

Phan Rang AB Newsletter

The History of Phan Rang AB and the stories of those who served there.
"Keeping the memories alive" Newsletter 211

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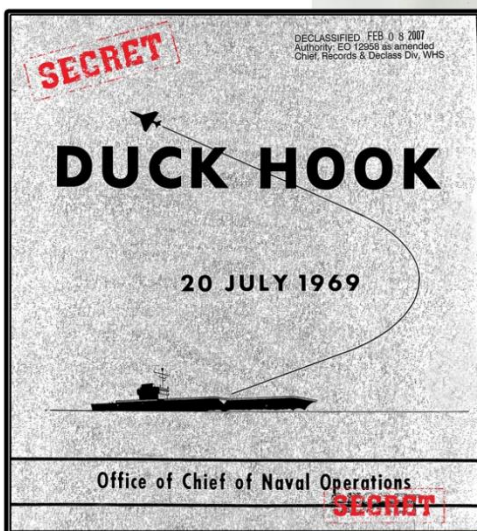
Order of the Constipated Chameleon

Serving Our Country

Doug's Comments

Vietnam's Most Secret Squadron Project Duck Hook

(For those of us stationed at Phan Rang AB, we probably all saw these aircraft and came to some conclusions along with opinions of others, as to their mission but that conjecture was probably incorrect. The following story exposes Project Duck Hook.)



Duck Hook (code-named "Pruning Knife" by the military) was the White

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House code-name of an operation President Richard Nixon had threatened to unleash against North Vietnam during the Vietnam War, if North Vietnam did not yield to Washington's terms at the Paris peace negotiations. Duck Hook called for the possible-nuclear bombing of military and economic targets in and around Hanoi, the mining of Haiphong and other ports, air strikes against North Vietnam's northeast line of communications as well as passes and bridges at the Chinese border, and air and ground attacks on other targets throughout Vietnam.

Weaving its way through moonlit skies, passing low between jungle-covered mountain passes, the blacked-out and unmarked airplane steadily headed for its target-an isolated drop zone deep inside communist North Vietnam. Arriving over its objective, a small green light blinked inside the plane's darkened fuselage, and two Vietnamese secret agents plunged out into the humid night air, their static-line parachutes snapping open, easing their descent into the heartland of the enemy. Above them, the sound of the mysterious transport quickly faded until it was no longer perceptible. Landing their black-camouflaged plane back at their secret base at Nhya Tran, South Vietnam, the Chinese flight crew headed for debriefing. Another ‘blackop’ by the U.S. Air Force's First Flight Detachment was complete. This article lifts the curtain of secrecy on the long-hidden story of “First Flight,” the Air Force's most secret Special Operations unit of the Vietnam War.

Taking the War to Hanoi

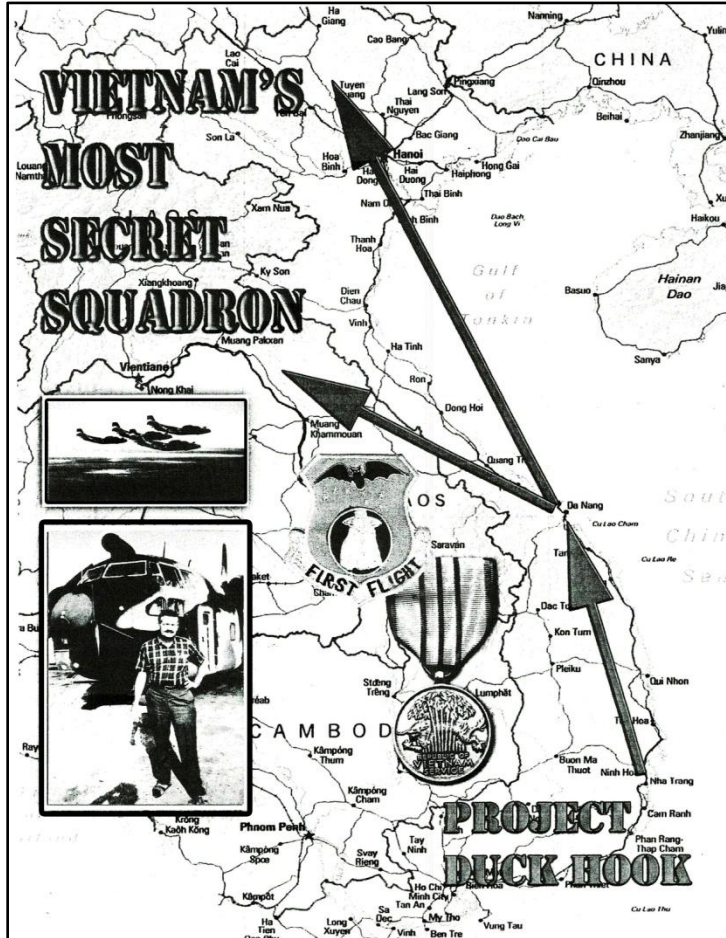
This story begins in January 1964 when President Lyndon Johnson reluctantly approved a proposal for the U.S. military to initiate a covert unconventional warfare campaign against North Vietnam in an effort to get the Hanoi to stop supporting the communist Viet Cong insurgency in South Vietnam. At that time, the Viet Cong were steadily gaining the upper hand in their fight to topple the South Vietnamese regime that the U.S. supported in accordance with its Cold War strategy of "containing" the expansion of communism. Johnson and his advisors saw covert action as one way to apply pressure on Hanoi without significantly expanding the war, by sending major U.S. ground troops into combat or launching American airstrikes against North Vietnam. Since 1961, the CIA had been conducting a covert UW campaign against North Vietnam, but their effort had been very limited in scope and the results were disappointing. Now it was the Pentagon's turn, and Johnson wanted results quickly.

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As a covert action, the UW campaign — designated OPLAN 34A — had to be carried out in such a way that U.S. involvement was concealed. Johnson did not want the North Vietnamese or their Soviet or communist Chinese allies publicly protesting American "aggression." After all, violating another nation's sovereign territory with an armed force is considered an "act of war" -- a situation technically circumvented by using a 'civilian' agency, like CIA, but riskier when U.S. military forces are involved.



Project Duck Hook's area of operation. Pictured is CMSgt. Howard Wright who stands in front of a Duck Hook C-123 in Taiwan in 1969. Wright is wearing typical clothing worn by First Flight members. The bulge on the plane's nose houses electronic countermeasures equipment to detect enemy radar and a weather radio antenna above the cockpit.

The OPLAN 34A unconventional warfare plan included surreptitiously inserting sabotage teams and intelligence agents into North Vietnam, keeping them resupplied, and extracting them if need be. Other missions included conducting small seaborne commando raids along the coast of North Vietnam, various Psychological Warfare operations, including passing leaflets and small single-station radios to the North Vietnamese population, dropping "gift kits" to peasants, and various other "black ops" intended to convince North Vietnamese leaders there was an anticommunist insurgency brewing on their own turf.

In January 1964, the U.S. Military Assistance Command in Vietnam secretly created an ad hoc Joint Unconventional Warfare Task Force to execute OPLAN 34A. The JUWTF was initially called the MACV Special

Operations Group, but more clever minds soon changed this to a less descriptive cover name,

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the Studies and Observations Group. The organization was officially abbreviated MACV-SOG, but, to those in the unit, it was either "MACSOG," or simply "SOG"

SOG gets an Air Force

When MACSOG was set up in early 1964, the U.S. Air Force had virtually no capability to fly the kinds of overt air missions contemplated for OPLAN 34A. At that time, the Air Force's dedicated unconventional warfare units resided in four Air National Guard squadrons, but these were not organized for a genuine covert role. The Air Force would have to create a new unit from scratch, and do it quickly. Known as the First Flight Detachment, or simply "First Flight," the new unit was specifically set up to provide MACSOG with a covert air infiltration capability.

The MACSOG commander was given direct operational control of First Flight. For this reason, and because First Flight flew missions exclusively for MACSOG, some of SOG's commanders — all U.S. Army colonels — often considered First Flight to be more of a SOG unit than an Air Force unit. In fact, First Flight was always an Air Force unit, albeit an unusual one. First Flight was commanded by an Air Force officer and always had at least two Air Force flight crews assigned, as well as Air Force maintenance, intelligence and administrative support people and a considerable number of civilian contractors. First Flight made its home at Nha Trang air base, about midway up the coastline of South Vietnam, right on the edge of the South China Sea.

The Air Force needed to quickly find and train flight crews to fly SOG's covert missions. In order to give the U.S. government the "plausible deniability" it desired, the Air Force would rely on "surrogates" — non-American "third country" foreign nationals — to fly the OPLAN 34A missions over North Vietnam. Seven crews from the Republic of China on Taiwan and three crews of Vietnamese were recruited as First Flight's primary flyers. The surrogates were then secretly sent to Hurlburt Field, Fla. where they underwent special training in low altitude night navigation and air drops to "blind" (unmarked) drop zones.

Within SOG, the Chinese crews were known as "C" crews, the Vietnamese as "V" crews, and the unit's two later four) American crews were called "A" crews. The A" crews were forbidden from flying OPLAN 34A missions, at least initially. Their primary job was to provide flying instruction for the foreign crews. They were, however, allowed to fly logistical airlift flights within South Vietnam supporting SOG's ground elements and to perform post-maintenance check flights.

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The aircraft picked for First Flight was the Fairchild C-123. Known as the "Provider," the C-123 was a rugged, two-engine assault transport built in the mid 1950s for the Air Force. C-123s were tailor-made for landing on rough, unimproved airstrips and for parachuting men and supplies. Since 1962 Air Force Providers had become a common sight at air bases and remote landing strips all over South Vietnam, and since 1963, the CIA had been secretly using a few of its own unmarked C-123s, flown by surrogate crews, for its covert missions over North Vietnam.

While the CIA's use of C-123s undoubtedly influenced the Air Force's choice of aircraft for its own operations, the CIA's experience with C-123s had revealed its shortcomings in range, load capacity and ability to safely fly night, low-altitude routes in mountainous terrain. Also, C-123s were less than optimal from a genuine "plausible deniability" perspective since they were unmistakably American-built planes and none were in the inventory of any other nation at that time. But C-123s were readily available, so the Air Force pressed on with what they had. For MACSOG, C-123s would become its primary platform for long-range covert infiltration, resupply and Psychological Operations missions.

In early 1964 the Air Force secretly assigned six of its C-123Bs to MACSOG under the codename Project Duck Hook. Knowing it had little time to get OPLAN 34A operations up and running, the Air Force used a special, quick-reaction modification program nicknamed Big Safari to design and install mission-specific modifications to the Duck Hook C-123s. For SOG operations, the Duck Hook C-123s received new navigation equipment, additional radios and surface-to-air missile radar detectors. Also, new crew stations were created for an electronic warfare officer and a radio operator.

The Duck Hook C-123s were also "sanitized" by removing as many incriminating "made-in-the-U.S." stickers, stencils and markings from components inside the airplanes as practicable, and all Air Force insignia and tail numbers from the outside of the planes. Also, the official records of the six Duck Hook C-123s were deleted from Air Force files.

The planes were initially given a nondescript gray paint job, but this was later changed to a dark night camouflage scheme. The mostly black and dark green camouflage inspired First Flight members and others who saw the planes in various places around Southeast Asia to nickname these mysterious birds, the "Black Bird 123s." Special frames were built on the exterior of the

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planes so that various national insignia could be quickly attached or removed, depending on the "cover" story for that particular flight. Having lost their official identities, each of the Duck Hook planes were thereafter identified by new codenames, "Whiskey Alpha", "Whiskey Bravo," "Whiskey Charlie," and so on.

Into the Secret War

In December 1964, Flight Detachment began flying covert missions over North Vietnam. Initially all OPLAN 34A missions over "denied" airspace were flown using only the unit's Chinese or Vietnamese flight crews. First Flight's missions included resupplying intelligence teams inserted earlier by the CIA, dropping additional agents to reinforce those teams and infiltrating SOG's own agents and teams into enemy territory. They also dropped leaflets, small transistor radios (tuned to a radio station purported to be run by Hanoi, but really run by SOG), and "gift kits" for North Vietnamese peasants.

A typical First Flight combat mission began at its home base at Nha Trang. After takeoff, the C-123 usually proceeded to a forward staging base closer to enemy territory where the crew would land, refuel and wait for nightfall. Da Nang Air Base in northern South Vietnam was often used. Wherever they went in their Black Bird C-123s, the flight crews and any American ground support personnel with them wore only civilian clothes. When darkness fell, the C-123 would depart the staging base and proceed into North Vietnam; often through the "back door" which is to say, by slipping into enemy territory from Laos instead of making a more dangerous coastal penetration from the sea. Flying as low as they dared in the moonlight, the crews used mountainous terrain to mask their plane from enemy radars, and to minimize exposure to enemy anti-aircraft gunfire. Flying low at night in this kind of terrain, sometimes through rainy and cloudy weather, was extremely hazardous, even without the dangers of the enemy defenses. First Flight's C-123s were not equipped with terrain-avoidance radars, and night vision goggles for the pilots had not yet been invented. The risk of slamming into a mountainside hidden in the darkness was very real; this is exactly how one Duck Hook crew and plane was lost.

When the target drop zone was in the northern part of North Vietnam, the crews faced the increased threat of Soviet-built radar-guided SA-2 surface-to-air missiles and radar-equipped, radar-directed MiG fighter-interceptors as well as hundreds of anti-aircraft guns. One Duck

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Hook C-123 on a low-level agent infiltration mission was riddled with enemy gunfire right over their drop zone, but the wounded crew managed to bring their damaged bird back to base.

Leaflet drops were among the most dangerous missions because they required the C-123 crews to leave the relative safety of low altitude as they neared their target area to quickly climb to a much higher altitude where they would release their leaflets so they could flutter down far and wide. But this tactic greatly increased the crew's exposure to detection by enemy radar and engagement by SAMs or MiGs.

First Flight C-123 instructor pilot Maj. Fred Heitzhausen, who in 1966 flew the first all-American crewed mission over North Vietnam, recalls his first leaflet drop as "the scariest, spookiest night of my life." Immediately after completing the leaflet drop at 14,000 feet, Heitzhausen pulled off all engine power, rolled his plane over into a steep 90 degree bank, then plunged down toward the pitch black jungle below, diving 4,000 feet in only 40 seconds to get to low altitude as quickly as possible to minimize exposure to the enemy defenses. It took him another 5,000 feet of altitude just to pull out of the dive without hitting the ground. The pilot remembers this not-quite-by-the-book combat tactic as "a hairy maneuver, to say the least."

In 1965 Johnson approved an expansion of SOG's covert operations into the officially off-limits territories of Laos and Cambodia. First Flight quickly began using its C-123s, flown by the American crews, on cross-border infiltration and resupply missions over these "denied" areas supporting clandestine reconnaissance teams. The Government of the Republic of China would not allow the U.S. to use the "C" crews to fly missions against Laotian targets because Taiwan had diplomatic relations with Laos. Operations into Laos and Cambodia involved supporting small reconnaissance teams, often led by U.S. Special Forces Soldiers, who would silently penetrate into the enemy sanctuaries to report on North Vietnamese resupply networks, ambush enemy troops, locate targets for airstrikes, or "snatch" (capture) enemy soldiers for interrogation.

Use of the Vietnamese crews was soon discontinued but the "C" crews continued to be key assets for SOG throughout First Flight's existence. Heitzhausen remembers the Chinese crews as being "professional and competent." In their second year of OPLAN 34A operations, the White House authorized the "A" crews to begin flying missions over North Vietnam.

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In 1968 the First Flight C-123s were pressed into service in the epic aerial resupply effort to support the surrounded Marine garrison at Khe Sanh. On one such mission, First Flight flight mechanic Jimmy Pruett was tasked to fly a load of ammo and food with a part American, part Chinese crew. After a quick offload under fire, Pruett ended up backhauling so many wounded troops and tired, worn out Marines that he could barely get their ramp closed for takeoff.

Heavy maintenance for the secret Duck Hook C-123s was accomplished at a secure facility in Taipei, Taiwan, which, as American First Flight commander and instructor pilot Maj. Roger Gibson remembers, had its particular perks for the SOG troops back at Nha Trang. While he was the officer in charge of overseeing maintenance in Taipei, Gibson would receive special orders via SOG's secure radio net from C-123s headed for Taiwan. He would procure a planeload of liquid refreshments and other morale-boosting goodies to put on the next Black Bird C-123 headed back to the war.

In November 1968, Johnson ordered all U.S. combat operations against North Vietnam to cease, including all OPLAN 34A activity, in his final effort to kickstart peace negotiations with Hanoi. Subsequently, First Flight concentrated on supporting SOG's recon teams operating clandestinely inside Laos and Cambodia. Many of the unit's flights involved airlifting the recon teams from their main bases at Camp Long Thanh or Nha Trang, to closer "jump off" sites at Kontum, Ban Me Thuot, or Kham Duc, South Vietnam, or Udorn and Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. The use of Thai air bases by First Flight C-123s was especially politically sensitive to the Thai government, and great care was taken by the aircrew and maintenance troops not to look like U.S. military personnel when in Thailand, and their Black Bird C-123s had all Air Force insignia removed before operating there.

When it became clear in 1969 that newly elected President Nixon was not interested in restarting the covert unconventional warfare campaign in North Vietnam, the need to retain First Flight's special, covert capability was increasingly debated by senior commanders in Vietnam. First Flight's C-123s recently given the new code name Heavy Hook were valued for their ability to fly long range covert airborne infiltration and resupply, but helicopters were better suited for many of SOG's short range operations into Laos and Cambodia. Also, since October 1966, four new and more capable C-130E-I Skyhooks (MC-130E Combat Talons) had been assigned to SOG, but these overtly U.S. Air Force planes were limited to clandestine operations, not covert missions. In the end, MACV decided they still needed First Flight's

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unique capabilities, and throughout 1970 and 1971, First Flight's American and Chinese crews continued flying combat missions, daily logistical airlift runs and training flights.

In early 1972 it was finally decided to shut down MACSOG's operations in accordance with Nixon's "Vietnamization" strategy which included the steady withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Southeast Asia. First Flight Detachment stood down on March 1, 1972, and was quietly disbanded at the end of the month. The unit's Americans were reassigned; the long-serving Chinese crews returned to Taiwan and the four surviving Heavy Hook C-123s were transferred to the Republic of China Air Force.

Summary and Conclusion

During its eight years of existence from 1964 to 1972, the First Flight Detachment played a significant role in the covert unconventional warfare campaign in "denied" territories — North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia — where the U.S. government's official position was that Americans were not involved in any kind of activities on the ground. First Flight supported the full gamut of MACSOG's UW activities, including special reconnaissance, guerrilla warfare, intelligence collection, Psychological Operations and personnel recovery. The unit flew numerous covert combat missions into the enemy's sanctuaries and thousands of airlift missions providing essential and secure logistical support for SOG's ground units.

After the war it was determined that most, if not all, of the agent operations in North Vietnam supported by First Flight had failed. But many of First Flight's other operations, from its missions to "infiltrate" and "resupply" phantom insurgent teams that never existed, to showering the North Vietnamese population with subversive PSYOP material, diverted elements of the enemy's armed forces from the war effort in South Vietnam to internal security duty. Furthermore, First Flight's crews directly supported the incredibly courageous SOG recon teams that harassed, damaged and diverted North Vietnamese forces operating in the enemy's Laotian and Cambodian sanctuaries. To be sure, Washington's fatally flawed leadership never allowed SOG's UW campaign to be of sufficient scope and intensity to fulfill its potential. But there can be no doubt the efforts of SOG's covert Airmen played a definite role in reducing the enemy's ability to inflict casualties on our forces fighting in Southeast Asia. And it is essential to acknowledge the major role played by the Republic of China's brave and skilled flyers who risked their lives as trusted allies of the U.S. for so many years.

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The unit lost four of C-123s and their crews, including at least two American Airmen killed in action. None of the planes went down in "denied" territory. On many missions, the C-123s were damaged by enemy ground fire, and on at least one occasion, several flight crew members were badly wounded.

First Flight broke new ground for the Air Force in the art of clandestine operations, including the use of third country surrogate flight crews, sanitized, unmarked aircraft and other special security practices. Indeed, the very existence of First Flight Detachment remained secret until decades after the war ended and the unit no longer existed. Ultimately, the story of First Flight is not just a fascinating chapter in the history of Air Force Special Operations; it can also serve as a source of unique and hard-earned lessons in the potential conduct of clandestine air operations by U.S. Special Operations Command in the future.

The author wishes to thank the following Air Force veterans of the First Flight Detachment for their contributions to the research for this article: Roger Gibson, Russ McCarthy, Cleveland Colston, Fred Heithausen, Wayne Haring, Jimmy Pruett, Howard Wright, Bill Palmisano, Bill Higgins and Cecil Morgan.



A “BLAST FROM THE PAST”

A recent rolling thunder storm reminded me of one of the less pleasurable experiences of heeding the call of nature between combat operations in Nui Dat.

While there were ‘piss-a-phones’ strategically placed around the C Company lines, there was a communal ‘thunderbox’ located adjacent the showers. From memory, this was a four-seater

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affair where one could sit in solitude, reading a book or a newspaper from home while going about one’s ‘business’.

Located in the 1 ATF area was a Battery of American M109 155mm self-propelled howitzers. The M109 has a crew of six personnel; the section chief, the driver, the gunner, the assistant gunner and two ammunition handlers. The gunner aimed the cannon left or right while the assistant gunner aimed the cannon up and down. The M109 carried 28 rounds of 155 mm ammunition and was also armed with a .50cal machine gun with 500 rounds of ammunition.



One never knew when the Battery would be called upon for a fire mission. Every so often, the quiet solitude of the ‘thunderbox’ would be interrupted by M109s opening up in response to a call for fire support. Now, while one was used to explosions of all descriptions, it was not so much the noise of the howitzers but rather the concussive effect of their fire.

Such was the force of the concussion, that the midges, gnats and other little critters in the excreta pit would be literally blown up below one’s exposed buttocks and legs causing a rapid contraction of the sphincter and a hasty conclusion to one’s solitude.

Ah, the memories.

Article by Lieutenant Colonel (retired) R.A. Lambert; Platoon Commander, 9 Platoon, C Company, 5th Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment 1969-70

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AN ABORTED “MAGPIE” MISSION

AN ABORTED MAGPIE MISSION

Squadron Leader Graham Neil, of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) served in Vietnam as a Forward Air Controller (FAC) with the US Air Force on secondment in the 19th Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS), headquartered at Bien Hoa. This unit had 120 aircraft altogether, comprising three types - Cessna O-1 Bird Dogs, Cessna O-2 Skymasters and North American OV-10 Broncos. It had 230 FACs who were scattered across 26 forward operating locations.



Squadron Leader Graham Neil, of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) in the cockpit of his OV-10

Graham's Callsign was "Issue 21" and he flew a Bronco as the Air Liaison Officer (ALO) for the

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2nd Brigade of the US Army’s 25th Division in III Corps which was based at Cu Chi. The OV-10 was specifically designed as a COIN (counter insurgency) aircraft, and included a large carrying capacity for two paratroopers if required, although this capability wasn’t used while Graham was there. He also said that it was useful for conveying freezers, beer and other such vital supplies.

The OV-10s had no air conditioning and the left-hand window could be opened slightly to air the cockpit when taxiing. The pilot entered the cockpit from the right-hand side, opposite to all fighter aircraft that Graham had flown, as the designer reasoned that pilots should not have to climb over the throttle quadrant, increasing the risk of loose objects or gravel interfering with its operation. It could carry a second person and often other FACs would fly in support of each other. They used gyro-stabilized binoculars which could be used by the second seater and which gave good visual coverage at ranges longer than the VC assumed. The binoculars swung from a bungee cord and could cause air motion sickness as the operator tried to use them in flight.

Before conducting strike missions, FACs would undertake visual reconnaissance (VR) which could be quite boring but sometimes was most productive, e.g. finding a stream muddier than before would indicate that people had been in it and smoke from cooking fires could be detected at dawn and dusk. FACs were always on hand in the event Troops in Contact (TIC) situations developed.

“...the FAC would call out for anyone available with “snake and nape”...”

Strike aircraft were available all over South Vietnam at 20 minute intervals based on Fragmentary Orders (Frag) and, if targets weren’t immediately available, lower priority tasks such as Landing Zone (LZ) preparations were conducted. When immediate air strikes were called, nearby aircraft with an appropriate weapon load would be scrambled from their base and often in order to keep the enemy’s heads down in the interim, the OV-10s with their four sponson mounted 7.62mm machine guns would fire them while waiting for the strike aircraft before firing White Phosphorus (WP) target marking rockets. Alternatively, the FAC would call out for anyone available with “snake and nape”, i.e. 500lb Mk 82 high drag bombs and napalm.

Fighter aircraft could arrive on the scene in III Corps, having been unable to drop their ordnance further south in IV Corps (Mekong Delta region) where a low cloud layer may have built up, thus prohibiting dive bombing attacks. With their level bombing profile, RAAF No. 2 Squadron Canberras could fly underneath this cloud layer to drop their bombs, providing they pulled up from 1,200 above ground level to avoid self-damage from the exploding ordnance.

Hung ordnance was a potential hazard in the OV-10 with its STOL (short take-off and landing)

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capability as reverse thrust at 70 knots could possibly see a loose rocket skimming down the runway from the sponson-mounted pods. Consequently in that area of operations the routine was to fire off unspent rockets into a beached Japanese cargo vessel to the east of Vung Tau which came ashore during a severe storm in 1968.

“...Canberra bombers had an advantage over dive bombing strike aircraft in that they could fly beneath the cloud layers, their extended race-track bombing pattern was an annoyance as the FAC would need to clear artillery...”

While 2 Squadron Canberra bombers had an advantage over dive bombing strike aircraft in that they could fly beneath the cloud layers, their extended race-track bombing pattern was an annoyance as the FAC would need to clear artillery for up to 10 miles around the target as the Canberras moved into bombing position. There was also a large time gap between bomb drops as well.

Generally 700-800 close air support sorties were conducted in South Vietnam each day. On Tuesday 3 March 1970, Graham controlled an afternoon mission flown by his RAAF colleagues from No.2 Squadron based at Phan Rang, with the call sign “Magpie 71”, the pilot being Pilot Officer **Barry Carpenter**, accompanied by navigator/bomb-aimer Flight Lieutenant **Bob Howe**, in Canberra bomber A84-247.

The target location was 135 degrees 28 nautical miles from TACAN Channel 73 (Bien Hoa), less than 10 miles north-west of Luscombe Field and the mission was tasked as a Landing Zone Preparation (LZ Prep) with Viet Cong known to be in the area. The temperature was hot and bombing runs were subjected to quite bumpy turbulence making it difficult for the crew to keep the Canberra steady enough for bomb release.

Many years later Graham recalled that this airstrike was a memorable one because the US Army had called for the LZ Prep mission at exactly the same time that they had tasked an Iroquois UH-1 (Huey) insertion of friendly troops at the same location. He had cleared the Aussie crew for a run-in at normal operating altitude of 3,000' above the ground, when the choppers suddenly appeared from nowhere, with no clearance from the FAC and attempted to insert at the target grid. Graham had to hastily tell the Magpie crew to “go through dry”, i.e. not drop any bombs.

The Magpie team had sufficient fuel to be diverted to another target in the same region and dropped their load of six 750lb M-117 bombs successfully, being given a Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA) of 3 estimated KBA (enemy killed by air).

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Somewhat annoyed by this incident, Graham was prompt in calling up the S-3 Air major on his special VHF frequency to tell him what he thought of the mix up. It wasn't the first time that this person had made a mistake – indeed he seemed consistently incapable of using 'air' properly. That evening Graham briefed his Tactical Air Command Post (TACP) FACs on the incident and reiterated that they had to continue trying to educate the S-3 Air and his staff as to the proper way of doing the job.

A sequel to that trip was that one of Graham's USAF FAC colleagues, who was always a bit “too big for his boots” (because he had done some of his time in an F-100 squadron before he was posted out as unsuitable) reported Graham to the LTCOL Division ALO for 'bad-mouthing the American fighting man'!

When Graham explained the near disaster that could have occurred, the Colonel apologized and said “let's just say that some of our people have thin skins”. That was the end of the matter and the particular FAC became the SLJO (Shitty Little Jobs Officer) and did not fly again for the last month of his tour of duty.

366th Units in Viet Nam Shift

HOLLOMAN — Movement of F-4C Phantom and B-57 Canberra units and the opening of a 10,000-foot concrete runway at the Phan Rang air base were announced last week by the Air Force in Viet Nam. Units shifted were Phantom- equipped 389th Tactical Fighter Squadron, formerly of Holloman, from Phan Rang to the Da Nang air base. The Canberra units transferred from Da Nang to Phan Rang.

Concurrent with the transfer, the parent wing designations along with their attached squadrons at the two bases were switched. The 35th Tactical Fighter Wing is now at Phan Rang and the 366th Fighter Wing is now at Da Nang.

Only the Phantom and Canberra aircrews and some support men were physically transferred.

The movement and unit redesignations were part of the Air Force's “bed down” program for its organizations in Viet Nam. The transfer joined the 389th with two sister Phantom squadrons- the 390th and the 480th -at Da Nang, the Air Forces most northern major air base in Viet Nam.

The newly completed runway at Phan Rang is capable of handling the largest transports and faster jet fighter operating in this combat zone.

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Col. George S. Weart, 46, of Chicago, the 35th commander, was first to fly a Phantom off the Phan Rang runway to signal its opening and end seven months of operation from an aluminum matting strip. Phan Rang has been used by the Air Force since March when Phantom crews of the 389th arrived from Holloman. (*Alamogordo Daily News, Alamogordo, New Mexico, October 21, 1966*)

AC-47D Gunships



The AC-47D Gunship was a totally new breed of Gooney Bird. This one was mean and could shoot back! In 1963 the USAF held a conference to determine the best aircraft types to effectively defend the villages and hamlets in South Vietnam. Fighter aircraft were reasonably effective, but only during daylight hours, but Charlie always hit you at night and most of the fighter types couldn't put their ordnance on the target accurately enough if the enemy was “in the wire”. What was needed was some type of aircraft that could fly low and slow, at night, and bring accurate fire to bear on the attacking VC.

An Air Force team adopted an old Second World War idea dreamed up by Colonel G. C. McDonald. His idea was to fly a pylon turn, with your weapons firing laterally or sideways. This would bring concentrated and accurate fire onto an enemy force from almost directly overhead. Captain Ron Terry headed the program to develop the side-firing weapons system using a C-47D as the gun platform. In late 1964 Terry's team installed a trio of General Electric SUU-11 A/A Minigun pods in the fuselage of a standard C-47D. Sighting was accomplished through the use of a modified A-1 Skyraider gunsight mounted in the left cockpit window. The test results were amazing! Each pod could deliver 6,000 rounds per minute, for a total of 18,000 rounds per minute with all three guns firing! A one minute burst from all three guns

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could put a bullet in every foot of a football field, end to end and side to side! And it was accurate to within 100 feet of the friendlies!

Combat test of the prototype gunship in South Vietnam were equal to the initial test results, only more so. So much so that the single gunship aircraft and crew were overwhelmed with requests for their fire support. A Stars and Stripes reporter nicknamed the gunship “Puff -The Magic Dragon” because of its awesome sight and roar at night, “it was like a dragon!” Because of the constant eerie night missions, the crews adopted the call sign of “Spooky.” Air Force brass designated the “new” aircraft as an FC-47D for Fighter/Cargo! But the fighter jocks bitched up a storm and Air Force changed the designation to AC-47D for Attack/Cargo.

In early 1965, PACAF ordered an additional four gunships, but General Electric could not supply the mini-gun pods for the conversion. These four aircraft, also designated FC-47D, were modified at Clark AFB in the Philippines for the gunship role with eight to ten .30 caliber M-2 machine guns firing through holes cut in the fuselage side and door. They used the same Mk 20/Mod) gunsight as the mini-gun aircraft. Upon completion they were rushed to South Vietnam where they performed alongside the mini-gun equipped prototype. All five FC/AC-47Ds were assigned to the 4th Air Commando Squadron at Nha Trang. As GE caught up with minigun pod production in 1966, all the M-2 armed gunships were converted to mini-guns.

Although based at Nha Trang, like the EC-47s, the FC/AC-47Ds were rarely at “home plate;”, with detachments of single aircraft at forward bases throughout Vietnam, including Phan Rang AB. By 1967 the minigun pods were being replaced by the GE MXU-47)/A minigun module. The M-470/A module was specifically designed for the gunship missions. It used the same 7.62mm Gatling gun, but it was not mounted directly to a vertical stand. This eliminated the problem of the ten minute reload time for gun pods. Plus the gun barrels were completely out in the open and kept much cooler, they lasted longer. Each FC/AC-47D also carried 45-60 flares, and at least 15,000 rounds of ammunition. They had UHF/VHF, and FM radios to talk to virtually anyone! The gunships were used as flareships, day and night forward air control aircraft, even as “escorts” for Psywar aircraft.

One of the most publicized battles of the Vietnam War was the Battle of Khe Sanh in early 1968. More than 24,000 tactical and 2,700 B-52 strikes dropped 110,000 tons of ordnance in attacks that averaged over 300 sorties per day. During the two and a half months of combat, fighters were in the air day and night. At night, AC-47 gunships kept up constant fire against enemy troops and provided illumination for the base.

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An EC-47Q from the 362nd TEWS on the ramp at Ubon RTAB in December 1972. The EC-47Q had upgraded electronic equipment and was powered by P&W R-2000-4 engines. There are two large blade antennas under the rear fuselage.

Snuffy Smith was one of four C-47D trash haulers that were converted to the gunship configuration during 1965 by installing ten .30 caliber machine guns in the left side of the fuselage. The original designation for the gunship was FC-47D for Fighter-Cargo.



A single casket holding the remains of six airmen on board Spooky 21 that was shot down over Laos, is carried July 9, 2012 by the horse drawn caisson to the burial site at Arlington National Cemetery.

The Mystery of the Spooky 21

Ever since that fateful 1965 Christmas Eve, families never gave up on

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finding its Air Force crew

Ta-oy, Laos — Maj. Derrell Jeffords bounced his roaring Spooky 21 down and off the runway at Da Nang Air Base in South Vietnam. It was just before 7:30 a.m., on Christmas Eve 1965. The big camouflaged belly of his twin-prop AC-47 was easily visible against a blue sky as he banked west.

The cargo plane-turned-gunship was on its way to Laos; its mission was top secret.

Jeffords put the South China Sea his back and the plane lumbered over landscape mimicking the twists and folds of an unmade bed. He and his five-member crew were to return to base in time for a late lunch.

But this was the Vietnam War.

Just over halfway through the flight, at 10:56 a.m., two U.S. planes in the area picked up a UHF radio broadcast: “Mayday, Spooky 21. Mayday.”

Then the plane disappeared, swallowed up in the dense green foliage of the Southeast Asian jungle.

For the next nearly half-century, those left behind had one mission: find and bring home the six crew members.

Besides Jeffords, a 40-year-old pilot from Florence, S.C., the Air Force crew was made up of the navigator, Maj. Joseph Christiano, 43, of Rochester, N.Y.; the co-pilot, 1st Lt. Dennis L. Eilers, 27, of Cedar Rapids, Iowa; and the weapons and ammo gang of Tech Sgt. William K. Colwell, 44, of Glen Cove, N.Y.; Staff Sgt. Arden K. Hassenger, 32, of Lebanon, Ore.; and Tech Sgt. Larry C. Thornton, 33, of Idaho Falls, Idaho.



Derrell Jeffords - Joseph Christiano - Dennis Eilers - William Colwell - Arden Hassenger - Larry Thornton

Two months before, 2-year-old Jeffrey Christiano had clung to the frame of his family’s front door, crying, “Daddy, don’t go!” as he watched his father walk away.

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“Christmas Eve became one of the hardest days of the year.”

As the crew members lifted off that morning, their families back home in the states were preparing for their first Christmas without them. They learned that the plane had vanished that same day. Christmas Eve became one of the hardest days of the year.

THE SEARCH BEGINS

This was what those who began the search for Spooky 21 knew: It had been headed for the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and its crew had never been seen again. That was the essence of what was officially labeled case file 0222.

The case file notes that the initial actions included “extensive searches” in the immediate aftermath, but “subsequent search efforts were terminated on 26 December 1965.”

There was a war on, after all. For years, only rumor surfaced about the plane or its crew. There were stories that the airmen were alive but captive. Some of the wives, not even certain if they were truly widows, quietly hoped their men had simply been captured, and had carved out new lives half a world away. Sherrie Hassenger figured her Arden would have been an asset in Laos, teaching villagers the finer points of woodworking and furniture making.

The U.S. military dutifully tracked down each rumor about the plane but could never substantiate any. Still, the resulting limbo was torture for the families.

By 1982, Christiano’s son, Jeffrey, was an 18-year-old senior wrestling for his high school team in Rochester. The crew had all been declared dead, Jeffrey was hoping to get into the U.S. Air Force Academy, to follow in his father’s footsteps.

DEAD ENDS

Finally, a possible break came on Jan. 19, 1993.

A joint U.S.-Laos People’s Democratic Republic team went to a village in Xekong Province, spoke to villagers about Spooky 21 and surveyed the ground. Still, the result was the same: no information, no wreckage.

A local village chief also stirred optimism at one point during a search for a different missing crew when he said that a two-propeller plane had gone down 5 to 8 kilometers away, close to the Spooky 21 target area. But a subsequent search found nothing.

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In military lingo, the location of the lost crew of Spooky 21 was a classic SWAG: Scientific Wild-Ass Guess.

That’s the term investigators use for figuring out something as unpredictable as where a plane should have crashed when it got shot out of the sky. It was guesswork, backed up by some old data.

It wasn’t until 1995 that a military team scouring a rice paddy in Laos found a small amount of wreckage that could have been from the plane. But the crash site was more than 70 miles from where they’d expected to find it.

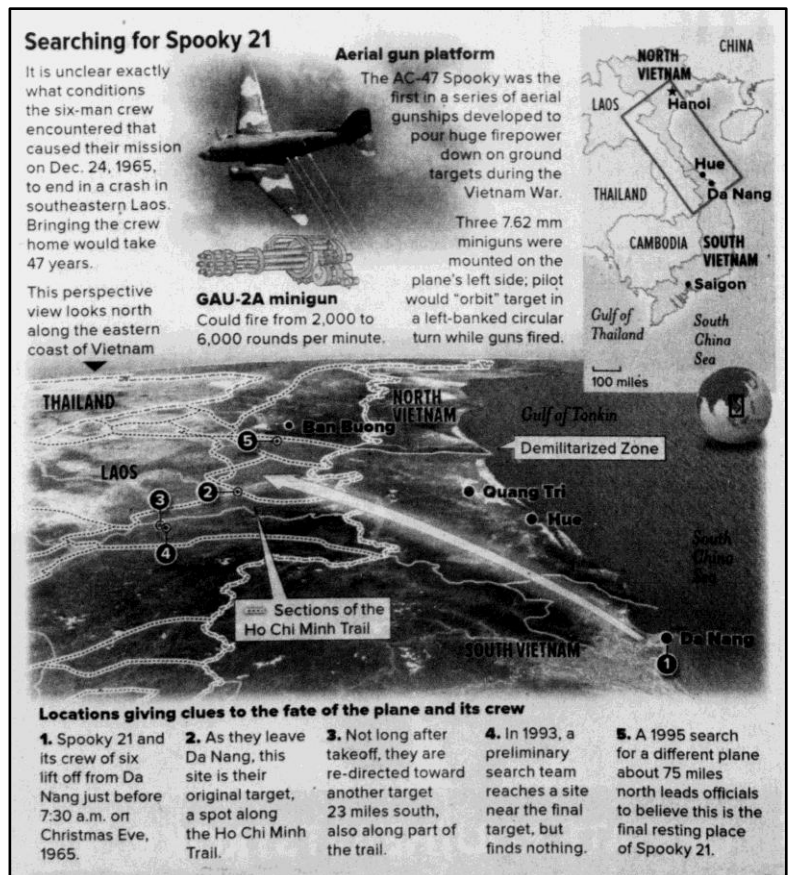
In 1999, after several visits to the rice paddy, search teams called for a full excavation of a site the size of three football fields. Because of red tape, weather and other delays, they didn’t start digging for two more years. Eventually they excavated the rice paddy four times between 2001 and 2011.

Guiding their work was a sacred military trust and the motto of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, known as JPAC, to not stop looking for troops lost on the battlefield “until they are home.”

Such searches were commonplace in Laos. More than 330 U.S. troops disappeared there during the Vietnam War. In its dense jungles and steep hills, even finding a site worth searching was difficult.

In the beginning, the hunt for Spooky 21 relied on villagers who recalled that a large two-propeller plane had crashed in the rice paddy sometime around late 1965. No wreckage was visible, and while telltale evidence doesn’t get up and walk away, the team knew that it could be carried away, piece by piece.

Desperately poor villagers scavenge aircraft wreckage. But Gregory Berg, a forensic



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anthropologist with JPAC out of its Hawaii base, said, “Something is always left behind.”

SO LITTLE

After a decade of excavation, recovery teams came away with a small amount of debris that they hoped were bones. But even if they were, they had no way of knowing if the bones belonged to the crew members.

And what they found wasn't much. Take two hands, cup them together, and then fill them with dry, blackened chips and slivers of material. That's what investigators had to study after the material was taken to a military lab.

Only one piece looked vaguely human — a single, broken tooth.

Forensic anthropologist Robert Maves ran the investigation of the materials once they arrived in Hawaii.

Maves' team determined the debris held bone chips from the back of a skull. “It was time to check to see if we could pull DNA,” Maves said.

FAMILIES WAIT

The military had been looking for the crew from Spooky 21 ever since it disappeared. And Jeffrey Christiano had been waiting his entire life.

Now 49, but only 2 when his father left for South Vietnam, he'd chased his father's ghost throughout his childhood. He married at age 22, seeking what he'd longed for since his father vanished, but it didn't last.

“I just wanted to be intact,” he said. “I'd felt a hole in my childhood. I kept trying, and failing, to fill it. I just really wanted my dad.”

Knowing there were many relatives with similar tales, Maves never let himself forget just how high the stakes were.

But the military didn't have DNA samples of the Spooky 21 crew. The next best thing is to test the DNA of a person's children, as they have the greatest genetic chance of carrying the same traits.

Maves' team arranged for cheek swabs as it prepared to try to extract DNA from the bone chips. But a big obstacle loomed.

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“The report from the field was that the plane was smoking as it fell to earth,” Maves said. “And we could see the chips had been subjected to flames.”

DNA doesn't normally survive heat more intense than 600 degrees. As the lab tried to recover DNA from the chips, “we estimated the fire to have burned at more than 1,000 degrees,” Maves said.

Still, they had to pursue every option. But it turned out to be fruitless.

Without DNA, the JPAC identification team was down to one final shot at identifying at least one crew member: the broken tooth.

Maves had the dental X-rays for each member of the crew. One was missing his first left upper molar and four others had fillings in theirs. Only one showed an intact left upper first molar: Hassenger.

The next step was obvious. Make an X-ray of the broken tooth to try to match it against the exact angles of the molar in Hassenger's dental records.

On Sept. 22, 2011, they compared them. The match was perfect, in the way that any two maps of the same piece of geography would match.

And that was it.

After 46 years of loss and searching, this was success. Hassenger at least, had finally been found.

The identification team then noted that because Spooky 21 had been identified, “both by type of plane and location” — meaning all other AC-47s that had been in that part of Laos had been accounted for — and with Hassenger's identification through dental records, case file 0222 could finally be closed.

“The available evidence suggests that Col. Derrell Jeffords and his five member crew died on 24 December, 1965 when their AC-47 gunship crashed in Savannakhet Province, Laos,” military records state.

But there was one important task still to complete.

HOME AT LAST

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The morning of July 9, 2012, was overcast, in Arlington National Cemetery. The remains of six men were to share a single silver casket. What was found two years ago, almost half a century after they had vanished, would barely fill a coffee mug.

The caisson crested the hill near the gravesite in a light rain, as the Air Force Band played “Going Home.” a piece based on Antonin Dvorak’s New World Symphony. Six airmen walked beside the casket; behind them, 18 family members; two wives, 15 children and one niece. They received American flags, folded into tight triangles.

Jeanne Jeffords, wife of Derrell Jeffords, would later sum up her feelings to friends: “Those six wonderful men are no longer MIA (missing in action), they are finally home.”

THE NEXT CHAPTER

Even now, Jeffrey Christiano says that Christmas Eve, the date his father and the others disappeared so long ago, remains a tough but vital time. His mother always made an extra effort to make sure the kids didn’t dwell in sorrow on what for many is the happiest night of the year.

Now he and his siblings keep that same spirit alive.

Christiano also says that he learned something at the burial that he hadn’t expected.

“ My earliest memory of my father is clinging to the door frame and shouting. ‘Daddy, don’t go!’ as he deployed to Vietnam ,” Christiano says. “But really, I don’t know if those are my memories, or the way my mind interprets what I’ve been told time and again by others about how I reacted as he left that day.

“The day of the funeral was the day he finally met his dad.”

"See, the thing is, my brothers and sisters, they were older. They knew my dad. They knew what he smelled like, what he looked like. They knew what made him smile and what made him angry. They knew him, I didn’t, or at least I don’t remember knowing him. So people ask me if the burial was finally closure for me, if it helped me put an end to the story of me and my dad.

“But that’s not it, July 9, 2012, was the day we finally met, really. It wasn’t closure. After 47 years, it was the beginning of my story with my dad.”

(Most of this story is from the Syracuse Post Standard, Syracuse, New York, May 26, 2013 with graphics from other sources.)

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In Memory of Shadow 76



LtCol Bernard Knapic (KWF)

Maj Moses Alves (KWF)

SSgt Abraham Moore (KWF)

SSgt Ellsworth Bradford (KWF)

Maj Jerome Rice (KWF)

Capt John Hathaway (KWF)

Survivors
Gale Jones, Gunner
John Lelle, Gunner
Bill Slater, Head Gunner

IN MEMORY OF SHADOW 76

May their souls rest in peace

An AC-119 52-5907 gunship, radio call sign Shadow 76, crashed as it was taking off from Tan Son Nhut when an engine failed and caught fire. With all its armament and ammunition together with a full fuel load the single-engined performance of the AC-119G was insufficient to enable it to stay airborne. Shadow 76 crashed into a house off the end of the runway killing a Vietnamese civilian.

Other Facts:

- Incident occurred on Saturday, 11 October 1969, 7:30 P.M.
- The fourth member of the crew that survived was a Vietnamese Air Force member
- The left engine caught fire and the aircraft went into a sharp left turn and crashed 500 yards to the left of the west runway in a rice paddy, and burst into flames.
- SSgt Ellsworth Bradford was an aerial photographer with the 600th Photo Squadron
- Maj. Jerome Rice was the Night Observation Scope (NOS) operator
- Lt. Col. Knapic was a standout basketball player from Duke University

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Order of the Constipated Chameleon

Submitted to Facebook by
Mark Burch the son of Captain
Joe Burch



Captain Joseph D. (Toenails) Burch distinguished himself during the period 1 May 1967 to 26 April 1968, by his contributions to 7th Army Signal Corps, Australian Air Force and Vietnamese Nationals. Some of his notable contributions to our sister service and allies consisted of aiding in the utilization of vehicles, and redistribution of food, beverages and equipment. Contributions to Vietnamese nationals (of the opposite sex) consisted of personal management, provider, interpreter, and companion. His contributions to his unit included the ground work for a new system whereby two persons can do the work of one. He did this without effort on his part. He was also instrumental in the replacement of three multi-purpose telephones with a thirteen position system which would be impressive to such important military men as Generals Washington, Lee, and Grant. For his outstanding accomplishments, Captain Burch is hereby appointed as a lifelong member of the Honorable Order of the Constipated Chameleon.

Serving Our Country



Capt. **Peter M. Lynch** 3rd, whose parents live at 13 E. Langhorne Ave., Haverford Township, has been decorated with the Air Force Distinguished Flying Cross for exceptional achievement in Vietnam. Lynch was cited for action as commander of a C-123 Provider aircraft while

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completing a combat essential resupply mission at Katum Airfield. He assisted ground forces in directing their fire at enemy gun emplacements and landed his aircraft under fire. Lynch successfully delivered urgently needed cargo without sustaining battle damage or injury to his crew. The medal was presented at Phan Rang Air Base where Lynch is a C-123 instructor pilot. He is a graduate of Msgr. Bonner High School and St. Joseph's College. He was commissioned following completion of the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program in 1964. (*Delaware County Daily Times, Chester, Pennsylvania, June 30, 1969*)



IN VIETNAM — Sgt. **Gregory R. Claar**, son of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Claar of Williamsburg Rd, recently spent a 13-day furlough with his parents. He spent two years at Ramey AFB, Puerto Rico, and following furlough went to Vietnam, where he is serving at Phan Rang. While here he and his mother spent a couple days with brother and family, Mr. and Mrs. Larry Claar and son Reggie of Newburgh, N.Y. (*Altoona Mirror, Altoona, Pennsylvania, March 25, 1969*)

Sergeant **Robert W. Wright**, son of Mr. and Mrs. Lee O. Wright, Goltry, is on duty at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam. Sgt. Wright, a supply inventory specialist, is assigned to a unit of the Pacific Air Forces. A graduate of Goltry High School, he attended Oklahoma State University and Northern Oklahoma Junior College. The Sergeant's wife, DeAnna, is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. LeRoy Stauffer, of Burlington. (*Ardmore Daily Ardmoreite, Ardmore, Oklahoma, April 6, 1969*)

Staff Sgt. **James D. Bulen**, son of Mr. and Mrs. James L. Bulen of 4512 22nd, Lubbock. is a member of the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam, that has been honored by the Vietnamese Armed Forces. The 35th has received the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Palm for its contribution to the military forces and local citizenry of the country. The wing which operates F- 100 Super Sabre fighter bombers, was cited for flying more than 53,000 missions during a two year period in support of U.S. and Vietnamese ground operations. The 35th was also recognized for its community service programs which included establishing a medical dispensary for treatment of villagers and orphans in the area. The sergeant is a 1965 graduate of Lubbock High School. (*Avalanche Journal, Lubbock, Texas, May 28, 1971*)

Airman 1C. **Jerome W. Schmidt Jr.**, son of USAF Chief M.Sgt. and Mrs. Jerome W. Schmidt, Clovis, N.M.. is a member of the 14th Special Operations Wing in Southeast Asia that earned the Presidential Unit Citation. Airman Schmidt, assigned at Phan Rang AB, Vietnam, is aircraft

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mechanic with the wing which has received the highest U.S. organizational award for its performance as the only USAF unit of its kind in the combat theater. The J4th is headquartered at Phan Rang and operated from nine major locations in Southeast Asia. Wing aircrews fly seven types of aircraft. (*Avalanche Journal, Lubbock, Texas, May 28, 1971*)

AIC LONNIE SIGWORTH AT CARSWELL AFB FORT WORTH, Tex. - U. S. Air Force AIC **Lonnie L. Sigworth**, son of Mr. and Mrs. Donald O. Sigworth, 113 East Ave., Long Beach, Miss., arrived for duty at Carswell AFB Tex. Airman Sigworth is a hospital corpsman assigned to the 7th Hospital Squadron. He was previously served at Phan Rang AFB, Vietnam. He is a 1968 graduate of Long Beach High School. (*Biloxi Daily Herald, Biloxi, Mississippi, September 19, 1970*)



Doug's Comments: I hope that you enjoyed this newsletter. If you have a story to tell, please write it down and send to me so that your unique experiences can be saved for posterity. As promised the next issue will again be all autobiographies of those serving at Phan Rang. If you haven't already sent yours in, do so now. This newsletter was composed and all graphics by Douglas Severt unless otherwise stated. To see a list of all previous newsletters click [here](#). To unsubscribe to Phan Rang News,

mailto:mailto:dougsevert@cox.net and put 'unsubscribe' in subject line.