Subject: Today in SEA History, 14 November (AC-130A, serial number 55-0044, Prometheus)

Today in SEA History 14 November 1971

In the spirit of “Gallows Humor” from the war in SEA, comes the following story of AC-130A, serial number 55-0044 (aircraft nickname: Prometheus operating under the call sign "Spectre 21") post-midnight of Sunday, 14 November 1971.

FYI: Tragically, four months after this battle damage occurred over the HCM trail, Prometheus (then-call sign “Spectre 13”) was shot down by a mobile PAVN SA-2 SAM in the Tchepone AOR with a loss of all aircrew members (including my friend then-Capt Dick Castillo, an infrared-IR operator who I served with previously in Air Training Command at Randolph AFB, TX).

Then-Capt Charles E. Baertl was the aircraft commander of “Spectre 21” on the 14 November 1971 mission and wrote about his experience in The Legacy of Daedalus – War Stories and Flying Tales, “Prometheus Inbound” (page 254).

Lt Col (Ret.) Baertl referred to his trusty steed as a “Fabulous Four Engine Fighter” assigned to the 16th Special Operations Squadron, 8th Tactical Fighter Wing …nicknamed The Wolf Pack by a previous wing commander, then-Colonel Robin Olds.

AC-130A SN 55-0044 Prometheus

Note from then-SSgt Tom Combs, crew chief:

“Here's a picture of 044. If you look close you will see three (red) stars above the crew entrance door. They were there when I took over in October 1971 and no one seemed to know what they represented. There's a mystery for you.”

Taken from Lt Col Baertl’s chronicle of Gunship mission #64:

As fate would have it, then-Capt Baertl was off-duty and just sitting down for dinner when the squadron scheduler intercepted Baertl with the news that his roommate was DNIF and he was being tasked as pilot/aircraft commander for that night’s “Spectre 21” combat mission. After mission planning @ 0005 hrs. takeoff departure and dry boresight/sensor alignment over Ubon field, “Spectre 21” proceeded east to the Steel Tiger AOR.

Prometheus had just begun to roll into a left bank firing-circle to engage enemy trucks with their twin 40mm Bofors along the HCM trail (Delta 96) east of the Bolovens Plateau in southern Laos. However, it appears a “nine-level” PAVN AAA gunner fired first, striking the Herk’s #4 propeller with 57mm AAA fire. The #4 prop separated, striking the #3 prop that also separated, resulting in a two-engine, asymmetric Herk gunship:

Heavily battle damaged and having lost 2,500' of altitude over enemy held territory, their AC-130A needed to lose gross weight …immediately to make it back home. Crossing back over the 6k' Bolovens Plateau was not possible. The "A" model gunship couldn't jettison fuel. Then, the enlisted illuminator operator (IO) shouted out an idea on the aircraft's intercom: "How about dumping the ammo?"

"Roger that! Do it!" replied A/C Capt Baertl. So the indispensable Spectre aerial gunners rose to the task. However, boys-being-boys they thought they could have a little fun on the way home by seeing how far out into the slipstream they could string a belt of 20mm ammo through the open aft cargo door of their gunship. Who knows? Consider their present position and IFE situation over Steel Tiger! But as the 20mm belt whipped in the slipstream, it began to build up a charge of static electricity and some of the rounds started "cooking-off". Realizing their horseplay could result in shooting themselves down; the gunners of Prometheus immediately jettisoned all of their 20mm ammo overboard.

But the fun didn't end when the 20 mike-mike went out the back ramp. Then the gunners decided to make their own bombs (a.k.a. Improvised Explosive Devices - IEDs) by tying some of their 40mm Bofors shells around flares, igniting the flares and tossing the homemade bombs overboard to impact on the HCM trail, denying some of their UXO to our clever/innovative PAVN adversaries.

In all, the gunners jettisoned about 7,500 lbs. of ammo and loose cargo allowing Prometheus to climb to 7K feet MSL. The AC-130 RTB'd by flying around the north slope of the Bolovens (below the Amber Airway that Scatback flew daily).

Twenty minutes out of Ubon, "Spectre 21" contacted "Moonbeam", the EC-130 ABCCC that orbited continuously over Laos – and declared an IFE. The 16th SOS SOF relayed (through "Moonbeam") a request to "Spectre 21" to explain themselves …why had they shut down two engines? "Spectre 21" replied: "Tell the SOF we shut down those two engines because there aren't any props on them." FYI: The SOF's reply is not quotable in our family-friendly Today in SEA History series! Then they contacted "Lion" Approach Control (Det. 3, 621st TCS) and Ubon Tower.

Overhead Ubon field, and fearing an overheated bearing in their #2 engine would soon let-go on downwind (resulting in a nearly impossible single-engine approach & landing) "Spectre 21" flew a wide base leg and landed successfully.

Post flight shutdown: Flight Engineer, MSgt Larry D. Stauty commented: "Gentlemen, that was a routine, two-engine landing."

The “public affairs version” from the Ubon base newspaper:

Spectre Airborne Emergency
Aircrew Masters Time, Gravity and Distance

By Capt. A. J. Cerchione

Phantom Flyer, November 26, 1971

Ubon RTAFB, 16th SOS

The black of night reached in past the aircraft's windshield and halted at the edge of the instrument panel an AC-130 nicknamed "Prometheus." On that panel, registered on dials and muted red lights, is a continuously unfolding summary of the health of the aircraft. At the head of this complex nervous system, sits the aircraft commander (AC), serving as an interface between neural and electronic reporting systems. On that panel, also, is captured more than transient evidence of fuel used or of miles covered, for a perfectly flown aircraft is a testament to the skills of an entire wing. When some unexpected deviation occurs, however, it is only the men in the left- or right-hand seats who can reestablish equilibrium. The meters merely query and record; the pilots assess and act.

Piloted and crewed by the men of the 16th Special Operations Squadron, "Prometheus" was 40 minutes away from Ubon RTAFB last week when an in-flight emergency occurred. At 1:45 a.m., a loud thump was heard throughout the aircraft. The instrument display before the aircraft commander, Captain Charles Baertl, remained unchanged except for the altimeter: it extravagantly reeled off 2,000 feet of altitude. The second hand of the instrument panel clock now took on special significance for the crew.

The intercom momentarily erupted in noisy confusion and Captain Baertl invoked strict voice discipline. Composure regained, status reports began to come in: a ball of fire and sparks had been seen whipping past the right side of the aircraft. Baertl, at this point, decided to feather the props on the right-hand side. The gauges on the center instrument panel indicated that the engines were still running. Master Sergeant Larry D. Stauty, flight engineer, visually checking the situation over, reported back that the props were gone; the crew was ordered to jettison several tons of excess cargo and equipment. Between damage assessment and the

accomplishment of corrective action, the aircraft had lost another 1,000 feet. But the struggle between dead weight, gravity and available engine power had shifted in favor of the AC-130 and its crew. The aircraft slowly regained some of its lost altitude and headed for home. It was still touch and go. The disinterested clock's second hand had completed eight revolutions from the time the props had been shattered to the moment equilibrium was frantically restored.

In the rear of the aircraft, Major Jack McDonald's mind played with the unpleasant thought of "spending a night in a tree" and with the potential inconvenience of it all. "I've got 21 days to my DEROS and this is a hell of a thing to happen," he mused.

Captain Baertl, equally interested in staying out of the trees, could not avoid the ironic thought that he was just filling in for the regular aircraft commander, Captain Wilbur W. East, who was sick. He was a "Guest AC" for this flight. A man given to happier thoughts, though, he was grateful that he had flown the AC-130 on two engines before during emergency simulation missions.

Pilot and co-pilot, Captain Dennis A. Carlson, began to plan ahead. They had to deal with their looming problem of setting an 110,000-pound aircraft down on a runway, for they no longer enjoyed the luxury of slowing their landing roll with reversed props. Nearing home and into their final approach another problem arose: a third engine was starting to act up and it affected available power.

Touching down at last, Captain Baertl gingerly tried reversing the prop on his remaining inboard engine, but the maneuver caused the aircraft to drift 25 feet off the runway. Instead, he increased pressure on the brakes and steered for the centerline. When it finally came to a halt, the crew scrambled to evacuate the aircraft and permit the fire department to attend to "Prometheus" smoking brakes.

It was left to the flight engineer to sum it all up: "Gentlemen that was a routine two-engine landing." In the cockpit, the instrument panel was dark; the indicator needles relaxed; and only the hands of the clock continued their endless rounds.

Acknowledgments: Many thanks to my friends, former-SSgt Tom Combs, AC-130A crew chief; former-Sgt Gene Ponce Jr., webmaster - Ubon RTAFB historical site http://us-mil-thai.tripod.com/index.html for providing the photos and reference material for this article. Additional thanks go to Col (Ret.) Robert H. (Bob) Karre, editor - The Daedalus Flyer http://www.daedalians.org/the_daedalus_flyer.html for providing me with access to The Legacy of Daedalus – War Stories and Flying Tales.