



COURTESY AIR FORCE ART PROGRAM

Commando Hunting Over Laos:

Spectre Gunships in Action

Air Force AC-130 crews sustained 14 KIA in two separate shoot downs in 1972, making them that service's largest hostile losses in single actions of the Vietnam War.

Here is the story of the 16th Special Operations Squadron in the early 1970s as it interdicted Communist movement along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

by Tim Dyhouse

In the early evening of March 28, 1972, at Ubon Royal Air Force Base in Thailand, U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Sidney Terry received an unexpected order: He would be replaced on that night's AC-130 gunship mission by fellow airman Staff Sgt. Edwin Jack Pearce.

Terry, who had only been at Ubon for a couple months, says he didn't know Pearce that well but does recall that the staff sergeant had won quite a bit of money in a poker game earlier that day.

Scheduled for a "four or five hour" flight hunting enemy



traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail in neighboring Laos, Pearce and the rest of the 14-man crew of the AC-130 gunship Spectre 13, nicknamed *Prometheus*, took off in the darkness at Ubon, where they were supposed to return in the morning.

"They never came back the next day," said an emotional Terry, a life member of VFW Post 1432 in Salina, Kan. "Rarely does a day go by that I don't think about that flight. To this day, it puts a lump in my throat because I'm here, and they're not."

◀ Left: *AC-130E Gunship Serenade in the Moonlight* by Charles Ball. As dramatically depicted here, AC-130 aircraft wreaked havoc on NVA transports at night along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos in the early '70s.

All 14 men were killed when the *Prometheus* was shot down. It tied for the worst single loss of life suffered by Air Force gunships working the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

'Airborne Tanks' Patrol over Laos

During the later years of the Vietnam War, attacking enemy traffic on that route in a relatively slow moving AC-130 was indeed a hazardous, albeit necessary, duty.

Laos was officially a neutral country during the war, but its fractured coalition government and the aggressive Communist Pathet Lao made a mockery of that status. A separate agreement on Feb. 21, 1973, put a cease-fire in place there a month after Vietnam.

The Pathet Lao-controlled portions of Laos provided the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) a convenient supply route—the Ho Chi Minh Trail—running nearly the length of the country's southeastern panhandle. Winding through 1,700 square miles of steep, mountainous terrain, the trail featured at least four main offshoots into South Vietnam and continued southward into Cambodia.

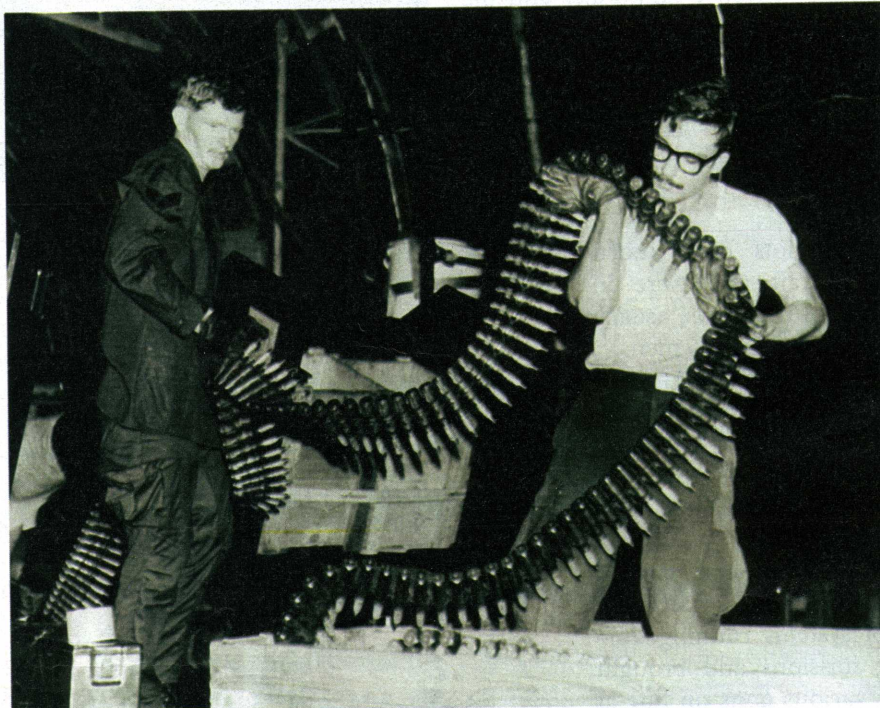
The U.S. Air Force—with help from the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps and Royal

Laotian Air Force—targeted trucks, supply caches, storage bases, trail support structures and even the trail's geographic features. The overall air mission was known as *Operation Commando Hunt*, a series of seven campaigns from November 1968 through March 1972.

During the day, B-52s and fighters attacked the trail. At night, when most traffic moved on the route, the main workhorse was the AC-130 gunship. Known as an "air-



The 16th Special Operations Squadron's insignia.



U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO

▲ These massive belts of armor-piercing 20mm cannon shells represent the smallest caliber ammunition fired by the Air Force AC-130 gunship.



▲ Above: Shown among this AC-130 crew just prior to a mission is Jerry Van Engen, third from the right in the back row. Van Engen was replaced at the last moment on the night of Dec. 21, 1972, when *Spectre 17* was shot down over Laos, losing 14 men.

▶ Right: Van Engen (right) is with Robert Reid who parachuted safely from the *Spectre 11* on June 18, 1972.



PHOTOS COURTESY JERRY VAN ENGEN

borne tank,” the AC-130 was a converted cargo plane highly maneuverable at low speeds. It could spend hours orbiting at about 175 mph above a target while delivering a precisely placed stream of withering fire.

‘Fabulous Four-Engine Fighters’

By 1972, its weapons system featured two Vulcan 20mm cannons, one 40mm Bofors cannon and a 105mm howitzer. This firepower made the gunship an extremely effective tank killer and the scourge of the enemy who ventured onto the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The crews called themselves the “Fabulous Four-Engine Fighters” and the best “truck-killers” in Southeast Asia. Each man had a specific duty.

The pilots commanded the aircraft and were in charge of the crews, usually comprising 11 to 16 men.

Each flight carried four to five navigators, and in addition to plotting a flight’s course, they also ran the gunships multiple night sensors.

Flight engineers readied the aircraft for inspections, kept systems running during missions and brought the various guns on line at the pilot’s direction.

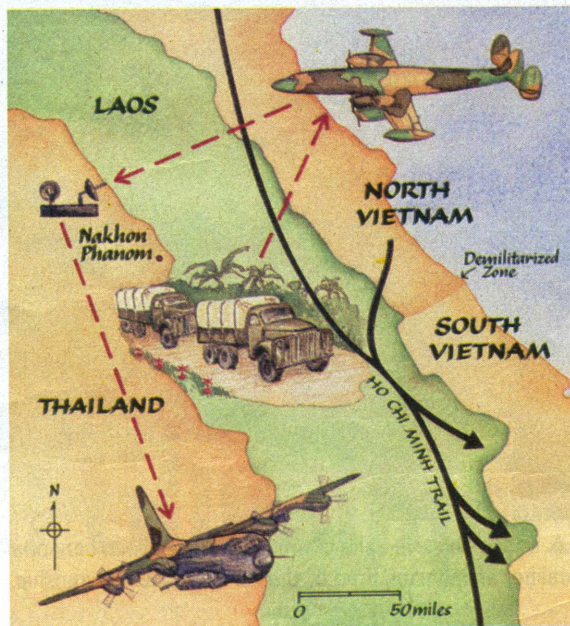
Illuminator operators (IOs) were in charge of the large light at the back of AC-130s used to illuminate Special Forces camps during close air-support missions. They spent most of their time lying flat on their bellies looking out over the open ramp calling out enemy anti-aircraft fire. As the NVA began to use surface-to-air missiles, the IOs used flares to divert them.

Gunners manned and maintained the guns and “shoveled brass” (cleaned up the expended shells that “flew everywhere” as the guns fired at a rate of 6,200 rounds per minute) after the missions. Each flight usually carried five or six gunners.

Photographers flew on every mission and took photos while over the targets. As they returned to base, they also helped gunners shovel brass. Once



COURTESY DON NEWTON



MAP BY JOAN PENNINGTON, PENWORX@COX.NET

on the ground they turned over their film, which was processed and sent to Washington every day.

The first AC-130s began arriving in the war zone in 1967 and within a year, the Air Force had enough to form a squadron. On Oct. 30, 1968, it activated the 16th Special Operations Squadron—part of the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing—at Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand.

Over the next four years, the AC-130, more commonly known as the “Spectre” based on its squadron’s call sign, would become the most deadly night-flying weapons system in Southeast Asia.

Equipped first with the AC-130A model gunship and later with the more advanced AC-130E/H models, Spectre

▲ Members of a gun shop crew at Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base from 1971-72 take a break in front of two 40mm cannons. They are Ron Goings, Lyle Milliman, Don Newton and Mike Hamann.

◀ AC-130 gunships operated over Laos’ perilous Ho Chi Minh Trail, destroying NVA trucks with deadly precision.

aircrews flew the latest in the family of gunships, including the famous AC-47 Spooky, AC-119G Shadow and the AC-119K Stinger.

Nicknamed the “Great Laotian Truck Eater,” the 16th SOS destroyed or damaged an average of 10,000 trucks per year on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Additional roles included defense of hamlets and fire bases, supporting troops in contact with the enemy, escorting convoys and illuminating battlefields.

Playing a ‘Deadly Game’

For AC-130 crews, those battlefields lay thousands of feet below in the thick jungles along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The trail itself was actually a network of roads that totaled more than 2,700 miles in length. Richard L. Stevens, author of *The Trail: A History of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Role of Nature in the War in Viet Nam*, wrote that it was “a massive labyrinth of hundreds of paths, roads, rivers, streams, passes, caves and underground tunnels burrowing through mountains, forests and into the earth.”

To get to those battlefields from Ubon, Spectre crews had to “cross the fence,” or fly over the Mekong River, which

ordered most of the crew to bail out near the airfield before attempting to land.

As the plane slammed to the ground, the starboard wing was sheared off and the aircraft caught fire. The pilot was able to escape, but the flight engineer was not and died in the incident.

Less than a year later, on April 22, 1970, an AC-130—call sign Adlib 1 and called *War Lord*—and two fighters patrolled over Route 96A some 25 miles east of Saravan in southern Laos when the gunship took 37mm ground fire.

The flak caused the port wing to catch fire and one crewman managed to bail out. The other 10 airmen were killed in the crash near Ban Tang Lou.

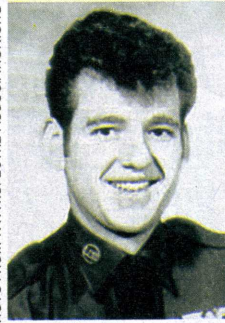
Worst Year of the War for AC-130s

For nearly two years, AC-130 crewmen managed to avoid hostile fatalities, but that changed in 1972 when 40 members lost their lives in shoot downs.

“It was clearly the worst year of the war for the AC-130 gunship,” said Charles A.

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PHOTO FROM WWW.SPECTRE-ASSOCIATION.ORG



Master Sgt. James Kenneth Caniford was among the missing crewmen of the *Prometheus* that was shot down on March 29, 1972. His remains were eventually identified in March 2008.

Spectre Gunships in Action

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Berninger, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel who flew 133 missions with the 16th SOS between February 1972 and January 1973. "Although the Vietnam War was supposedly winding down during 1972, the air war was still very active along the Ho Chi Minh Trail."

During Berninger's time at Ubon, the *Prometheus* went down March 29 over Laos. As the aircraft approached the town of Muang Phine, some 35 miles

west of Khe Sanh, an SA-2 missile fired from a newly established SAM site in Laos struck the plane. The *Prometheus* burst into flames, crashed and exploded.

"It was in big orange flames," said former Lt. Col. Stephen J. Opitz, a fire control officer, recalling what a fellow co-pilot told him about the crash. "I guess it looked like the size of a football field just arching down the sky. They took a direct hit. They were loaded with fuel and it turned into a big orange ball."

Opitz, who earned the nickname

"magnet ass" after surviving three SAM attacks, described the sound of a missile exploding overhead as "like a freight train and a thump." His Spectre 15 avoided a SAM attack in April 1972 around Tchepone, allowing the crew to continue hunting trucks, destroying two.

A search-and-rescue (SAR) task force found no survivors of the *Prometheus* crash. The Pathet Lao claimed it had shot down the plane.

The father of Staff Sgt. James

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Kenneth Caniford, who was killed on the *Prometheus*, told the *Frederick (Maryland)-News Post* about his feelings after his son's remains were identified in March 2008.

"When you're in MIA status, there is never any closure," Jim Caniford said. "That's the most difficult part. We will die without knowing what happened to our son. You have to comprehend the immensity of what this does in a family's life. The forgotten people in all of this are the wives, the brothers, the sisters."

'The Whole World was Orange'

Less than three months after the *Prometheus* went down, on June 18, 1972, another SAM found its mark. This time the missile was an SA-7, and it was the first time that type of missile had brought down a gunship of the 16th SOS.

The plane, Spectre 11, was patrolling near the A Shau Valley about 25 miles southwest of Hue. The missile hit the No. 3 engine, and the wing blew off moments later when a fuel tank exploded.

"At that point, the aircraft went into a flat spin, and I was immediately plastered up against the 40mm ammo rack," said former Capt. Gordon Bocher, who was serving as the fire control officer on the flight. "I could see other crewmembers plastered against the sides of the fuselage, too. That type of centrifugal force makes your body feel like it weighs about 2,000 pounds. There was really no hope of doing anything."

Bocher, of Stephens City, Va., says "everything was on fire and the whole world was blazing orange" inside the plane as it continued its death spiral toward the ground. Suddenly, Bocher says "everything went bright to black, as I guess I passed out. The next thing I knew, I wasn't hot anymore and I could see trees."

The VFW life member remembers pulling the ripcord on his parachute, which was open "only for about five seconds" before he hit the trees.

The plane had exploded "into about four pieces," Bocher says a fighter pilot told him. Bocher, 2nd Lt. Robert "Vic" Reid and Staff Sgt. Bill Patterson were the only crew members who were able

to open their parachutes and survive the crash. A total of 12 airmen were killed.

"I'm alive today because I followed the pilot's orders," Bocher said. "Capt. Paul Gilbert's first priority was the safety of his crew, and he sacrificed his life so that we could get out. My son's middle name is 'Paul' in honor of Gilbert's heroism."

Bocher hid in a tangle of tree roots during the night, with an NVA patrol passing within "10 or 12 feet" of him about 2 a.m. "I even called in an airstrike on my own position," he said. "But the SAR guy told me to sit tight and keep my mouth shut."

Bocher, Reid and Patterson were all rescued by SAR helicopters—dodging intense enemy ground fire that delayed the extractions—the next day.

While he was trapped inside the plane, Bocher says "I knew I was dead, but I became very peaceful. I was with the people I wanted to be with. As far as I was concerned the 16th SOS was the best unit in Southeast Asia, and I was proud to serve with those men."

Thor Goes Down

Some six months later, the war's last hostile shoot down of an AC-130 happened. On Dec. 21, 1972, Spectre 17, nicknamed *Thor*, found three enemy trucks near Ban Laongam, 25 miles west of Saravan, Laos. As it was firing at targets from an altitude of 7,800 feet, it was hit by 37mm fire. The aircraft exploded—most likely a result of the flak hitting a fuel tank—and crashed in flames.

"I was the first person on the scene for the crashed Spectre 17," said H. Ownby, a forward air controller working under the call sign Raven 26. "I have dealt with the tragedy that night, the next day and all the years since then. There were three other Raven forward air controllers involved that night and the next day."

Of the 16 men onboard, 14 were killed, including a pilot from the 497th Tactical Fighter Squadron who was along for the ride. Two crewmen bailed out and were rescued within hours.

Jerry Van Engen was originally assigned to the flight, but was replaced by 1st Lt. Delmar Ernest Dickens, who was killed.

"That night will live in my memory

for the rest of my life," said Engen, who served at Ubon from February 1972 to February 1973. "I do not know why I was spared and Delmar Dickens was taken when he replaced me on that flight."

Heroism on Display

Missiles and anti-aircraft fire were constant threats for AC-130 crews, but sometimes the airmen's heroism averted tragedy. The day after the *Prometheus* went down, March 30, 1972, Capt. Waylon O. Fulk was piloting Spectre 22 above Laos when he made a third pass over an enemy convoy that his gunners had shot up. A barrage of 37mm and 57mm fire hit the plane, ripping into the right wing and right side of the fuselage.

As he steered away from the ground fire, Fulk ordered his 14-man crew to prepare to bail out. He then notified other planes in the area and radar stations of his situation. After 13 men had parachuted out safely, Fulk, who had reported the jump site and engaged the autopilot to fly the plane away from enemy territory, joined his illuminator operator at the aircraft's cargo ramp.

Both men exited safely, and the next day all 15 crewmen were picked up—the largest and most successful mass crew rescue of the war. Fulk was awarded the Air Force Cross for his actions.

Without a doubt, the AC-130s flying out of Thailand were effective against the enemy. According to the NVA 377th Air Division history, "Just one hour when AC-130s did not operate over our chokepoints was both precious and rare."

This was, after all, "the crucial struggle of the Vietnam War and one of the most significant encounters in history," said author Richard Stevens.

Jack S. Ballard, author of *Development and Employment of Fixed-Wing Gunships, 1962-72*, summed up the contributions of the flight crews best: "The gunship successes and failures were inseparable from the individuals involved—the indispensable human element."

A permanent reminder of that human sacrifice can be found in Memorial Air Park, Hurlburt Field, Fla. This special memorial reads: "In Memoriam 52 Spectres—16th Special Operations Wing." ★