

Aerial Warfare, The Spectre Unit, **and the U.S. Air Force**

With names like Ghost Rider, The Warlord, The Exterminator, Super Spooky, and the Spectre the United States Air Force had the deadliest units of the Vietnam War era. Most people enjoy the speed of an F-16 Fighting Falcon, Northrop F-5, or even the Stealth Bomber that came out in the 1990's. I myself have come to enjoy the beauty and majesty of the AC-130 Gunship. There is no other plane that can carry as much weight, while making a pylon turn, and shooting all its firepower for 360 degrees. I grew up visiting these ladies of the past on various Air Force Bases throughout California, never really knowing what they were actually used for. My grandfather, Ret. Maj. Gerald "Gerry" Harris, navigated these herculean behemoths during the Vietnam War. The Spectre Unit known today has come a long way in aviation history since the canvas covered dual winged, single prop engines of the 1920's and 1930's.

Since the beginning of military air travel, there was only the capability to shoot machine guns from the front or from behind if there was a passenger seat. When the United States joined World War I in 1918, our aviation combat force was called the American Expeditionary Force (AEF). When the war ended, and not knowing what to do with the air power at the time, they were all rolled over into the Army Air Service (AAS). The AAS in 1926, became a branch of the Army and was named the US Army Air Corps. It would take another sixteen years for technology to take another leap towards progress.

The first to even suggest a side-firing plane was 1st Lieutenant Gilmour McDonald of the 95th US Coastal Artillery in 1942. He was of the opinion that if the Civil Air Patrol pilots could have side-firing machine gun added to their planes for anti-submarine warfare, it would help with the prevention of a possible attack. Nothing came of it. Lt. McDonald also wrote the Research and Development Service Sub-Office proposing the installation of a side-firing bazooka in light aircraft. Again, nothing came of the idea, (Mutza). He never gave up in the idea of side-firing machine guns on planes and their possibilities. Technology continued to progress with bigger and better guns, and our aviation forces changed names and hands a few times. September 18, 1947, the United States Department of the Air Forces was created by the National Security Act of 1947, (Wikipedia). Tensions between the Soviets and the United States started to go downhill, and the newly formed United States Air Force (USAF) had its first testings as its own branch of the service. The USAF created strategically placed bases all over the world from the United States, Great Britain, South Korea, and everywhere in-between. When the Korean War started in 1950, the Far East Air Forces (FEAF) were the first to respond to the invasion by the North Koreans. While the United States was using B-29 Bombers to bomb North Korea, the North Koreans had Soviet-made MiG-15 fighters. The USAF countered with F-86 Sabre jet fighters. It ended up being a campaign to inflict as much damage as possible, including the capital city of Pyongyang using the bombers against the North Koreans and Chinese.

In 1961, Lt. McDonald heard President Kennedy's counterinsurgency directive and decided that it was time to send in his proposal called "Traverse Firing of Rockets and Guns" to the Air Force System Command limited war program, (Mutza). The program was accepting ideas, and McDonald's made it to the right people. His proposal started some test flights out of Eglin AFB, Florida. It was at Eglin AFB that McDonald met Ralph Flexman, the man that was

going to help him further his ideas. Ralph Flexman was an engineer with Bell Aerosystems. He had been taking a special interest in war projects his company was developing. Flexman read McDonald's proposal for the side-firing aircraft and brought it to his colleagues at Bell. In June of 1963, after a lot of different testing on different types of planes, with different guns, and different pilots, Capt. John Simmons flew test missions from Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio. He realized that he could stay fixed on a target while flying a pylon turn. Simmons caught the eye of Air Force top brass, and was given a Convair C-131 to test lateral sighting from a cargo-type plane, and free reign to adjust as he pleased. Eventually mini-guns attached to a 14-inch bomb rack were added, Mod 4 gun sights were installed, and cameras were mounted behind the pilots' seats in the AC-47D. With the "AC" standing for "Attack Cargo", the "AC-47 was powered by a pair of Pratt & Whitney R-1830 Twin Wasp, 14-cylinder radial engines" (Mutzna, p.17). With a maximum speed of 224 mph and a cruising speed of 160 mph, it had a range of 1,600 miles.

With innovative designs proceeding at an all-time rate, the leaders of industry: Boeing, Douglas, Fairchild, and Lockheed were sending in as many Ideas as possible. The proposal for the C-130 Hercules put Lockheed on top. "While the Herc's little brother, the C-119, was call the Flying Boxcar, the C-130's cargo area was the actual dimensions of a railroad boxcar," (Mutzna, p.121). January 1967, Lt. Ron Terry was given the okay to do all the modifications on a C-130 at the Aeronautical Systems Division at Wright-Patterson AFB. Terry and his team landed in Vietnam in September of 1967, to test his C-130.

The Vietnam War had been going on for a number of years when the 16th Special Operations Squadron (16 SOS) "Spectre" was activated at Ubon Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB), Thailand, and assigned to the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing, (Spectre Association). From 1968 to 1969, my grandfather Maj. Harris served with the 16th SOS Spectre. On the 26th of

September 1968, Spectre became battle damaged qualified when it took its first hit from an Anti-Aircraft Artillery (AAA). The Gunship, Spectre, flew its first mission in December of 1968 with F-4 escorts of the 497th Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS). The AC-130 Gunships were loaded with 40mm and 105mm cannons, 25mm Gatling guns, 105mm M102 howitzers, sophisticated sensors, navigation and fire control systems, long-range target detection and identification, and global positioning systems depending on the model. With four Allison T56-A-15 turboprop engines and a speed of 300 mph, it took four officers and eight enlisted to fly these enormous birds. According to Military.com “Gunships destroyed more than 10,000 trucks and were credited with many life-saving close air support missions.” From November 1968 to May 1969, the “Gunships” flew 186 missions, destroyed 415 trucks and damaged 273 more, (Spectre Association). As soon as ground crews heard those turbo-prop engines, they knew that they had support when they saw the mighty AC-130 Spectre flying above.

The Spectre Gunships may have started during the Vietnam War, but there has always been a gunship in every conflict since. October of 1983 the AC-130Hs were over the head of Grenada during operation Urgent Fury. Operation Just Cause was a National Command Authorities-directed into the Republic of Panama, and a complete success for Spectre. Operation Promote Liberty, the pacification of Panama, was the completion of Just Cause on January 14, 1990. Spectre flew close air support and armed reconnaissance missions nightly to point out any Noriega loyalists left. The Gunships didn't have much time to relax, because on September 6, 1990, Spectre had been assigned to the USAF Special Ops Command and being deployed in support of Desert Shield and Desert Storm. At the end of Desert Shield, Spectre was given Operation Eastern Exit. In January 1991, Spectre was standing by in an East African Country to help with a non-combatant evacuation of the American Embassy, (unknown). One of the main

differences between then and now is, then all you had to do was radio to base for support and within 15 – 20 minutes the gunship would be there. The Infantryman in Iraq do not have the same assurances because the AC-130 is tied to a single ground unit for a prescribed period that is usually determined the day prior, according to Gunships Unleashed, (Seifert).

With all the firepower, technology, and all of the innovations there were still losses. According to Pat Carpenter of the Spectre Association, between May 24, 1969 and December 21, 1972 the Spectre unit lost 52 airmen of all ranks and several different aircraft, (Email, 2015). These men are listed on Panels 1W, 2W, 11W, and 24W of the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington D.C.. We have to remember that through every conflict, no matter whether we win or lose, there will always be losses.

I knew growing up how much the “Spectre” meant to my grandfather. He would never talk about the things that went on during his war times, and through my research for this paper I now understand why. I remember watching the AC-130 Gunships as a child, and now as an adult, I see the AC-17 Globemaster’s out of Fairchild AFB, fly over the college in the afternoon. Which just happens to be decommissioned Larson AFB. I can’t help but watch her fly, and think of just how many people it took to get to that point. What would Orville and Wilbur Wright think of what’s flying in the sky now.

To all the men and women in the Gunships flying and protecting us from whatever ever has come or may still come yet, a most sincere Thank you.

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