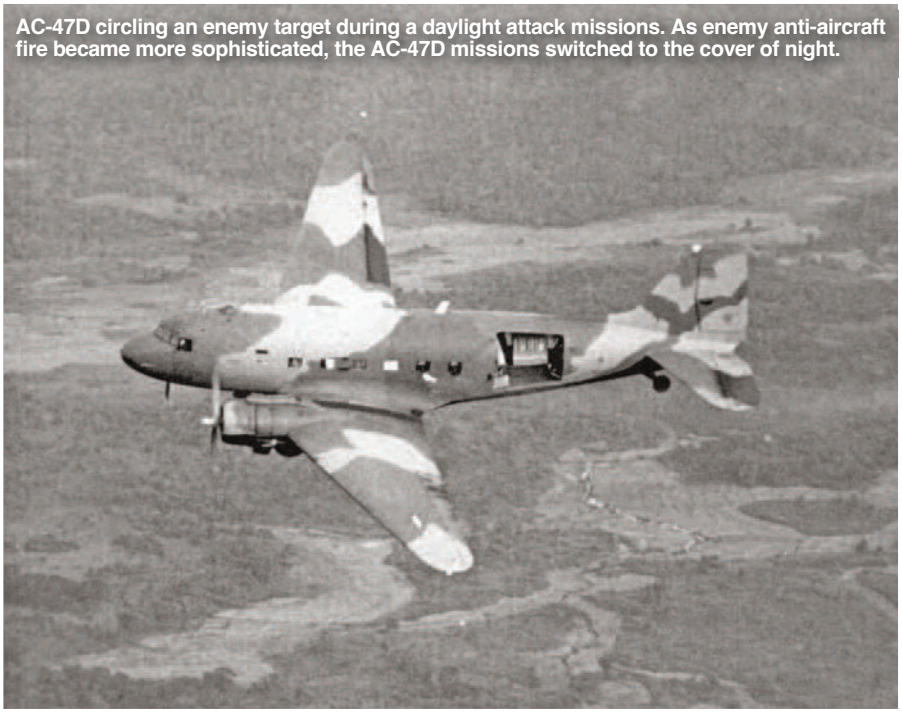
***Spooky 71* after returning to base with an incredible amount of battle damage. Note the three-foot hole in the wing.**



***Spooky 71* being repaired for a return to service.**



John Levitow after being awarded the Medal of Honor.



AC-47D circling an enemy target during a daylight attack missions. As enemy anti-aircraft fire became more sophisticated, the AC-47D missions switched to the cover of night.

When I left, Stu became the pilot and a Lt. Dick Lord was assigned as the new copilot. They finished their tour and all, except the new copilot, returned to the States in December 1966.

Most military aircraft have a radio call sign consisting of one or two words followed by a number. This is so that when a radio call is received, the recipient will know the type of aircraft, its squadron (and in our case, its detachment), as well as its assigned mission. Our call sign was always *Spooky* followed by a two-digit number and, because of this, our AC-47Ds and personnel were generally known as *Spookies*.

DEPARTURE

After about nine months, my crew and I were pulled out of Da Nang because our squadron commander felt we had had enough. We were sent to Binh Thuy, which was in the Mekong Delta south of Saigon. There was little action at this location and what we did have was not nearly as exciting as what we had over Laos. Boring.

Shortly after arriving there, my youngest son Les had his leg seriously injured while riding an amusement park train. Because of this, I returned home on emergency leave. However, the USAF "lost me" upon my return to the States. I left on very short notice so I was instructed to go home and new assignment orders would be sent to me at that location. After sitting around about a month, I called the USAF Personnel Center and inquired about my new orders. After a long pause with a few "aaahs" and "eeers," I was told that I would be called back. A week later, I called again and got the same answer.

Greenville AFB was very close to my home but it had just been closed. However, it still had a colonel to oversee the shutdown. I went to see him just so the system could not accuse me of being AWOL. He then called some colonel at the Personnel Center and then things really started to happen. Once they decided I should be assigned "somewhere," the question of where I should be assigned "from" came up. Being that I was not presently at a base or even assigned to a unit, they didn't know how to assign me to another base or unit. Finally, the brass put me at the Travis AFB hospital (only on paper) and then transferred me from that location to my next duty base. I was finally sent to RAF Alconbury in England and when I got there, the personnel office didn't even know I was coming. Does the USAF have a great personnel system or what?

In summary, I was in Vietnam for nine months. During that time, I was credited with 710 hours of combat time and 156 combat missions. I was awarded the Silver Star, the Distinguished Flying Cross with two Oak Leaf clusters, and the Air Medal with twelve Oak Leaf clusters. An Oak Leaf cluster represents being award the medal again. **AC**



Aviation Models

Desktop, Diecast, Balsa Kits, & Custom Models

www.aviation-models.com

P.O. Box 542
Sandisfield, MA 01255

(800) 591-4823

Check out our sister website.

The Aviation History Online Museum

www.aviation-history.com

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, Management and Circulation: 1. PublicationTitle: AIR CLASSICS Publication Number: 0002-2241 Filing Date: 9/30/2022 Issue Frequency: Monthly Number of Issues Published Annually: 12 Annual Subscription Price: US $59.95 Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: 9800-D TOPANGA CANYON BLVD #368 CHATSWORTH, CA 91311 Complete Mailing Address of the Headquarters of General Business Offices of the Publisher: SAME AS ABOVE. Full Names and Complete Mailing Address of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor: MICHAEL D OL'EARY, PUBLISHER. MICHAEL D. O'LEARY, EDITOR Owner(s): CHALLENGE PUBLICATIONS, INC. 9800-D TOPANGA CANYON B;VD #368, CHATSWORTH, CA 91311. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or more of the Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages or Other Securities: MICHAEL D O'LEARY, 9800-D TOPANGA CANYON BLVD #368, CHATSWORTH, CA 91311 The Tax Status has not changed during the preceding 12 months. Publication Title: AIR CLASSICS Issue Date for Circulation Data Below: OCTOBER 2022: Extent & Nature of Circulation: Average No. Copies Each Issue No. Copies of Single Issue During Preceding 12 Months Published Nearest to Filing Date Total Number of Copies (Net Press Run) 50.950 53,700 Legitimates Paid and/or Requested Distribution Outside countyPaid, requested Mail Subscriptions- 15,000 15,100 as Stated on PS Form 3541 In-County Paid/Requested Subscriptions Stated 0 0 On Ps Form 3541 Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street 20,800 20,850 Vendors, Counter Sales, and Other Paid Distribution Outside USPS Requested copies Distributed by Other Mail Classes 200 200 Through the USPS c. Total Paid and/or Requested Distribution 36,000 36,150 Nominal Requested Distribution Outside-County Non-Requested Copies Stated 400 400 on PS Form 3541 Free or Nominal Rate In-County Included on 0 0 PS Form 3541 Non requested Copies Distributed through the USPS by Other 0 0 Classes of Mail Non Requested copies Distributed Outside the Mail 350 400 Total Non-requested Distribution 750 800 Total Distribution 36,750 36,950 Copies not Distributed 14,200 16,750 Total 50,950 55,465 Percent Paid 97.95% 97.15% Electronic Copy Circulation Paid and Requested Electronic Copies 0 0 Total requested and Paid Print Copies (Line 15c) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 16a) 36,000 36,150 Total Print Distribution (Line15f) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 16a) Total Requested Copy distribution (line 15c) + Requested/Paid 36,000 36,150 Electronic Copies Electronic copies Percent Paid (Both print & Electronic Copies (16b divided by 16c x 100) 97.95% 97.87%. I certify that 50% of all my distributed copies (electronic and paid print) are paid above a nominal price. 1. Publication of Statement of Ownership is required and will be printed in the DECEMBER 2022 issue of this publication. 2. I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete: MICHAEL D O'LEARY, PRESIDENT