AIR COMMANDO JOURNAL

A Professional Publication by the Air Commando Association
Dedicated to Air Commandos Past, Present & Future

SPECTRE
AC-130H Model

Eagle Claw

El Salvador

Somalia

Bosnia

Afghanistan

SPECTRE Maintainer

John Chapman
Air Force Cross Recipient

Foreword by Ronald Terry Col (Ret) USAF

Summer 2014

ACA

Vol 3: Issue 2

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Air Commando JOURNAL Summer 2014
Vol 3, Issue 2

4
Foreword *Col (Ret) Ronald Terry*

9
AC-130s in Operation Rice Bowl and Eagle Claw

16
Bield Kirk and Blinking Light

29
Spectre in Bosnia

30
Spirit 03 and the Golden Age of the Gunship

35
The Opening Rounds

ON THE COVER

AC-130H Spectre

Photo donated to the Air Commando Association by Col (Ret) Sherman 'Gene' Eller.

AC-130H aircraft #6568 "Night Stalker" crew.

20
Operation Continue Hope
Somalia 1993-94

5
Chindit Chatter

7
Hotwash

42
The Spectre Maintainer

44
An Everlasting American Legacy

45
CCT John Chapman
at the Battle of Takur Ghar

51
16th SOS Moving Forward

FOREWORD

In August 1967, Capt James Krause (Deceased), Capt James Wolverton (Deceased), Wing Commander Thomas Pinkerton, RAF (Deceased) and yours truly gathered around a drafting table along with design draftsmen and engineers of the Flight Test Modification Shops of the Aeronautical Systems Division, at Wright Patterson Air Force Base, in Dayton, OH. Jim Wolverton and I had just recently returned from Los Angeles, where we were assisting in a special study on Counter-insurgency conducted by the late Maj Gen Gordon P. Seville. The study was chartered by Gen Bernard Shriver, Commanding General of the Air Force Systems Command. Jim Krause (the father of Forward Looking Infrared [FLIR] in the Air Force) had just completed test of our earliest FLIR Sensor and Tom Pinkerton had built our first analog fire control computer. We laid out the design and integration plan of what was to be designated the Gunship II Modification Program. The modification was accomplished on one of the original three C-130 prototypes made available to us. The installation included 4-20mm Gatling guns, 4-7.62mm Gatling guns, FLIR, NOD (Night Observation Device), Beacon Tracking Radar, and the analog computer tying it all together. By this time, the AC-47 which we began deploying three years earlier in Vietnam had achieved an amazing combat record and was in high demand for close support and armed reconnaissance. Our hope was to take this capability to an even higher level of effectiveness and safety for the crews. This hope, which has been fulfilled a thousand times over, is now a matter of record.

The articles in this historic *Air Commando Journal*, on occasion of the retirement of the last of the AC-130H aircraft, describe some of this outstanding record. I am honored to have the opportunity to both congratulate and thank all those who have flown, maintained and provided the logistical support for the: AC-130A, AC-119G, AC-119K and the AC-130 E, H, and U model gunships, over these past six decades. Winston Churchill said of the RAF, "Never have so many owed so much to so few." I think the same could well be said of those who flew and supported the AC-47, AC-119 and the AC-130 Gunships. Thank you, and thank you, and thank you ..... JOB WELL DONE!!!

Ronald William Terry
Col USAF (Ret)

Editor's Note: Col (Ret) Ron Terry is the undisputed father of the gunships beginning with the AC-47. We are very honored to publish his opening remarks along with this issue of the "ACJ" which focuses on the AC-130H.

CHINDIT CHATTER

Recently, in a very moving ceremony at Cannon AFB, the last of the active duty AC- 130H Spectre Gunships was retired. Just as warriors in the past retired their old and trusty war horses, it is time to put these great steeds out to pasture. Some Spectres will go to the "boneyard" at Davis-Monthan AFB and others will assume a noble presence in air parks and museums to preserve the heritage alongside other Air Commando aircraft.

The predecessor to the H-model was first deployed to Southeast Asia in 1966. That story was told in the Summer 2012 issue of *Air Commando Journal* (Vol 1, Issue 4). Thus, the H-model retirement concludes nearly half a century of A and H-model service. Its successors, the U-model and the Whiskey, are ensuring the legacy continues. The AC-130J is now in production and testing. The U, W, and J-models will ensure our nation's SOF will benefit from these most feared and revered weapon systems for the foreseeable future.

This edition of the *Air Commando Journal* is dedicated to the AC-130H and more importantly the magnificent men and women who maintained and flew them. When we announced our intention to make this edition a tribute to Spectre, the response to our call for articles was overwhelming. So much so that we will carry additional articles forward to future issues.

The space limitations of a journal cannot hope to cover the entire history of the Spectre. Thankfully, that effort is taking place as Chief (ret) Bill Walter finishes compiling his book on Spectre as we go to press. He has graciously offered some selections from his draft for this issue. We are also thankful to all the other authors that have given their time freely in helping us produce this edition. We are especially pleased that Col (ret) Ron Terry agreed to compile the foreword. As always we welcome comments and critiques in our "Hot Wash" section. For now, please enjoy this latest edition of the *Air Commando Journal*.

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Hotwash

Winter/Spring 2014 Issue

I always enjoy reading the *Air Commando Journal*. It brings back so many memories from Laos and the folks we knew there. The photo with Heinie, Vang Pao, Ambassador Sullivan, Pappy Pettigrew and Bill Lair was like a flashback! Can't wait to read the articles.

Thank you,
Jody Duncan

Page 49 photo from Spring 2014 - Vol 3, Issue 1

I was afraid that after the editors of the *Air Commando Journal* had gone through the list of present and former AC aircraft they'd run out of material. The latest edition seems to put that to rest. I think they again did a great job. I particularly liked the Laos article. (I recommended that a writer who is working on a SOF in Laos article check it out.) I also like the page 49 picture - having known everyone in it except Gen Vang Pao who I only saw once, briefly. Ambassador Sullivan was in charge in Laos when I was there in '65. Pettigrew was the USAF attache, (Clark Baldwin was the ARMA and my boss), I worked with Bill Lair in the BKK in the early 70s, and I knew Heinie from 1960 onward.

Col (Ret) Scot Crerar

Hi, [contributing author] Harry Bright just sent me a copy of the Winter/Spring 2014 issue of the *Air Commando Journal* with his article about my father, Col William A. Jones III (Medal of Honor recipient). It's so wonderful to have our Dad remembered even after all these years. Our family really appreciates it! I am hoping I can order a few more issues to send to my sisters and daughters. Can you please help me?

Elizabeth Hart Jones

Just received the Winter/Spring 2014 issue of ACJ, more great reading by an excellent ACJ staff. Many stories I've never heard while I worked in the ACA office back in the early 90s as secretary. Keep up the great work!

Dan d'Errico ACA L-1259

I saw the letter from Debra Duffy (Deken) in the latest Journal. I have a couple of pictures and remembrances of Lt Col Deken that I'd be happy to share with her. At the time I was an enlisted Combat Controller assigned to Waterpump from Mar 72 through May 75 (with Lt Col's Rhuman, Aldersen, and Deken). I remember Lt Col Deken well - he supported our CCT. We were a group of enlisted guys without a CCT officer assigned. He was a great Detachment commander as we transitioned from Det 1, 56 SOW to MACTHAI/TLD. Please forward my contact information to Ms. Duffy.

Best regards,
Maj (Ret) John Koren, USAF
ACA Life Member
Euless, TX

I received your letter saying the postal service "offed" me, I'm still in the same place and still get mail every day. So this life member is still alive and well. I should have suspected something when I didn't get the last issue about the Talons.

Dennis the latest issue is great, really enjoyed it since I spent many days and nights in Northern Laos sitting Jolly Green alert at Lima Site 36, 59, 20 and 20 alternate or 98 in 1965-66. Knew Gen Vang Pao, Pop Buell, Father Bourchard and the customers.

Sincerely,
Forest (Woody) Kimsey

Dear Col Barnett,

I served with the 309th Air Commando Squadron in Vietnam in 1964-65. While there, E.S. Van Inwegen, Brig. Gen, USAF (Ret) joined our squadron as a young officer. We have remained good friends over the past 50 years and recently we were talking about what a first class magazine the ACA Journal has become. We congratulate you as editor for publishing such a superb product.

R.C. Doc Weaver
Santa Fe, NM

ANG Role in the Air Commando World

Are there any plans to perhaps do an article on the role the Air National Guard played as part of the 1st Air Commando Wing (ACW) during the early to mid sixties? As a member of the WV ANG during that time we were attached to the 1st ACW at Hurlburt and in pursuit of that role flew HU-16, U-6, U-10, and C-119 aircraft. We also worked with the Army special forces counter insurgency operators throughout the south eastern US (Ft. Bragg primarily) as well as supporting operational training in Panama and other areas.

Although never called to active service, we did fly the first pathfinder mission to Europe in 1967 crossing the North Atlantic Sea in a Southeast Asia camouflage painted C-119, landing at Alconbury RAF base in England and then on to Sembach Air base in Germany

where we worked with paratroopers from the German Army. Our unit, the 130th ACS and I believe another unit in Maryland, were prepared to go if called. Although the WV unit has long since transitioned to another role, those of us who served during that time were extremely proud to be associated and known as Air Commando's.

Jim Westfall
ACA #4456

Dear Col Barnett,

Enclosed is a $1,000 contribution to the Association in honor of CMSgt (Ret) Roland 'Hap' Lutz. I know you're well acquainted with Hap, and I doubt that I can say anything about him that would come as a surprise. Nonetheless I'd like to offer a couple of comments.

During my time as an intelligence officer it was my great good fortune to serve with Hap in Savannakhet, Laos, for a few months in 1972, and we have stayed in touch over the years. I've known some very fine people in the Air Force, and Air Commandos have always been among the best. Hap stands out even in that company, the best of the best, the embodiment of absolute integrity, decency, devotion to duty, and service to his fellow man. To count him as my friend and comrade has been a treasured privilege, and I want to acknowledge that publicly. Hap's entire career reflects the highest possible credit upon the United States Air Force and upon our country, and the world is a distinctly better place because of his presence in it. I salute him with admiration and gratitude.

Please add this contribution to the Association's general funds to be used as needed. I'm confident that whatever you do with it will meet with Hap's approval.
Sincerely yours,

Capt (Ret) Charles L. Felsenthal, USAF
ACA Life Member #L1139

Commandos,

I'd like to update my mailing address, due to a 6 month deployment to Djbouti as JSOAD-DJ Senior Enlisted Advisor.

We have many Commandos out here with me that are doing nothing but exemplary work in this AOR. As the 1st Special Ops Group Chief Enlisted Manager and now JSOAD Senior Enlisted Advisor, I would like to add some commentary of our work out here in the coming months, should you have an open spot in the Journal. As always, appreciate all the Association does year in/year out for our Air Commandos.

Regards,
Chief Leick

Dear Mr. Barnett,

I recently attended a course at the AFSOC school house and picked up a copy of *Air Commando Journal* (Winter/Spring 2014 issue). What an amazing periodical! I'm not in the Special Ops community but know and have worked with many who are. I was immediately impressed with the quality of the Journal, the depth of the stories and breadth of coverage. The one thing that jumped out at me in reading it from cover to cover is the amazing amount of pride and organizational culture your community has. It was clear to see the camaraderie and brotherhood which can only be forged by those who have experienced hard training and difficult assignments together under tough conditions!

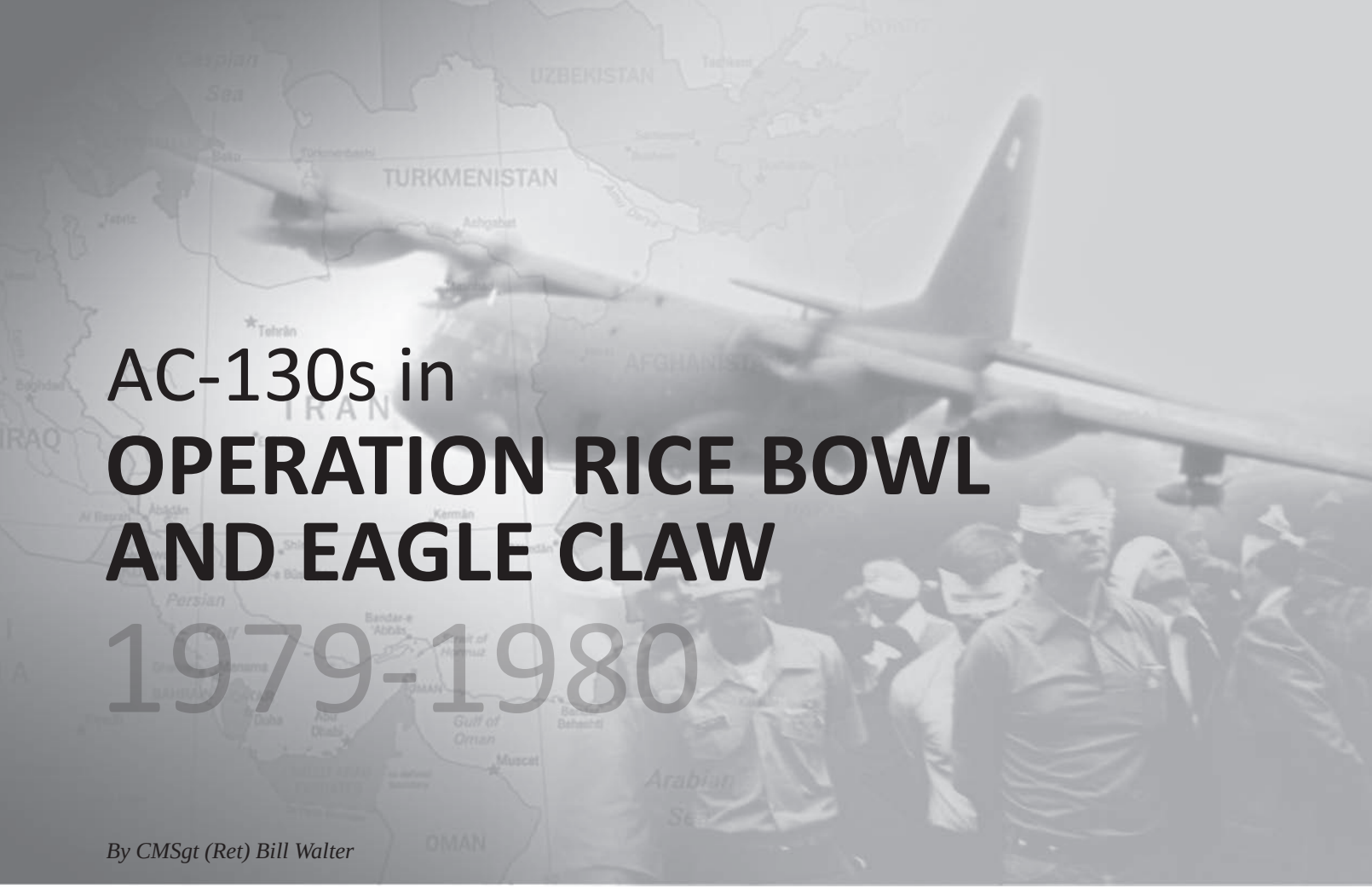
I especially enjoyed the story about the Son Tay Raid and the use of drones. During my attendance at National War College, I conducted research in preparation for a briefing on the Son Tay Raid. It was an amazing operation considering the "jointness" component in an early era where Joint Ops were not the norm. I'd not known about the use of drones in that mission until I read this piece. As a side note, I discovered that a young Air Force Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI) Maj Richard Beyea was instrumental in the planning of the mission. From June to December 1970, he participated in the Son Tay prisoner rescue attempt as security and counterintelligence officer for the Joint Contingency Task Group. Maj Beyea went on to become Brig Gen Beyea and the 10th Commander of AFOSI.

Reading the narratives of the 2013 Hall of Fame inductees was also very inspiring and humbling. I especially enjoyed reading about Col Terry's innovative ideas that led to the side firing gunship. My father was in the Army and deployed to Vietnam from 1968-1969. As I got older, he told me many stories about "Puff the Magic Dragon" and "Spooky" sightings. He even had a few photos of long, orange and red streaks seeming to magically appear from a darkened sky. Col Terry's narrative helped me connect the dots on these stories and photos. In 1969-1971, my father served as the NCOIC for the R&R facility in Pattaya Beach, Thailand and had a close working relationship with many of the Army Special Forces who trained in the area. As a 1st and 2"d grader at the time, I had no context for the Vietnam war happening just hours away from where we lived, but on the many trips we'd make to U-Tapao Air Base I came to love watching F-4s take off and seeing all the military operations in action.

Again, thanks for producing such an enjoyable and informative journal! All the best to you and your community.

Col James L. Hudson
Commander /Special Agent
Air Force Office Of Special Investigations
Langley AFB, VA 23665

Submissions can be e-mailed to info@aircommando.org or mailed to Hot Wash c/o Air Commando Association, P.O. Box 7, Mary Esther, FL 32569. ACA reserves the right to eliminate those that are not deemed appropriate. Thank you in advance for your interest in the Air Commando Journal.



AC-130s in OPERATION RICE BOWL AND EAGLE CLAW 1979-1980

By CMSgt (Ret) Bill Walter

Editor's Note: This article complements the related articles by Jim Lawrence concerning AC-130H activities during Eagle Claw, ACJ Vol 1, Issue 4 (Summer 2012) and Vol 2, Issue 1 (Fall 2012).

Demonstrations within Iran that started in October 1977 culminated with the departure of the Shah of Iran for exile to the West on 16 Jan 1979. With the Shah's departure, his forces quickly collapsed, opening the door to the formation of an Islamic republic lead by religious clerics, and on 1 Apr 1979 that was what the people of Iran voted for. On 4 Nov 1979, Iranian "students" stormed the US embassy in Tehran, seized the buildings, and took 66 American citizens hostage.

In December 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini returned from exile in Paris and was installed as the Supreme Leader of the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran.

In response to the seizure of the embassy (sovereign US territory), President Carter tried a number of diplomatic, military, and economic measures designed to peacefully win the release of the prisoners. First, he sent additional naval forces to the Persian Gulf in order to demonstrate that the US could and would use force if necessary. The President then froze substantial Iranian financial resources that remained in American banks. The Carter Administration was also able to garner limited support from the UN and from various nations around the globe, but that was tried was able to secure the release of the hostages. As the situation festered without resolution, the news media titled the event "The Iran Hostage Crisis." This media obsession with the hostage crisis, served as a daily reminder of how hopeless the situation was.

The emerging political, economic and military situation was very complex and it became obvious that there were no easy solutions. With the Vietnam War very fresh in the American psyche, and with the President preparing up for a reelection campaign in 1980 it was highly unlikely he would commit US combat forces to battle the Iranians. When the Iranians began to threaten trials and execution of the hostages however, it became clear that a military response option had to be formulated.

The Iranian hostage-takers identified themselves as "Revolutionaries" and as such, did their share of playing to a sympathetic international media. During the middle of November 1979, they singled out and subsequently released

thirteen women and African-American hostages. The Iranians' apparent attempt to fragment American resolve may have achieved some desired effects in the international media, but the released hostages proved to be an intelligence "gold mine" for US military planners. The inside information concerning whereabouts of other hostages, guards, security levels, etc. proved to be very valuable intelligence. By New Year's Day 1980, it appeared there was no end in sight to the Crisis and the Iranians continued to retain the 53 American hostages.

As the hostages continued to languish in the US Embassy, international media portrayed the US as a helpless giant. Behind the scenes however, military contingency planning was on-going. A punitive strike on Ayatollah Khomeini's home or on the Iranian oil fields was considered, but rejected. On 12 Nov 1979, Joint Task Force 79-1 (JTF 79-1) was formed to plan and execute a rescue mission. The task force was led by US Army Maj Gen James "Hammer" Vaught. JTF 79-1's mission was very straightforward: assault the embassy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tehran, take out the guards, free the hostages, and get everyone safely out of Iran. Gen Vaught purposely named the mission planning function "Rice Bowl" to avoid any hint of a link to a mission concerning Iran.

Leading the ground component was Col Charlie "Chargin' Charlie" Beckwith, the commander of Special Forces Operational Detachment - Delta (SFOD-D), more commonly referred to as "Delta Force" or just "Delta." At that time, Delta was a secretive unit whose very existence was officially denied by the Army. They operated in the shadows and were virtually unknown outside of the Army Special Operations world. Everything about the way Delta operated was nonstandard, right down to their preference to be referred to as "operators" instead of soldiers. Leading the air component was Col James Kyle, a former AC-130 pilot and no-nonsense mission planner. Together, Cols Beckwith and Kyle formed a very competent special mission planning team.

It was known upfront that planning would be difficult and time consuming. There were many planning factors that when examined, appeared to have seemingly exponential complications. Aside from infiltrating a large force into the middle of a large city surrounded by hundreds of thousands of potentially hostile Iranians, Delta operators would likely face Iranian tanks, armored personnel carriers, infantry, and armed "revolutionaries." The Iranian military had several contingents of soldiers and military equipment less than six miles from the embassy that could quickly react and present very real threats to the Delta operators. Of particular concern were Iranian ZSU-23-4 AAA guns. They were suspected to be in the area and would likely be formidable threats during the mission. The ZSU-23-4 is a very potent weapon that mounts four 23mm cannons on a lightly armored chassis. It could be a very significant threat to Delta if used in a ground assault role.

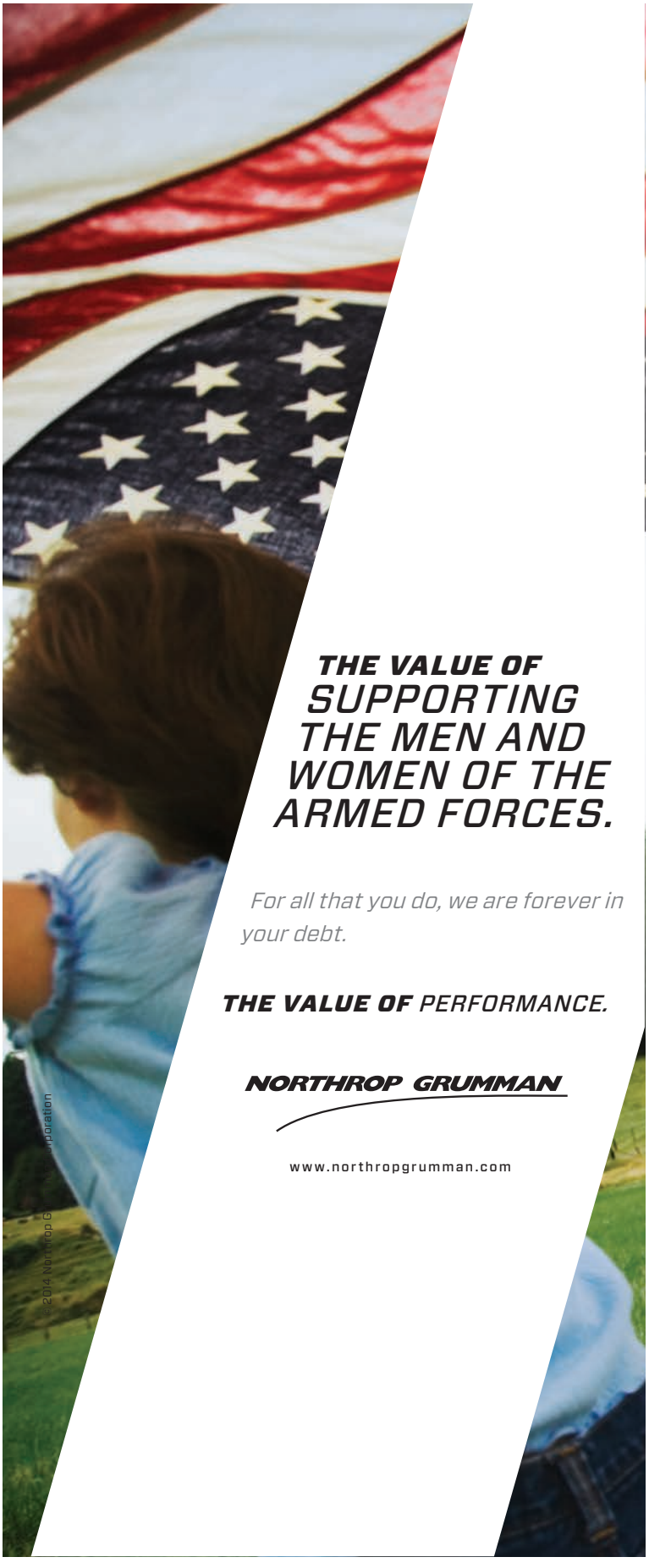
It was obvious Delta needed persistent fire support that could stay with them for the duration of the mission. These concerns prompted planners to add AC-130H gunships to provide fire support for Delta, and especially the assault team that would breach the walls of the embassy. Delta operators welcomed the addition of the AC-130H since many had worked with Spectre crews in Vietnam and were familiar with gunship capabilities. Responding to top secret tasking, 16th Special Operations Squadron commander, Lt Col Florin White, and the operations officer, Lt Col John "Pappy" Gallagher, selected sensor operator, MSgt Don Boudreaux to travel to the Pentagon for a meeting. Because of very tight security concerns, they could not tell Boudreaux what the meeting concerned—a fact Boudreaux found both strange and interesting. He was given only basic information, ordered to remain silent concerning the trip, and to travel in civilian clothing. Once in place at the Pentagon, he was indoctrinated into the compartmentalized program, briefed on the proposed mission, and assigned the task of AC-130 mission planner. As Boudreaux worked with Maj Gen Vaught's planning staff, most the squadron deployed for mission training.

Lt Col Gallagher was the principal fire support liaison with Delta. He worked very closely with Maj Lewis "Bucky" Burruss, the Delta deputy ground commander and primary fire support officer (FSO). Together, they devised specific plans and tactics to ensure any threats that might come down Roosevelt Avenue in Tehran were quickly eliminated by an AC-130 orbiting overhead. Lt Cols White and Gallagher selected specific crew members primarily based on their experience and proficiency in the AC-130. Unfortunately, there were only a handful of pilots qualified for aerial refueling in the squadron at the time because the capability was rare for C-130s in 1980. Crews were loaded with highly experienced flight engineers, illuminator operators, sensor operators, and lead gunners, with the remainder of the crews being a mix of both rank and experience. Crew selection was done in secrecy and those selected for a crew were not allowed to discuss any details with others in the squadron. Crews were ordered to abide by a "no-speak" list of words to limit risk of any chance of a security compromise. The words included hostage, Delta, rescue, and Iran. Instead, other words were substituted: hostage became precious cargo, Delta became customer, rescue became mission, and Iran simply became objective.

As increased activity became more noticeable on Hurlburt speculation became more of a problem, but it never seemed to spill beyond the front gate. The perception by the general population on Hurlburt was that all military units were responding in the same "lean forward" sort of way. So the increased activity was deemed routine. Inside the squadron however, not much remained routine and many suspected they were training for a mission to Iran, but few thought an actual mission would occur. Regardless of intention, the emphasis on operational security and strict "no-speak" policy amounted to only a few key leaders having any knowledge of the objective. The majority of crew members were being tasked to train for a mission they could not define, and even those selected to be mission participants were not given orders outside of a closed room. To say operational security was tight would be an understatement, but it made sense. Even the slightest leak could have compromised the entire mission.

Fire support was only one hurdle in an very complicated plan. Because of the location of the embassy compound, many "moving parts" needed to be addressed and multiple backup plans devised. The rescue force would be supported an EC-130Es equipped with "Harvest Eagle" fuel bladders. Jerry Uttaro and "Taco" Sanchez provided an outstanding description of this aspect of Eagle Claw in the Fall 2013 issue of this journal. The EC-130Es were borrowed from Keesler AFB, MS, and were flown by MC-130 crews from Hurlburt. They were joined by MC-130E Combat Talons from Hurlburt Field and Kadena AB and AC-130H Spectre gunships from the 1st Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt Field. The MC-130s and EC-130s provided airlift and ground refueling, and AC-130s provided aerial intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR), and direct fire support. Aside from those units already mentioned, the plan involved elements of all the Services including US Army Rangers, USAF C-141s and KC-135s, and US Navy RH-53 helicopters from the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz.

There was no easy route to Iran. Tehran was far from any accessible coast line, so any approach had to be by air. Use of an aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf was risky because of limited maneuver room and the threat of air attack. There was also concern the Soviet Union or Iran would mine the Gulf of Hormuz



AC-130H 6570 participating in long-range mission training in Guam, January 1980. Note painted over roundel. (Photo courtesy of CMSgt (Ret) Bill Walter)

and entrap the carrier battle group inside the Persian Gulf. Thus, the closest practical location to launch helicopters was from about 100 miles south of Iran in the Indian Ocean—diagonally at the far end of Iran from Tehran. Mission planners were very concerned about the former US air defense weapons still active in Tehran. Iran possessed F-4 and F-14 fighters, but intelligence sources discovered most of the fighters were incapable of flying because of parts shortages. Iran also had advanced I-Hawk air defense missile systems. This was a particular concern for the AC-130 crews since aspects of the I-Hawk tracking radar were not detectable by the AC-130's ALR-69 radar warning receiver. The problem was mitigated somewhat by purchasing commercial "Fuzz Buster" radar detectors, which we mounted in the cockpits of the aircraft.

To facilitate development of long distance infiltration tactics necessary for mission tasking, AC-130 crews deployed to Anderson AFB, Guam in a record, non-stop 29.7 hour flight. (Jim Lawrence describes this "SOAR-ASS" flight in the Summer 2012 edition of ACJ.) These flights not only demonstrated the AC-130's new air-refueling capability with an approximate mission length similar to a flight from Hurlburt to Tehran, it also helped create the perception that Rice Bowl had nothing to do with Iran. While the force was on Guam, crews also developed tactics for lights-out, night air refueling. The aerial refueling capability enabled live fire training missions at the end of a 1,300 mile, 8-hour transit flight, and recovery after the same distance nonstop.

Due to the secretive nature of the mission and the fact there was only one active duty AC-130 squadron, 16th SOS leadership and crews were essentially given a "pass" to do whatever was needed without Headquarters TAC riding roughshod over them. Many tactics developed during Rice Bowl had never been attempted by AC-130 crews before. Low level, communications-out

formation flying with a rapid climb to firing altitude a short distance from the objective was a common tactic for fighters. We adapted it for gunships in order to retain the element of surprise.

We also attempted to fire while climbing to altitude, but the physics of the task proved very difficult, and aside from a flock of seagulls being decimated by Pappy during a live fire, not much else was hit. While crews were training in Guam, a small quantity of 20mm armor piercing discarding sabot (APDS), high density (depleted uranium warhead) ammunition was delivered to Hurlburt for potential use against the Iranian ZSU-23-4 guns. The concept of using the round was quickly rejected since there were no established ballistic parameters in the fire control computer and firing discarding sabot projectiles in front of the props was deemed to be excessively risky.

Looming in the background was the ever-present concern of a security leak that might compromise the mission. To counter some curiosity seekers, highly creative aircraft crew chiefs attempted to mask the AC-130's presence by mimicking the exterior of the WC-130 by painting a huge USAF roundel on the AC-130Hs. Unfortunately, the unique "humps & bumps" of a gunship makes it stand out from other aircraft, regardless of paint or decals. Since the home-made roundel didn't seem to help, they were painted over with dark blue paint, giving an even stranger appearance. Crews continued to train in Guam until late February when they returned to Hurlburt.

Through the end of March, elements of JTF-79-1 continued to train and rehearse in Yuma, AZ, and Indian Springs, NV. Lt Col Gallagher and Maj Burruss developed the tactic of night convoy escort, with Delta operators driving blacked-out vehicles on PVS-5 night vision goggles and the only illumination being from the GLINT (gated laser intensifier for night television, a laser illuminator system) on the AC-130s above. These convoy escort tactics were needed not only during the rescue, but were a back-up plan if the rescue force was forced to exfiltrate Iran via vehicle to the Turkish border. The time between developing new tactics and training both the AC-130 crews and the Delta operators was quick and sometimes rough, but effective nevertheless.

The assault on the embassy compound was to take place at night. To retain the element of surprise, gunship arrival time over target was critical. The mission plan called for precisely timed takeoff, route, and airspeed to the objective. The timeline enabled Spectre crews to be overhead their individual objectives just after Delta Force began breaching the embassy wall. Once breaching began, an AC-130 crew over the embassy would maintain direct radio contact with Maj Burruss. This gunship crew would prevent Iranian reinforcements from reaching the embassy compound and pass information concerning potential threats to the assault team. Since the urban real estate of downtown Tehran was very dense and diverse, the potential for misidentifying targets was high. To remedy potential problems, Maj Burruss and SGM Forrest Foremen provided gunship crews a map grid system which pinpointed targets and zones in the area of the embassy.

The second AC-130 in the plan was tasked to fire on any fighter aircraft that started to taxi at Tehran International Airport. The third gunship was tasked to provide overhead fire support for US Army Rangers during the planned airfield seizure of Manzariyeh airfield located outside the city limits of Tehran. This gunship crew would also fire on any alerted Iranian jet fighters should they begin to taxi. The plan included a fourth AC-130 to be an airborne spare should any of the first three experience mechanical or communications problems.

AC-130 crews were given very specific rules of engagement by Gen Vaught. There was no intention to arbitrarily shell downtown Tehran or cause unnecessary death or destruction. In an attempt to limit damage and potential casualties, President Carter requested Delta Force and AC-130 crews use CS riot agent (tear gas) instead of lethal ammunition. The request may have been considered odd considering the situation at hand however. Nonetheless, it was a request from the President.

There were 105mm CS gas rounds in existence that could have been fired by AC-130H crews. However, they weighed the same as a standard HE round and were very lethal within close proximity of shell impact. The effects of CS were also very subjective and affected by wind, and could work against Delta operators. It was clear to planners the use of CS gas was problematic. Since the President had requested the use of CS, the basic issue was addressed cleverly by Maj Burruss who would carry a single CS riot control grenade to the objective, in effect meeting the letter, if not the intent, of the President's request. When Delta needed AC-130 fire support, Buckshot would throw the CS grenade to mark the position for the AC-130H overhead. The gunship crew overhead would then fire 40mm Misch Metal-lined projectiles on top of the burning CS grenade. Mission planners believed the Misch Metal-lined projectile would provide a better deterrent than CS gas since detonations produced a loud explosion, a bright flash, and a tremendous amount of pyrophoric sparks as if they were a giant "flash bang" grenade. Misch Metal projectiles would only be lethal to personnel who were relatively close to impact, so collateral damage concerns were low. In any case, the fireworks an AC-130 crew could put down would appear lethal and intimidating, and would likely cause hostile crowds to break contact and disperse quickly.

After Delta Force had rescued all the hostages from the Embassy and taken them to the soccer stadium across from the embassy for helicopter pickup, Gallagher's crew would escort the helicopters from the stadium to Manzariyeh. With the hostages rescued, AC-130 crews overhead Tehran would then drop leaflets over the city assuring Iranians the US came to rescue US "political prisoners," not to wage war.

On April 10th, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and respective mission commanders reviewed the plan in great detail. Many members of the JCS deemed the rescue high risk with the chance of success estimated between 60 and 70 percent. Col Beckwith's assessment of success was briefed at 40 percent.

Although the JCS did not recommend execution of the plan, the task force commanders and primary staff were convinced they were ready and had a good chance of pulling it off. Undeterred, the Chairman of the JCS, Gen David Jones, gave his final briefing to the National Security Council on April 11th. On April 16th, the Joint Chiefs approved the plan and Gen Jones briefed the President that evening. After the briefing, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and President Jimmy Carter ordered that a rescue mission be conducted. Not everyone agreed however, as Deputy Secretary of State Cyrus Vance felt so strongly against the mission that he resigned from his position.

By mid-April, under the execution phase, code named "Eagle Claw," mission participants began to deploy from various locations. Members packed for warm weather and were specifically prohibited from taking cameras with them. On April 17th, AC-130H crews deployed under routine TDY orders indicating destination as "Exercise Flintlock 80" in Germany. These orders were intentionally misleading to prevent anyone from inadvertently "connecting the dots" to a mission in Iran and compromising the mission. Shortly after the mission crews departed by C-141s, four AC-130H gunships took off from Hurlburt Field with just an augmented basic crew onboard. Crews were issued non-standard call signs and routine flight plans, with aircraft pilots listed by pseudonyms.

Aircraft 69-6569 was commanded by 16th SOS operations officer, Lt Col John Gallagher, 69-6570 by Capt Herman "Bubber" Youngblood, 69-6567 by Capt Donn Kegel, and 69-6575 by Capt James Lawrence. The planned two-ship formations did not go without problems. Aircraft 69-6569 aborted on day one and 69-6570 and crew took its place. The next day, 6569's flight engineer, SMSgt Jerry Appleby, discovered, 69-6569 had a non-aerial refueling external tank installed and had it changed. This was indeed a fortunate discovery since it would have posed significant problems on the deployment. Once all was in order, 69-6569 and 69-6575 took off. Crews flew non-stop with air refueling from Hurlburt to Wadi Qena, Egypt. This forward operating location was named Operating Location Alpha (OL-A). The trip was especially remarkable in that the aircraft could not be pressurized and had to travel at altitudes 10,000 feet and below. During a leg of the mission north of Bermuda, Capt James Lawrence's crew was receiving fuel from a KC-135 tanker when their tanker was hit by lighting. A large fireball traveled down the boom, across the top of the gunship, and exited the left wing tip. The strike blinded Lawrence momentarily, causing him to perform emergency break-away procedures and fall back to the pre-contact position to gather his wits. The flight engineer and navigator determined there was no apparent electrical system damage and Lawrence returned to the tanker to complete the refueling.

Once arriving at OL-A, crews discovered an airfield so remote and desolate that Egyptian soldiers only served 30-day tours there. Delta intelligence officer, Capt Wade "Ish" Ishimoto, and Lt Col Dick Potter were among the first Americans to set foot on Wadi Kena. Lt Col Potter headed the JTF advance party to the airfield finding dust, heat, and large biting flies to be the principal elements in the area. They quickly selected several abandoned, Soviet built, earth-covered concrete shelters which could be used as quarters. The shelters were structurally sound, but were caked with human excrement and trash. With few options and little time until the assault force arrived, Lt Col Potter and his small team worked around the clock cleaning and sanitizing the shelters.

As personnel began to arrive, mission equipment was set up and inspected. When the aircrews arrived they were taken to the newly cleaned shelters. All aircrews and mission specialists were housed in one shelter and slept on standard-issue military cots arranged in multiple rows. The Rangers bunked in an identical shelter next to the aircrews. Delta and the combat control team were bunked in another shelter near the end of the runway. The JTF main command post, code named "Ear Guard," was a few shelters away from the aircrews. All the aircraft were parked near the aircrew shelter. Crews slept during the day and stayed awake all night to condition themselves and to prepare for the long mission into Iran.

During specific periods during the day, maintenance and support personnel outdoors were ordered inside the shelter after camouflage netting was draped over the AC-130s' guns. This was done to hide the gunship from Soviet spy satellites passing overhead. Two days before the start of the mission, Gen Vaught called all the gunship aircrews into to the command post for a formal briefing. Standing on a recently built picnic table, he briefed everyone on the mission objective and what AC-130 crews were expected to do. For most, his revelation came as no surprise, but the "cat was out of the bag" now and there would be no turning back. He stressed the importance of AC-130 fire support to Delta Force. During this briefing, a flight engineer noted the charts showed that the gunships did not have enough fuel to make it back to the tankers if there was unplanned delay over the target. In response, Gen Vaught stated that no gunship was to leave the area until his aircraft departed Manzariyeh. He said that if he saw a gunship leaving and he had the means, he would shoot them down. Perhaps a bit of drama on his part, but he made his point. He then said, "If you do not have sufficient fuel you could land on Manzariyeh, destroy the gunship, and he would give the crew a ride home." He closed his statement with, "Don't worry, Jimmy [Carter, the President] will buy you a new airplane."

Shortly afterward, AC-130 crews were escorted to the Delta shelter to coordinate plans. While viewing a large three-dimensional model of the embassy compound area that had been built by the CIA, crews conversed with Delta operators concerning the upcoming mission. This was the first time most AC-130 crews had met any Delta operators, who talked the military "talk," but did not fit the normal image of anyone in the military at that time. Instead, operational security measures and the operators' desire to blend in with the civilian population included relaxed

The AC-130 gunship's primary missions are close air support, air interdiction and force protection. Missions in close air support are troops in contact, convoy escort and urban operations. Air interdiction missions are conducted against preplanned targets or targets of opportunity. Force protection missions include air base defense and facilities defense. (Photo courtesy of CMSgt (Ret) Sherman 'Gene' Eller)

grooming standards, wearing of civilian clothing, and longer-than-regulation hair. Gunship crews discovered Delta Force operators were very professional, thorough, and deliberate regardless of their appearance.

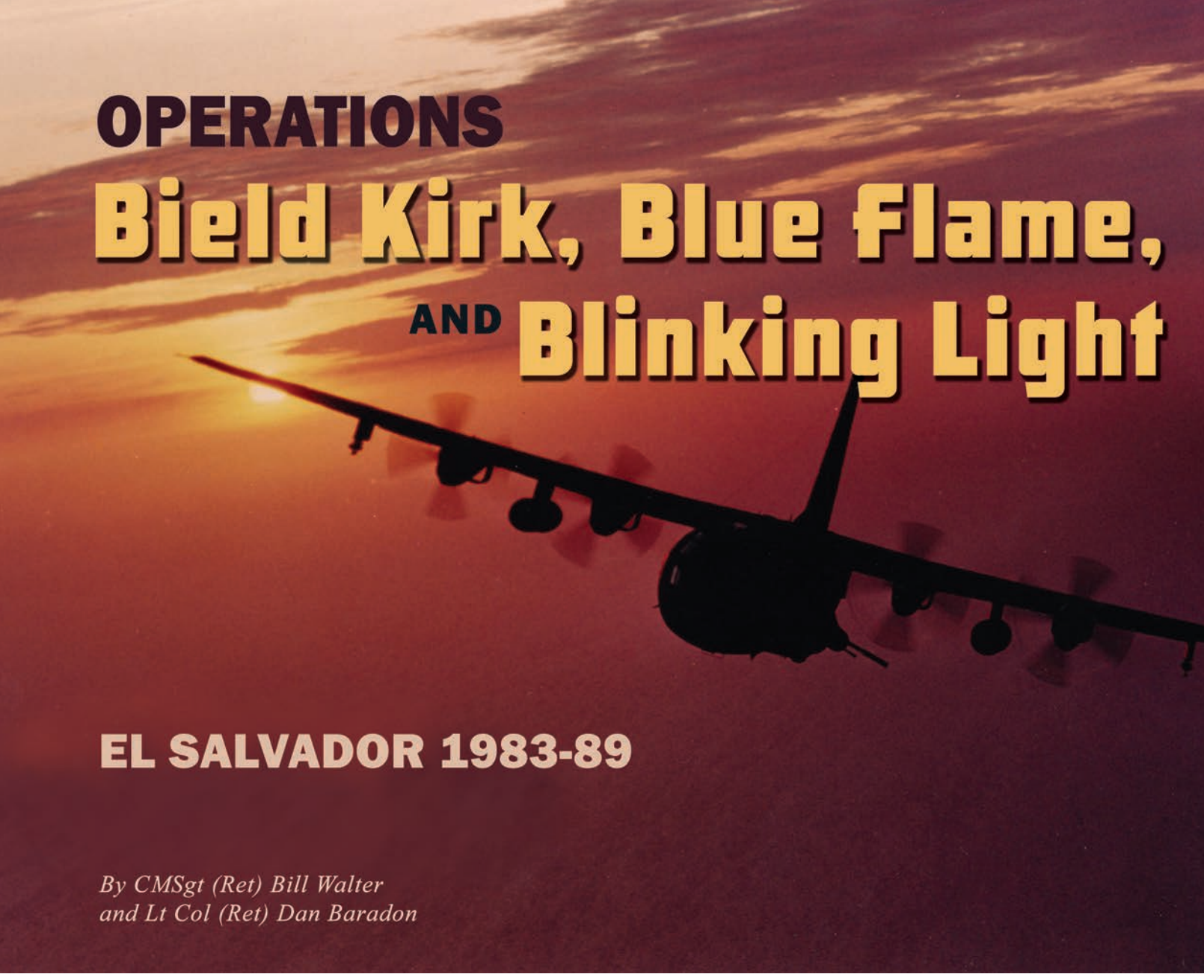
On 22 April, as AC-130 crews at Wadi Qena prepared their aircraft for the mission, MC-130 and EC-130 crews and POL specialists departed for Operating Location Bravo (OL-B) an isolated airfield on Masirah Island off the southeastern coast of Oman. The following day, Delta operators, the Ranger roadblock team and other mission specialists flew to OL-B via C-141. After all personnel were in place at OL-B, they readied to depart for the first stage of mission inside Iran at Desert One.

On 24 April, as AC-130 crews and maintainers were preparing for the long mission to Iran, serious trouble occurred at Desert One. All the required helicopters did not make it to the Desert One site and the mission was aborted. Making matters worse, during the evacuation from Desert One, an RH-53 crashed into an EC-130 killing five on the EC-130 and three on the RH-53.

After Operation Eagle Claw aborted, AC-130 mission participants returned to Hurlburt, just as quietly as they left. No mass debriefing was conducted and all the participants were ordered to sign a non-disclosure agreement, agreeing not to speak about the mission. For many years nobody outside the special operations community knew the gunships were involved in the Iran hostage rescue attempt. At the time, leaders felt that if it were public knowledge that AC-130 gunships were poised to fire on Tehran during a "rescue" mission, the reputation of the Carter Administration and the DoD would go from bad to worse. In the end, economic pressure, diplomatic measures, and a new US President secured the release and recovery of the hostages. It should also be noted that the hostages were repatriated just as President Reagan was being inaugurated.

About the Author: CMSgt (Ret) Bill Walter is a former AC-130H Aerial Gunner and a veteran of Operation Eagle Claw.

Editor's Note: This article an excerpt of AC-130 history 1973-2014, drafted by CMSgt (Ret) Bill Walter. Publication is expected in early 2016.



OPERATIONS Bield Kirk, Blue Flame, AND Blinking Light

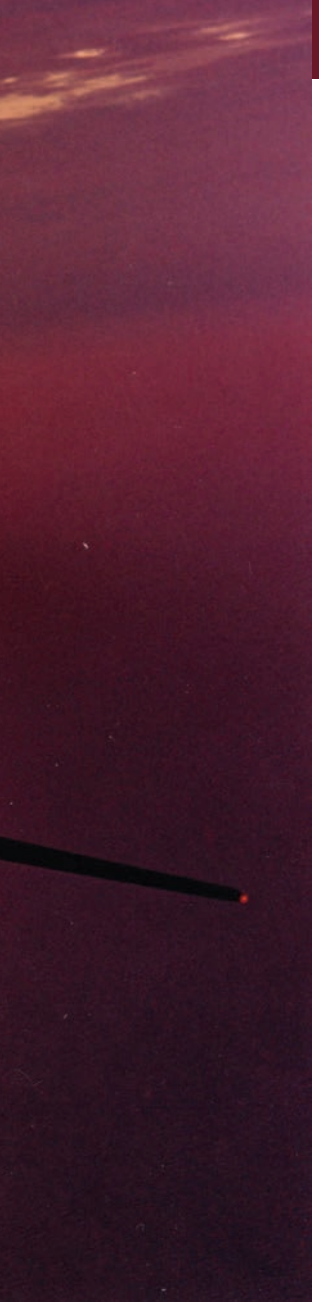
EL SALVADOR 1983-89

By CMSgt (Ret) Bill Walter and Lt Col (Ret) Dan Baradon

As the political situation in El Salvador continued to decline during the early 1980s, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) determined that they needed accurate and timely intelligence information to assist Salvadoran counter insurgency initiatives. Previous inclusion of the AC-130 in high level exercises tasked by the Joint Special Operations Command and others, highlighted gunship capabilities to the JCS and others within the U.S. national security hierarchy. To assist the Salvadorans, the JCS realized that observing the nighttime activities of Marxist guerillas would pay large dividends in the Salvadoran's fight. The gunship's ability to detect targets at night, maintain persistent surveillance of an area of interest, and record movements of both vehicles and personnel on the aircraft's battle damage recorder were unique capabilities in the early 1980s. Consequently, tasking of the AC-130 was an "easy pick" for the National Command Authority (NCA) and the JCS. They felt the AC-130's capabilities were exactly what they needed to accomplish the task of assisting El Salvador.

In early March of 1983, 1st Special Operations Wing (SOW) Detachment 1 was activated at Howard Air Force Base (AFB), Panama and AC-130H gunship crews deployed to conduct the then-secret operations in El Salvador code named BIELD KIRK.

The missions were highly classified and directed and controlled by the JCS with input from other government agencies. To help maintain secrecy, crews deployed with very generic travel orders indicating the TDY location as "Anyplace within Central America." The purpose of TDY was listed as "Unit support of 193rd Infantry Brigade" but most crews didn't even know where the 193rd was based.



Beginning in July 1983, five crews and two aircraft were deployed to Howard AFB to conduct BIELD KIRK missions. In addition, a set of two KC-135 tankers were sent from Grissom AFB to perform refueling in support of the BIELD KIRK missions.

Initially, crews were billeted in the Air Force base's family housing area near the Navy's Farfan housing area. These were two story townhouse-type buildings designed for small families - not for fourteen member gunship crews. Officers and enlisted were billeted in separate, but adjacent quarters. Since the operation was highly classified, U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) mission planners briefed crews to "act normally" so as to not raise suspicion. Considering that fourteen man aircrews (at that time all male), jammed into family housing units was highly unusual even to the casual observer, crews thought keeping "low key" was highly unlikely. Fortunately, nobody seemed to make the connection and most locals thought the USAF was being "cheap" by renting one house for many crewmembers instead of paying for individual rooms at a local hotel or base billeting.

After their arrival in Panama, mission tasking was swiftly received. Aircrews reacted and began to plan missions almost immediately. Although the AC-130 crews were not specifically trained for intelligence collection, they quickly adapted.

As the AC-130 missions were deemed to be intelligence collection missions, and in concert with an agreement with the government of El Salvador, U.S. NCA directed removal of all AC-130 guns or to make them incapable of firing. To comply with this order, the number two 20mm gun was removed entirely and number one gun had its barrels removed. The 40mm gun barrel was removed and the 105mm blast diffuser was removed and the barrel end taped over. The agreement also extended to personal defense weapons as well. Crews were not allowed to carry their customary self-defense Smith & Wesson Model 15 .38 caliber revolvers. It was thought that arming the crews while performing intelligence collection missions would put them in jeopardy if they were captured by Marxist guerillas. The only "weapon" aircrews were allowed to carry was a survival knife. Enterprising aircrew members pushed the limits on this sanctioned activity through an unofficial "contest" to see who had the biggest "survival" knife.

Aircrews flew the missions "sanitized" without unit patches or insignia. The sole identification allowed to be carried on a mission by the crew was the standard AF black leather aircrew name tag, Geneva Convention ID card and dog tags. The only other item allowed was an Escape & Evasion kit furnished by INTEL, which would be signed out before the mission and turned in after mission completion.

To conceal the aircraft while overhead an objective area, the aircrews practiced extreme light discipline. As they used Night Vision Goggles (NVGs) extensively, even the smallest amount of stray light would cause NVGs to "bloom" rendering them ineffective. To mitigate this phenomenon, and to prevent guerillas from directly observing stray light from the aircraft from the ground, crews either stopped down or removed small light bulbs on Flight Station-245 (bulkhead between the cockpit and cargo compartment) and anywhere near the gun positions. To facilitate better visual surveillance and sensor cueing, one of the 20mm gun ports was covered with Plexiglas. This allowed one of the gunners to act as a left scanner whose duty was to identify potential targets and talk the sensor operators on to the target.

Individual crews would fly ten-plus hour missions nightly from Howard. The missions used tracks that took the mission aircraft up the west coast of Central America where it would refuel off a KC-135 (or rarely a KC-10) tanker off the coast of Nicaragua, prior to entering the airspace over El Salvador. The aircraft flew the rendezvous completely blacked out using NVGs to rendezvous with the KC-135. Once established on the refueling track, the KC-135 would overfly the AC-130 at the proper time and slow down to complete the rendezvous. This enroute overtaking method of refueling while blacked out on NVGs was called "Gin Bearer" refueling.

Once fully fueled, crews would enter El Salvador near the river outlet at La Union or near the Rio Lempa and the Playa el Icacal. Prior to entry, crews were required to check in with two U.S. mission monitors. The first was a ship stationed off the coast that possessed a Navy Command and Control Center nicknamed "Jittery Prop," and "Carrot Top" a mountain-top U.S. radar site. Crews had prioritized preplanned "targets" during mission planning. Routes of flight between targets were also planned and were put together and briefed to the crew at the mission briefing. There were also ad hoc tasked targets received in flight depending on the situation during their in-country mission coverage time. During the in-country time, the FCO would use the Battle Damage Recorder to record the sensor imagery for later intel use.

Crews would normally land back at Howard AFB as the sun began to rise, debrief their findings and submit video tapes to the intelligence analysts. Initially, the coverage requested was all night long. To fill this requirement, the long and tedious missions required two crews to fly every night but eventually the tasking was reduced to one mission per night. There were however, critical time periods where the unit would "surge" and provide additional aircraft and crews to fly the mission. These periods normally coincided with Salvadoran events such

as elections or holidays.

On a frequent basis, the guerillas fired small caliber weapons towards the gunship which posed little threat to AC-130s at their normal operational altitudes.

During normal mission flight profiles, it was always dark by the time AC-130s skirted the coast of Nicaragua while over international waters. Within a few weeks from when the missions began, many crewmembers reported they were being "shadowed" by small aircraft. The "shadows" always appeared to be behind them, just after coming off the tanker and prior to going "over the fence" into El Salvador. Some crews flew defensive maneuvers to avoid being tracked, but did not succeed in losing them. Aircrews speculated that they could be MIGs from Nicaragua, and some crews became "gun shy" when they knew they were being tracked. As tensions rose and crews became more nervous and careful, one navigator called a defensive maneuver by mistaking the bright light from the planet Venus as either a threat or possible collision hazard. To complicate matters, the shadow aircraft never displayed hostile intent and stayed just far enough away to make identification extremely difficult. These shadows went on for a couple of weeks and crews were frustrated as they still had not identified them - even by rigging a pair of PVS-5 NVGs to a portable video camera. As time went on, the shadows become bolder and one night a gunner finally identified the "shadow" as a blacked-out Lear Jet flying about five hundred feet from the left wing. Other members of the crew also saw it as it turned away from the AC-130 as it entered El Salvador. The "shadows" continued nightly for about another week and a half but many in the Operations Center claimed crews were seeing things and the stars were playing tricks on them.

After several weeks of shadowing, ABC News featured a lead-in segment during their Nightly News that claimed "AC-130 Gunships are flying combat missions in El Salvador" complete with video of AC-130s taking off from Howard Air Force Base. Obviously, the origin of the shadows was exposed. After the story broke, US Officials denied AC-130 activity in El Salvador and locals started watching the Howard flight line more closely. Reporters with binoculars would see AC-130s come and go. They'd see fresh aircraft come in from Hurlburt, and witness the gun barrels being taken off and dream up wild reasons for it. One news article accused AC-130 crews of "firing so much the barrels had to be changed after every mission," a claim crews found particularly amusing since AC-130s didn't carry ammunition and their guns were deactivated.

On August 8, 1984, a joint State Department and US SOUTHCOM news briefing on Intelligence Information on External Support of the Guerrillas in El Salvador took place. The original briefing was classified and prepared for members of the Congress. Ambassador Thomas R. Pickering at the urging of Congressional members, worked with the DoD and declassified 95 percent of the briefing material and presented it at the press conference. At the press conference, Ambassador Pickering and the Commander-in-Chief of US SOUTHCOM, General Paul F. Gorman told the world about the external support that was coming from Nicaragua via land and sea into El Salvador to support the guerrillas. During the course of this briefing, the mission of the AC-130 and its activities in and around El Salvador were disclosed. BIELD KIRK imagery documented transfer of arms from mother ships just off the coast via large ocean-capable canoes (called cayucas) to the beaches of El Salvador and overland movement of arms (within El Salvador and out of Honduras into El Salvador) by pack animals was shown and explained to bolster the case for and substantiate outside support of the guerrillas. Needless to say, when the AC-130 - BIELD KIRK connection was revealed, the name was rapidly changed to BLINKING LIGHT and the missions continued.

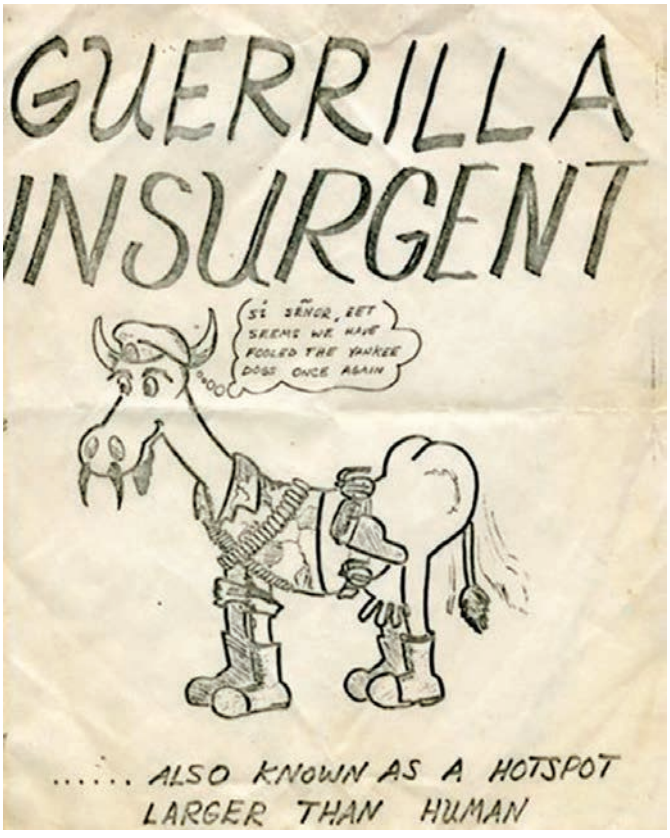
The guerillas learned quickly to seek cover whenever the gunship was approaching overhead. In open terrain, they were always spotted on the IR sensor, but did manage to evade when able to duck into buildings, vehicles or heavy jungle. Once individuals were spotted, gunship crews reported the activity, the U.S. would alert the Salvadorans, who would then alert the Salvadoran Army who would quickly respond. This lash-up worked very effectively especially with the U.S.-trained ARCE Battalion and the Salvadoran-trained, anti-terrorist, Ponce Battalion.

As the mission wore on, the guerrillas grew fearful of the gunship since they knew anytime they could hear the gunship overhead, bad things were about to happen to them. They became more proficient at hiding and essentially became tactically insignificant whenever a gunship was overhead. The Estado Mayor Conjunto de la Fuerza Armada de El Salvador (Salvadoran Military Headquarters), and an Army member were known to have said, "when a gunship flies, our soldiers do not die."

In the latter stages of BLINKING LIGHT, guerilla activity during the hours of darkness began to fade. Crews continued to fly missions on a regular basis "hitting" their assigned targets. During the dry season, the countryside was absolutely covered with "agricultural burns" and the ever-present livestock. Gunship sensors (at the time) were state-of-the-art, but it was still difficult to distinguish between a group of humans or a group of cattle moving through tall grass and jungle. Crews recorded everything they saw and reported identifying targets as "cattle" so often they could have been ranchers. Intelligence analysts questioned whether some of the targets were cattle and called reports "inconclusive." Cattle sometimes follow one another on jungle trails and their movement could be misconstrued as appearing "tactical," but even with the gunships IR sensor, there is no mistaking a 1,000 pound steer for a 150 pound man. Since a lot of time, money and effort was expended flying the reconnaissance missions, Intelligence analysts at the Pentagon cringed at the thought of repeated reports of "cattle" and prohibited the word "cattle" from being used to report activity. Immediately, crews began using the term "bovine," but it was rejected as well after a short period of use. The acceptable term that emerged from the controversy was "hot spot larger than human"…which stuck for the remainder of the operation.

Eventually, there were organized protests at the Hurlburt front gate and media scrutiny continued. The missions continued unabated and the intelligence collected was significant enough to attract the attention of Lt. Colonel Oliver North, who flew on one mission listed on the passenger manifest as "Mr. North." At one point in 1986, under the code name of Operation NINE IRON, guns were re-installed and ammunition loaded on two aircraft for a strike mission in El Salvador. Crews flew non-stop from Hurlburt Field with air refueling, across Honduras and into El Salvador. While in El Salvador, the crews quickly identified the two preselected targets and were ready to fire. Then, they received instruction not to fire and return to Hurlburt Field.

Also in 1986, a KC-135 crew from the 305th Air Refueling Wing at Grissom AFB, gave their lives in an aircraft accident upon return to Howard AFB after refueling the AC-130 on a BLINKING LIGHT mission. On June 17, 1986, a KC-135A took off from Howard AFB on what was then the standard profile to perform an en route overtaking rendezvous off the coast of Nicaragua. As the tanker stabilized to air refueling speed after overtaking the AC-130, the gunship began to approach the pre-contact position prior to air refueling. The tanker crew encountered an engine problem that aborted the air refueling and necessitated a return to Howard AFB. The AC-130 was directed to return to Howard AFB as well. Approximately 1 hour out from Howard AFB, the gunship crew was directed to coordinate a random refueling track with the second tanker that had just launched from Howard AFB. The gunship navigator, Captain Dan Baradon coordinated the random refueling track and a normal rendezvous was accomplished. After refueling, the AC-130 crew flew a full length mission. They spent over 12 hours flying, met the 4 hour in country time, exited El Salvador and returned to Howard AFB. When the pilots established contact with Howard AFB, they were informed that the runway was littered with debris and they would have to divert to the civilian airport, General Omar Torrijos International (now Tocumen International), in Panama City, Panama. The crew informed the tower that they would have to land at Howard as going to the civilian airport would be exceptionally difficult for operational reasons. After some discussion, the Aircraft Commander, Captain Rick Middleton, requested a low approach to assess the runway condition. Upon the low approach, an engine and light debris was observed on the first 1,000 feet of the runway. Discussion ensued and the crew thought that a fighter aircraft had crashed but there was no large debris field, the engine had a cowling and there was only one tanker parked on the ramp. The crew discussed the low approach, debris seen, and concluded that it was a tanker engine. Everyone onboard thought that the tanker had probably recovered at Tocumen after the incident at Howard. The two pilots decided, based upon the low approach visual observation that the crew would avoid the area of debris and could safely land long on the Howard AFB runway. Captain Middleton circled the field, landed successfully and taxied to parking.



Drawing posted on the wall of the Intel shop at Howard AFB in the later stages of BLINKING LIGHT. Crews were directed to not use the term "cattle" on the BDA tape and instead use the term "hotspot larger than human." (Artwork courtesy of the Author)

Upon parking, the mission commander, Lt Col Hank Geier, came on board the aircraft and informed the crew that the tanker had crashed and that the crew had been killed. Evidently, after a much harder-than-normal landing, the number four engine came off the aircraft and the crew initiated a go around. After departing the Howard AFB runway environment, they were observed to have fire trailing from the wing, just missing the bridge of the Americas and they crashed on the backside of a jungle-covered hill at Rodman Naval Station, killing all aboard. AC-130H gunship crews continued flying nightly missions to El Salvador until October 15, 1987 when BLINKING LIGHT operations scaled back while focus shifted to Panamanian strongman, General Manuel Noriega. Regularly scheduled, but infrequent missions continued until Operation Blinking Light officially ended in 1990.

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Operation Continue Hope

Somalia 1993-1994

By CMSgt (Ret) Bill Walter

In 1991, Somalia entered into a civil war which resulted in almost 1 million refugees and nearly 5 million people threatened with famine because of the civil and persistent drought. The United Nations and others tried to resolve the war and provide relief, but were hindered by continued fighting among the warring parties. In March 1993, the United Nations established the UN Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM) to create a secure environment for humanitarian assistance and to restore peace, stability, and law and order. The United States committed to providing a quick reaction force (QRC) for the UNOSOM troops on the ground. On 5 Jun 1993, members of Mohammad Farah Aideed's Somalia National Alliance (SNA) militia attacked the UN forces. That attack resulted in 24 Pakistanis killed and 44 wounded.

The US responded with special operations forces including four AC-130H gunships from Hurlburt Field. The deployment order arrived at about the same time that the 1st SOW was conducting a change of command ceremony, with local reporters and television coverage present. Since it would be very obvious that something big was going on during the change of command, operational security concerns prompted the 1st SOW Director of Maintenance, Col Fred Gross, to have the four AC-130Hs towed to the Hot Cargo area. Parking the aircraft in Hot Cargo separated the aircraft by ½ mile from the ceremony, provided some cover so aircrews and maintainers could prepare the aircraft for deployment without being observed or disrupted. The change of command ceremony between Col Charles Holland and Col Clay Bailey took place at 1000hrs and went off without a hitch.

Once the preparations were complete, Lt Col Tom Waylett led the deployment of four AC-130s and crews commanded by Captains Forlano, Crabtree, Hughes and Cutts to Djibouti, on the north-east coast of Africa (see map). The AC-130H crews flew nearly 24 hours over a two day period with only one ground refueling stop at Torrejon AB, Spain. This long-duration journey was possible only by using augmented crews--additional aircrew members on board who would regularly rotate positions between flying and resting.

Lt Col Jim Connors, the 16th SOS commander, led the 300-member support package of aircrew members, planners, maintenance and supply troops, weather personnel, and an initial ammunition supply. They left the day after the gunships on a 17 hour, non-stop C-5 Galaxy flight direct to Djibouti International Airport. After three in-flight refuelings, the C-5 landed in Djibouti. Stepping off the C-5 at about 0200hrs, 1st SOW personnel were a bit shocked at the oppressive heat and found the temperature at the airport was "hot as blazes."

The operating location in Djibouti had not been used by American forces before so there was no infrastructure in place to handle a large influx of people. Hurriedly, arrangements were made to quarter the aircrews and support personnel in an old Sheraton hotel, French Air Force billeting, at a French Foreign Legion camp, and in an old storage hanger on the Airport.

After arrival, the initial target packages were built by MSgt Steve Jones, CMSgt Mike Steinbeck, and Special Tactics Combat Controllers from the 720th Special Tactics Group. In order to identify and locate their targets they were accompanied to Mogadishu by five personnel from the 1st SOW Special

Forces liaison detachment commanded by CW4 Vernon Ward. Traveling by commercial air to Mogadishu, they developed a grid overlay system to identify and pre-designate targets in the vicinity of the former US embassy.

On the afternoon of 11 June, three flight crews arrived at the airport for the first mission into Somalia. The maintenance crews were performing pre-flight checks on the sun-drenched gunships—no easy task as temperatures inside the gunships easily exceeded 130°F. To mitigate the effects of operating in such a hot environment, aircrews quickly completed their mission planning and pre-flight checks. Afterwards, they hurried to take off in order to get air flowing through the fuselage to cool the inside of the aircraft. The three aircraft were commanded by Capt Chris Mazur (6574), Capt Jim Hughes (6570), and Lt Col Tom Waylett (6577). The fourth aircraft (6568) remained on the ground in Djibouti as a spare. Each aircraft carried a full combat load of 105 and 40mm ammunition. Once crews arrived over Mogadishu, they landed to refuel under low light conditions at the Mogadishu Airport. While refueling was ongoing, it became very dark as crews traveled to a mess tent for dinner and prepared for a long night. During dinner, SSgt Jim Patterson, AC-130 sensor operator said gunfire could be heard to the north of the airfield and periodically a large caliber tracer round would skip off the runway and into the sea. Crews returned to their fully-fueled gunships and took off to fire on their pre-planned targets.

Lt Col Waylett's crew was supposed to fire first, but fire control system problems prevented them from firing. This forced them to fall back while Capt Mazur's crew took the lead. As Waylett's crew set up their 105mm gun for manual lanyard firing, Mazur and Hughes attacked Aideed's radio station and his command and control (C2) facility. Lt Col Waylett's crew then fired on barracks, vehicles, M48 tanks, weapons storage sites and a structure known as "the Cigarette Factory" (a known Aideed-controlled facility). Since all pre-planned targets were marked by laser and controlled by the two combat controllers and the 1st SOW SF liaison personnel, there were technically no "call for fire missions." Instead, the ground liaison team set up an observation point (OP) on the roof of the Pakistani Army headquarters building, the tallest building overlooking the target area. Some targets were as close as 100 meters from the OP, but the ground party was protected from shrapnel by a three-foot high concrete wall around the roof. MSgt Jones noted that the Pakistanis soldiers were happy to see their dead and wounded comrades avenged and would come to the roof and cheer whenever a gunship was firing. They also would serve the controllers cookies on formal serving trays, like a butler would…complete with white gloves. It made for quite a contrast, both mayhem and formality. All three aircraft stayed overhead Mogadishu until they were Bingo fuel (the point when the aircraft has enough fuel to return to base or to a tanker) and returned to Djibouti. When they landed, it was determined that all three crews had expended all of their 105mm loads on targets.

The crew chiefs welcomed the aircrews back with complimentary warm beer and then started their post-flight inspections and maintenance. As the gunners unloaded the spent cartridge cases, they found the casings were valuable commodities since everyone wanted a souvenir of these initial strikes. There was no cartridge case disposal issue, whatsoever.

While inspecting Lt Col Waylett's aircraft, the crew chiefs spotted holes in the fuselage just aft of the cargo door. Fearing the gunship was hit by undetected AAA fire, a crowd quickly assembled around the tail of 6577. A closer inspection revealed the damage was not from AAA fire, but was impact damage from the metal ratchet handle of a tie-down strap. The strap had been inadvertently left dangling by the loadmaster when he closed the cargo door. While the aircraft was inflight, the metal ratchet of the tie-down strap had repeatedly struck the aircraft before it broke free and fell to the ground somewhere between Mogadishu and Djibouti. After the facts were discovered, the damage was repaired and the loadmaster forgiven for making an honest mistake. The story of the "hostile 57mm cargo strap" however, survived. Years later, when that loadmaster received an assignment to new base, the crew chiefs presented him the frayed cargo strap as a memento.

On 15 June, the 16th SOS began planning its final strike of the deployment. Remarkably, aircraft 6568 had been on ground alert for the entire deployment. Primary crew chief SSgt Ben Weber and assistant crew chief Dave Rhodes were happy to see it on the schedule as the lead aircraft. Since 6568 had not participated in any combat activity since it had been built, this mission would be the first combat mission ever flown by "Night Stalker" and would be its "combat christening" as the last of the original 11 AC-130Hs to log combat time.

On June 16th, Capt Rich Forlano's crew departed Djibouti on aircraft 6568, eager to be the first crew to fire it in combat. Unfortunately, before they could fire on a target in

Source: UN Department of Field Support, Cartographic Service

Mogadishu a bleed air duct blew out on the right wing and they had to shut down engines #3 and #4. The crew was forced to declare an in-flight emergency (IFE) and their only option was to land at Mogadishu International Airport. The aircraft was heavy and difficult to control as they fought to stay airborne. With a lot of heavy rudder inputs, they successfully landed on the runway, but with both engines out on the right wing, the ability to reverse engines for braking was impossible. Setting down hard on the runway, they needed heavy application of brakes to keep from running off the far end. Capt Forlano and his co-pilot, Capt Chris Ferraraccio, managed to stop the aircraft on the runway and the entire crew performed emergency egress of the aircraft. As the crew watched from a distance, overheated brakes smoked until the fusible plugs in main landing gear rims ruptured, causing all four tires to deflate.

As Forlano's crew sat stranded on the runway of Mogadishu Airport, the airborne spare commanded by Capt Don Timpson took their place. Forlano's crew then watched the other two crews attack targets located only a few miles away from the airport. After Capt Timpson's crew Winchestered (shot their entire ammunition load), they landed on Mogadishu runway, taxied next to 6568, refueled and took 76 rounds of 105mm ammunition from 6568. Capt Timpson's crew then took off and continued to fire on targets previously assigned to Capt Forlano's crew. When overhead one of the targets, they were instructed to illuminate a road block with the 2KW spotlight in the overt mode. After discovering the light would not slave to the LLLTV (low light level TV) sensor, they had to resort to another back-up procedure they made up right then and there. To complete the mission, gunners SSgt Tony Millhouse and SSgt Kevin Neperud took turns manually positioning the light onto the target via "talk-on" by Capt Timpson. This was the last known use of the overt 2KW light during a combat operation. When the mission was complete, both gunships landed to pick up Forlano's crew, then returned to Djibouti. Forlano's flight engineer, TSgt Rob Withrow, stayed with aircraft 6568 on Mogadishu Airport ramp with the US Army providing security as a transient alert crew towed it off the active runway.

Once Foralano's crew debriefed at Djibouti, a gunship maintenance crew gathered tools and needed parts, then boarded a C-141 Starlifter to Mogadishu. Upon arrival, they were met by three men in civilian clothes who briefed them on the dangers of the area. They were instructed to not get on top of the aircraft because they could be easy targets for snipers. The trouble was though, they needed to get onto the wing to access the ruptured bleed air duct, so they had to take their chances.

Aircraft 69-6576 "Predator" painted in the European camouflage scheme. While supporting operations in Somalia on March 14th, 1994, a gun explosion caused loss of the aircraft and eight crew members. (Photo courtesy of MSgt [Ret] Richard McDonald)

The aircraft had already been towed off the runway and was parked near the perimeter of the airport. The landing gear doors were damaged by the deflated tires during the tow, so the maintainers removed the doors and loaded them into the aircraft. With frequent gunfire heard in the distance and AH-1 helicopter gunships patrolling the perimeter of the airport, they began to repair 6568.

It was a very long day for them since they had already worked a full shift at Djibouti before being flown to Mogadishu to work another 12-14 hours. At the end of their extended day, there was plenty of work that still needed to be done. The team was exhausted, but there was no place to sleep as the local tent city was full. Fortunately, one of the deployed medical units offered up their cots so the maintainers could get some rest. For the next three days, MSgt Chis Langlois, TSgt Ken Curry, TSgt Tom Riley, SSgt Marty Theis, SSgt Ben Weber and Sgt Dave Rhodes worked on tires, brakes, the bleed air duct, throttle cables, and pulleys until repairs were completed. A ferry crew was flown in from Djibouti to retrieve 6568, the maintenance team, and TSgt Withrow. Though "Night Stalker" had legitimately logged combat time before the IFE, it was not the type of combat history most care to remember. As a result, 6568's first combat mission was essentially overlooked from a historical perspective and the event only reinforced 6568's unofficial name of "Sick-Eight."

As the last planned AC-130 strike missions were being flown over Somalia, it was evident hostilities were very likely to continue and future combat operations were inevitable. Planning began at the 16th SOW Special Mission Plans Office for a follow-on mission involving US Army SOF. Special mission planners, Capt Dion Scaglione and SSgt Doug Michna, reported to Ft Bragg to plan operation CAUSTIC BRIMSTONE, a ground operation against elements of the SNA militia.

It was hoped that the Pentagon and

State Department would act quickly to approve the joint operation while AC-130s were still in place near Somalia, but that did not happen. The State Department rejected the plan and reduced it in scope to a small, limited deployment. Planners pushed back, hoping to increase the scope of CAUSTIC BRIMSTONE, but the State Department remained reluctant to do so. The plan was temporarily shelved and planners were sent back to their home units.

After the 4th of July, the 16th S0S deployment package made plans to return to Hurlburt. Some crew members were sent home on strategic airlift and basic crews with young aircraft commanders ferried the four gunships home. By the end of the deployment, crews had flown 32 sorties over Mogadishu. The last C-5 out of Djibouti flew the deployed mission planners and Lt Col John Easley's maintenance support package non-stop to Hurlburt.

There was no rest for the weary however. Upon arriving at Hurlburt, crews learned the first gunship to deploy to Italy to support Operation DENY FLIGHT was leaving the next morning. The squadron Director of Operations, Lt Col Mike Byers, would be the mission commander. As the 16th SOS deployed two aircraft and three crews to San Vito del Normanni AS, Italy, to fly missions over Bosnia-Herzegovina during Operation DENY FLIGHT, plans to send AC-130H gunships back to Somalia were already in the works.

While initial DENY FLIGHT operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina began, special mission planners at Hurlburt were called back to Ft Bragg to resume CAUSTIC BRIMSTONE planning. This time, the State Department mandated all operations to be conducted while operating out of Mogadishu airport. The mandate presented major problems for AC-130 operations since there was no infrastructure for the level of support needed to operate them. Unfortunately, the State Department would not budge on their position. The State Department's position meant the AC-130s would have to be eliminated from the joint task force (JTF).

With no AC-130s available, the JTF would then be forced to rely solely on small arms and rocket fire from 160th SOAR AH-6 Little Bird helicopters. The Little Birds are very capable and are flown by highly experienced pilots with significant combat time. AC-130 crews worked with them routinely and both units respected each other's' contributions to the mission. Granted, if the "lightning-quick-capture" raids went as planned, the need for AC-130s would be minimal. If the mission did not go as planned however, AC-130s would be needed for direct fire support, armed convoy escort, and even search and rescue support. Because of these factors, JTF leadership and planners believed they needed both the AH-6s and AC-130s for support and to provide overlapping capabilities. Hoping for a change in the State Department's position, AC-130 crews participated in pre-deployment training with the JTF in El Paso, TX, during exercise CRAFTY KAPER.

After a live fire/dry fire rehearsal from 12-19 Jul 1993, the tactical mission plan was complete. The original operation name CAUSTIC BRIMSTONE was changed to GOTHIC SERPENT and the planners were called to brief the JSOC Commander, Maj Gen William Garrison. Capt Scaglione began his briefing with a well-known axiom in the gunship community, "When you don't need a gunship almost anything will do, but when you need a gunship nothing else will do." He then went on to describe the scenarios in which the AC-130 would be indispensable to the JTF. He laid out a very convincing scenario to get AC-130 support added back into the mission plan and operate from the neighboring country of Kenya. Maj Gen Garrison was convinced the task force needed both AC-130s and armor support, but when he requested they be added to the plan, Secretary of Defense Les Aspin personally declined his request.

On 22 August, under the command of Maj Gen Garrison, Operation GOTHIC SERPENT deployed Task Force Ranger to Mogadishu. The task force included US Army Rangers from the 1/75 Ranger Regiment, Army Special Forces, helicopters and crews from the US Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) and USAF Combat Controllers and Pararescumen from the 24th Special Tactics Squadron (STS) at Pope AFB, NC.

Contrary to popular belief, Aideed's militia was not a rag-tag gang of civilians with guns. Rather, they were well trained and organized, even if their equipment was mixed or home-made and their marksmanship was less than stellar. They were accustomed to war. Even if their tactics and weapons were crude when judged by western standards, they were militarily effective.

By October, the Special Forces, supported by Rangers, had conducted numerous raids, capturing a number of the leaders from Habar Gidir, Aideed's sub-clan. On October 3rd, during a routine capture mission in central Mogadishu, the operators successfully apprehended several Habar Gidir lieutenants. As the mission progressed though, Aideed's militia shot down two 160th SOAR Blackhawk helicopters with RPG-7 anti-tank rockets. These tragic events caused an immediate shift from a capture mission to a rescue mission. The captured Somalis were released as the outnumbered soldiers and Air Force Special Tactics NCOs fought a pitched battle for survival throughout the night. As the "Battle of Mogadishu" unfolded, Maj Gen Garrison sent an urgent request, "Get the gunships here now," directly to President Clinton. The President immediately rescinded the Secretary of Defense's earlier prohibition. Very quickly the phones started ringing at Hurlburt Field and San Vito AS, Italy.

By the time the battle ended the next day, 18 American soldiers were dead, more than eighty were wounded, and one was captured by the SNA. On Hurlburt Field, Col Jack Holbien ordered Capt Scaglione to report to Ft Bragg as soon as possible. When he arrived, he joined with other mission planners including AC-130 navigator and air planner, Capt Mike Vaughn, and then proceeded to USSOCOM Headquarters at MacDill AFB, FL. On October 5th, they joined the USSOCOM Commander, Gen Wayne Downing for a non-stop flight from Tampa to Mogadishu.

At San Vito AS orders flowed quickly and two AC-130 crews were selected to re-deploy as soon as possible. DENY FLIGHT missions were put on hold and

all AC-130 assets were in the process of being re-deployed to Africa. Other than "get there fast," there was minimal planning or coordination prior to departure. Fortunately, the original plan devised to operate from Mombasa, Kenya, was fundamentally in place, but no support equipment of any kind was available. Though planners were confident gunship personnel would be billeted and fed on the local economy , the gunships would most certainly arrive earlier than the needed mission support equipment and personnel could be airlifted into Mombasa. Though the US Navy had several P-3 Orions stationed there, the only thing the initial AC-130 crews could count on being available was fuel and whatever they brought with them from Italy.

On October 5th, two AC-130H gunships commanded by Captains Chris Mazur in aircraft 6568, "Nightstalker," and Bob Sack in 6576, "Predator," left San Vito AS at maximum gross weight. They packed as much support equipment as they could possibly carry, a full tactical crew, a combat load of ammunition, several crew chiefs, and a security policeman. Both crews flew 14 hour flights directly to Mombasa. The following day, aircraft 6573, "Heavy Metal," and 6569, "Excalibur," commanded by Captains Mark Demers and Kevin Fox left Brindisi for Mombasa. Capt Fox's crew diverted to Cairo due to a maintenance issue and they arrived the next day.

The first crews to arrive at Mombasa Airport were essentially on their own. Since Mombasa is a well-known tourist destination, it turned out to be much better situated than Djibouti to support the gunships. It had many commercial hotels and restaurants, lessening the need to bring a high level of troop support equipment. The first two crews and support element were billeted in the Nyali Hotel, one of the oldest traditional Kenyan hotels in Mombasa. The Nyali had outdoor restaurants and a rainfall collecting cistern that provided non-potable water throughout the hotel. Because of the primitive water supply system, small bits of green algae came out of the shower head and sink in each room. The only drinkable water was bottled water available for purchase, but since there is water in beer too, some crew members made sure they kept "fully hydrated" after arrival. The entertainment did not end there however. There were monkeys living in the trees surrounding the hotel and more than a few unsuspecting crewmen had food snatched from their plates by the monkeys. Thankfully, the stay at the Nyali was short term, but still, crews were grateful they did not have to sleep in a tent in the stifling African heat.

On October 6th, Gen Downing and additional staff, including AC-130 planner Capt Scagilone, landed at the Mogadishu airport. They arrived just in time for a memorial service for the 18 soldiers killed during the battle of Mogadishu. Later that evening, a Somali mortar round impacted near the TF Ranger hangar, killing SFC Matthew Rierson and injuring a dozen others including Col William G. "Jerry" Boykin.

Considering the tragic events that unfolded a few days earlier, all options were on the table and mission planning was tactically calculated and aggressive. The Army planners brainstormed many different options, including AC-130 fires on multiple targets to suppress hostile Somalis and deter future attacks. Aside from the political aspect of gunship strikes, it was feared that firing directly on Somali targets was risky since nobody knew exactly where CW3 Mike Durant, the pilot capture by Aideed, was being held. Planners were concerned AC-130 fires may inadvertently result in Durant's injury or death. TF Ranger also wanted to recover the remains of their soldiers killed during the battle, some of which were televised while being mutilated, spat upon, and savagely dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. Considering all factors, the course of action chosen for AC-130 crews was to drive hostile Somalis into hiding by a firing near their positions as a shows of force, followed by constant overhead presence of the gunship.

Missions began on 7 Oct 1993. Gunship crews were tasked to fly constant orbits every night over known hostile locations from sundown to sunrise. To accomplish this, two crews flew overlapping missions with take-off spaced several hours apart. The basic concept was to time the missions to arrive over Mogadishu shortly after sundown, land in blackout conditions and taxi to a position near the large hangar where TF Ranger was based. While the gunship was being refueled, gunners, the flight engineer and loadmaster would stay with the aircraft to guard it. The pilots, fire control officer, sensor operators, and electronic warfare officer would go to the operations center to plan the mission with the Special Forces, Rangers, and liaison officers. Then the crew would take off to fly the mission.

The first night's missions would be flown by crews commanded by Capt Mazur and Capt Sack. Mazur's crew would fly aircraft 6568 which would be its first mission to Mogadishu since the bleed air duct failure and IFE in June. Capt Sack's crew would take off several hours after Capt Mazur to enable overlapping mission times that would cover the entire night. The first target was an open field near one of Habar Gidir's main operations center, the Cigarette Factory. Capt Mazur's crew was authorized to expend no more than 25% of their ammunition load during five minutes of continuous firing in an open field near the warehouse.

After taking off from Mogadishu, Capt Mazur's crew acquired their target and fired 40mm and 105mm rounds as planned. Once a fire mission was complete, gunship crews remained overhead the city, ready to fire on a moment's notice. They stayed overhead for around four hours until they were low on fuel. Then they landed, refueled, and flew back to Mombasa. Capt Sack's crew performed the same mission profile after Mazur, without a hitch. Capt Mazur's crew succeeded in firing aircraft 6568 in combat for the very first time in its history. Nobody at the time realized the historical significance of the mission…it was all about supporting TF Ranger.

The Somalis were now under surveillance every night as an AC-130 prowled overhead the streets of Mogadishu. It is likely that the Somalis remembered what the AC-130 strikes had done in June and understood what the AC-130 could do to them in the dark. It was rare to find anyone wandering the streets at night. To avoid being targeted, most would seek cover and stay inside whenever a gunship could be heard overhead the city. This was just what TF Ranger wanted gunship crews to provide.

By October 13th, gunships were tasked to perform surveillance on multiple locations throughout their mission

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times and report any activity to the task force. It proved to be a bit harder than anticipated in a city full of shot out buildings and derelict vehicles, primitive hand carts, and livestock made the task of locating targets difficult. In the city, there were few improved roadways that could be considered main streets. Connected to these main roads were a series of unimproved dirt routes that did not seem to follow any logical pattern. Of course, most of these back roads were primarily used for foot traffic since automobiles were fairly scarce. The clans however, had vehicles and many small pick-up trucks which the Somalis called "Technicals." These vehicles were nothing more than small pickup trucks with 12.7mm DShK or 14.5mm KPV machine guns mounted on the back. The Technicals may have looked strange, but were capable of inflicting extensive damage, destruction, and death. As missions continued into the middle of October, AC-130 crews detected multiple buildings where arc welding flashes could be seen. Most felt these were "chop shops" that were either manufacturing or repairing Technicals, but there was no practical way to verify the suspicion.

By the time Capt Demers and Capt Fox began flying missions, all aircrews were relocated to the White Sands Hotel a bit further down the coast from the Nyali. The White Sands was a modern hotel, surrounded by other hotels and restaurants. It was also comforting to the aircrews as there was no green algae flowing from the showers and no thieving monkeys. Maintainers were billeted a little farther down the coast at the Intercontinental Hotel. Feeding such a large contingent of personnel was handled by establishment of contracts with the Intercontinental, White Sands, and a restaurant called Yul's.

Front and back side of leaflets dropped on the city of Mogadishu after AC-130H suppressive fires near the "Cigarette Factory" on the second week of October 1993. During this time, SFC Matt Rierson, a Delta Force Operator had been killed during a mortar attack and CWO Durant was known to be captured with whereabouts unknown. (Courtesy of Author)

Some German military rations were also available to take onboard the flights.

On October 14th, CW3 Durant was released and the remains of those killed during the battle were returned. By this time, the crews were directed to stop suppressive fires, but continued nightly armed reconnaissance missions over Mogadishu in direct support of TF Ranger. As the night-time operations tempo was very high, additional crews were sent from Hurlburt. Additional personnel, support equipment, spare parts, and ammunition arrived in Mombasa. 16th SOS planners, Capt Steve Wiggins and Capt Rich Wallace, arrived at Mogadishu to augment Capt Scaglione. A temporary bomb dump was established near the Mogadishu runway. A newly developed penetrating fuse for the 105mm HE (high explosive) round was provided by the Air Force Research Laboratory. The gunships were now equipped to fire on just about anything in the city. But with every day that passed it seemed that resumption of firing operations was less likely to occur. Since Aideeed's militia was quick to adapt, they knew the AC-130 was only flying at night and began to increase offensive operations in the daytime. This was obviously a concern for the task force and the potential for AC-130 daylight operations was considered. Since the intelligence threat assessment indicated a very low threat level for the AC-130s, daylight missions were not only possible, they were inevitable. Once daylight missions began, there was an AC-130 armed reconnaissance mission scheduled to be overhead Mogadishu continuously, 24 hours a day. This change placed a tremendous demand on both crews and maintainers.

The gunships maintained a day/night crew rotation with most crews flying three nights in a row and then they would be off duty the fourth night. After their day off, they would shift from night to day missions for another rotation. On one day mission in mid-October, Capt Mazur's crew was interviewed on the Mogadishu ramp and filmed by a British reporter. They later appeared on "Good Morning America."

Once tanker support arrived, crews no longer had to land at Mogadishu for fuel, but continued flying long surveillance missions over the city. At 1830hrs on 20 Oct, operational control of all AC-130s was passed to Joint Task Force/10th Mountain Division as TF Ranger had wrapped up operations in Mogadishu. On 23 Oct, the last elements of TF Ranger left Somalia. AC-130s however, would remain on station to support Operation CONTINUE HOPE for another five months. Remarkably, the same politicians who refused to include AC-130s in the TF Ranger mission plan now refused to let AC-130s leave, even though TF Ranger was no longer there. AC-130 gunships continued to fly missions over Mogadishu until the end of March 1994.

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SPECTRE IN BOSNIA

Conflict in the Balkans

By Lt Gen Bradley Heithold, Commander AFSOC

After the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, multi-ethnic factions in Bosnia and Herzegovina sought their own independence, which the international community recognized. Bosnian Serbs, led by Slobodan Milosevic, categorically rejected the claim for this independence. From 1992 to 1995 open conflict resulted and with it came a disregard for humanity and an ethnic cleansing effort not seen since World War II. As a result, the United Nations (UN) passed several resolutions aimed at stifling Serbian aggression by establishing a No-Fly Zone and providing close air support to UN Peacekeepers. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was charged with this responsibility, which eventually expanded to airstrikes aimed at reducing Serbia's military capacity and coercing Serbian leadership toward the negotiating table.

Within the NATO framework, which included aircraft and crews from 12 separate countries, were the men and women of the 16th Special Operations Squadron. Spectre participated in each of the major air offensives within the overall NATO effort.

One such example of Spectre's contribution was the rescue attempt of EBRO 33—a French aircrew of two who ejected after enemy fire disabled their Mirage. Then commander-in-chief of Allied Forces, Southern Europe, Admiral Leighton Smith, tasked Spectre to team up with a flight of MH-53s and MC-130s to lead the recovery effort. Along with support from fighter aircraft providing suppression of enemy air defenses, the rescue package transited to the last known location of the pilots. Despite poor weather, the rescue package searched for the pilots for 50 minutes before being ordered to return to base. On their way out of the objective area, the MH-53s received anti-aircraft fire. Spectre quickly silenced the anti-aircraft artillery firing on the helicopters. A day later the same package would again attempt to locate the downed crew. The subsequent search was unsuccessful and the MH-53s again received heavy fire, anti-aircraft fire hitting one of the aircraft and injuring two crew members. The AC-130 crew successfully directed fighter aircraft onto the AAA guns. Several minutes later, during egress, the MH-53s took even more fire from different locations, requiring Spectre to once again silence the enemy anti-aircraft guns.

> "Together with our Army and AFSOC team members, 30 superbly talented aviators performed the mission in true Spectre fashion, professionally, with enthusiasm."
>
> — Maj Brad Heithold
> 16th SOS/DO Sep 1996

While the overall rescue effort was unsuccessful, the French Chief of Defense, Gen Jean-Philippe DOUIN, sent a letter to Admiral Smith, personally thanking him for the support from rescue aircraft, which included the men and women of Spectre.

A year later, from San Vito Air Station, Italy, AC-130Hs were tasked to protect 53 members of a US Presidential delegation sent to monitor the election process. The Spectre crews provided advance reconnaissance of helicopter landing zones and polling sites. They also delivered armed escort to the delegation as they moved between polling sites. The AC-130H missions were a grueling sunrise-to-sunset schedule, amassing four aerial refuelings between the two tasked aircraft. In fact, the sorties set records for both the longest AC-130 mission flown in the European command and longest ever daylight mission. Both of these records comprised truly significant feats, considering the robust lethality of Serbian air defenses. The elections were a top priority for the US, NATO, and UN. In fact, then-President Clinton noted, "These elections are a key step on the long, difficult path to a lasting peace in Bosnia—a path we are determined to walk alongside the Bosnian people in the days ahead." Given the gravity of the elections, it is no surprise that Spectre was asked to provide armed overwatch for monitors on the ground.

During the winter, the crews flew in less-than-comfortable conditions. Often times, the back of the airplane would resemble near-Arctic conditions, with sub-zero temperatures and winds whipping through the many holes in the fuselage. The crews were aware, however, of the importance of what they were doing and always elected to put the mission first. In one such example, the heat packs for the airplane had failed, making a cold situation even colder. While refueling in the air, the crew discussed returning for maintenance. But as the crew weighed their options, then SrA James Gary realized the importance of the mission and said to the aircraft commander, "Hey sir, we are OK back here, these people need our support. Let's go back!" As the mission commander and director of operations, I was proud of this dedication to the mission under such brutal conditions. That dedication, woven into the fabric of Spectre, has been the catalyst for the 16th's immense contributions not only in Bosnia, but worldwide over the past 44 years.

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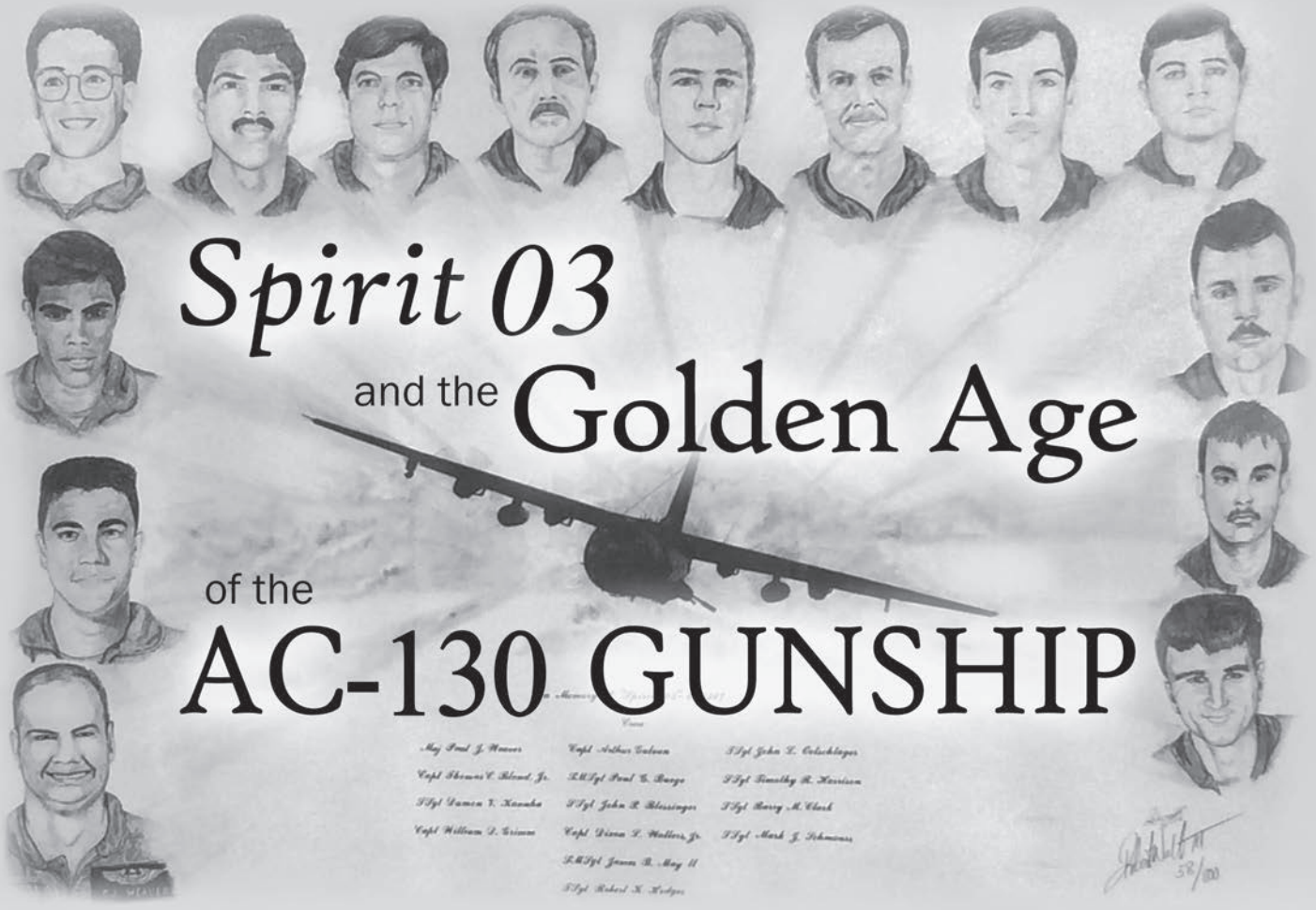


Spirit 03 and the Golden Age of the AC-130 GUNSHIP

By Maj Gen (S) J. Marcus Hicks, USAF

I learned of the loss of Spirit 03 from a crew chief at Little Rock AFB who saw my 16th SOS patch as we "blocked in" following my aircraft commander (AC) check ride on the 31 Jan 1991. Had it not been for the availability of that training slot, I might have been sitting in Cliff Bland's seat, beside my friend and Spirit 03 aircraft commander, Maj Paul Weaver.

I had been the copilot of the fifth and last gunship to arrive for Desert Shield, the defensive phase of the operation. Dixon Walter, our electronic warfare officer (EWO), had been a close friend and one of my three roommates until our crew rotated home after only a few weeks at King Fahd International Airport, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He returned a few months later to perish on Spirit 03. I had managed to get a vacant AC upgrade class after that first rotation, so I have little firsthand information about the night of the mission. Additionally, as Bill Walter has already provided a fine history of the event in the Summer 2012 edition of this journal, I don't plan to add to the history. I do, however, hope to provide some perspective on the impact the loss had on the gunship community at a critical time in our history, both for better and for worse.

Some Context: Highs and Lows

Desert Storm has always been a mixed memory for Air Force Special Operations Command. As Gen H. Norman Schwarzkopf led a victory parade for Operation Desert Storm, and the Nomads of the 33rd FW celebrated their 16 aerial victories, the Green Hornets of the 20th SOS feted the twin accomplishments of opening the war and achieving the first combat rescue of a downed US pilot since Vietnam. The Spectres of the 16th SOS, in stark contrast, were just beginning to cope with the loss of Spirit 03, the largest combat loss in the war, which took 14 friends from us and 10% of the AC-130H fleet.

The sting of our loss was all the greater when contrasted with the successes of Operation Just Cause (Panama), just over a year prior. There, 7 of the 10 active duty AC-130Hs and 2 AC-130As from the 919th SOW had been the primary close air support platforms for the entire operation. Two of those H-models had prepositioned to launch from Panama to support the rescue of Kurt Muse from the Modelo prison. I was a lieutenant and the copilot of Greg McMillan's lead aircraft in

that bizarre, two-ship formation, which is a story we will share in a future edition of ACJ. The other five H-model gunships departed Hurlburt Field directly to Panama. Duke Field's two A-model gunships deployed for a two-week rotation and added their capability and experience to the fight. Despite some unfortunate mistakes, the gunship community performed well in the permissive environment of Panama. In the first major combat operation since URGENT FURY (Grenada), Air Force Special Operations and the AC-130s were in the spotlight and it felt good.

It seemed odd that the squadron was grieving for Spirit 03 when almost everyone else at Hurlburt Field, Ft Walton Beach, and the nation were celebrating the victory of Desert Storm. We were confused about what had happened and our questions were compounded by the more than month-long delay in finding the crash site and the intense speculation about what had happened. That speculation, fueled by our grief, frustration, and anger, gave birth to legends that persist to this day. Like most legends there is some truth, but much has been taken out of context. In this article, I hope to provide a slightly different take on what happened over 23 years ago. More importantly, I hope to provide some perspective on the enduring legacy of Spirit 03, which has both inspired and haunted our community for so long. Ultimately, I believe the loss of Spirit 03 and 14 brave souls, along with key technological advances, has led to the largest advance in tactical employment since the development of the side-firing gunship in Vietnam.

Mythologies

Probably the most common misunderstanding of the shoot-down was that Maj Weaver, had been excessively eager to get into combat, having missed combat in Panama, and he stayed over the target too long—into daylight and against orders to return to base. Slightly less common is the misconception that they were supporting a Marine Corps force under fire from an Iraqi Free Rocket Over Ground (FROG) missile battery and chose to ignore the danger of the rising sun, ignored orders to return, and died heroically defending fellow Americans. Both stories contain partial facts, but are somewhat misleading. A more accurate description is that they were involved in the battle of Khafji, Saudi Arabia, one of the pivotal battles of the war, doing their job professionally. They died because of a lucky hit from a very capable surface-to-air missile (SAM).

The cockpit voice recorder clearly recorded the crew working with a Marine Forward Air Controller (FAC) and methodically and professionally engaging targets near Khafji. There were no signs of discord, unprofessional bravado, fear, complacency, or unmanageable fire-control difficulties. The crew was mindful of the rising sun, as well as their fuel state, and was preparing to depart when they received the order to return to base. As they were departing, the FAC, with no particular sense of urgency, asked them to look for possible FROG launchers in the area. The crew complied only momentarily as their fuel state forced them to depart.

Paul Weaver was turning toward base when the aircraft was hit in the left wing between number one engine and the external fuel tank by a man-portable SAM. What has not been told is that our AC-130s at that time had no defenses against the kind of SAM that hit Spirit 03. The flares we carried would have been ineffective, even had they been used. And, had the heat-seeking missile hit the engine as it was designed to do, Spirit 03 likely would have made it home. Unfortunately, the missile hit the wing in a partially empty fuel cell, causing an overpressure which caused the wing structure to fail. About two thirds of the left wing was ripped off, instantly rendering the aircraft unflyable and leaving no time for anyone to bail out. Spirit 03 was a combat loss, not a mishap.

The facts concerning Spirit 03 were: the aircraft was relatively low—at around 9,000 feet, it stayed to the limit of its endurance—a common practice then and now, they had been directed to return to base and complied with that guidance in a timely manner—although not instantaneously, and they remained over the target area for an extended period of time with few threat indications—departing just past sunrise. None of these facts, however, describes anything other than a crew aggressively pursuing their mission in the finest Spectre tradition. More importantly though, it reflects the context of their training and standard practices at that time.

Spirit 03 carried into the shallow waters of the Persian Gulf the experience, judgment, and collective wisdom of the 16th SOS of the day. It is therefore not helpful for any of us to blame the crew for making decisions, however poor we may think them to be in clarity of hindsight, which were consistent with their training. Every leader in the community, formal and informal, had a role to play in ensuring that training was appropriate, rigorous, and sufficient. If we had training deficiencies—and it is my professional opinion that we did—we should blame those deficiencies, not the dead, as the cause of poor tactical decisions.

As a command, we have long been distracted by emotionally-charged questions of leadership and judgment as we rotate crews on the eve of combat and often replace more experienced and capable crews with those with less experience. If anyone on that crew, or any other, should not have been there due to lack of experience, incompatibility, or any other incapacity, it leadership and not the individuals, who are to blame. The fact remains that Spirit 03 was shot down by an enemy weapons system while doing what we asked them to do and exactly as we had trained them to do.

There are other nagging concerns about senior leadership and oversight, including fundamental questions about whether or not gunships should have been in such a hazardous environment. Controversy and concerns over command and control continue to this day. Years later Gen Horner told me he had received mixed messages from the gunship community. Some wanted gunships to be given more opportunities to strike targets while others wanted them reserved for safer, rear-area defense missions. Gen Horner's observation is consistent with my own recollection of the internal debates, fueled by lack of consensus, antiquated doctrine, and limited understanding of our own capabilities and limitations.

For those of us who were in the 16th SOS then and had to move beyond the tragedy, there was much work to be done. Moreover, for those of us who have commanded crews

in combat, made decisions about doctrine and training, and subsequently committed multiple crews into combat, there has been much to reflect upon.

Technological Sea Change

The AC-130H that crashed in the waters off Khafji was a modified, 1969 C-130E, with few improvements since the 105mm cannon had been installed in South-east Asia almost 20 years earlier. The heads-up display was purportedly from an A-7 and provided only rudimentary, orange-colored symbology (symbology on modern HUDs is green). The navigation system used spinning-mass gyros—more Vietnam era technology. The fire control system, along with some of our training priorities, was so antiquated that we spent way too much energy trying to get our "nominal" altitude and airspeed exactly correct. These are two critical factors when flying pylon turns to ensure the round goes where there the crew intends. Pilots constantly checked weather forecasts for altitude deviation values (D-value) so we could set the altitude exactly right on the sea-level range, in part because the fire control system did not handle "off nominal" situations very well, and in part because years of peacetime training had allowed us to creep into tactically unsound training practices. This habit, like many others, would haunt us in the mountains of Kosovo and Afghanistan because we had no practical experience with real terrain elevation, let alone developing firing solutions for mountainous terrain. Worse yet, few of us were concerned because we did not know we were deficient. Crews also spent an enormous amount of time practicing degraded modes of firing, often because that was all we had when the antiquated systems failed. While I am a believer in degraded operations, the opportunity cost of hours over the range was too high. Our pre-information-age computers and sensors were closer to Apollo technology than to modern computers.

Given the poor fire control system and sensors, the AC-130H of my youth could barely find a target, let alone hit one, from reasonable altitudes. In training, the typical employment altitude for the AC-130H was about 6,000 feet AGL. In that context, 9,000 feet over Khafji was about as high as you could go and expect to be effective because the 20mm round runs out of energy and begins to tumble the higher the altitude above ground. Further, we had rarely, if ever, trained on oxygen, which is a requirement above 10,000 feet. Thus, the crew of Spirit 03 was doing what they could, with the equipment they had, and the training they had been provided.

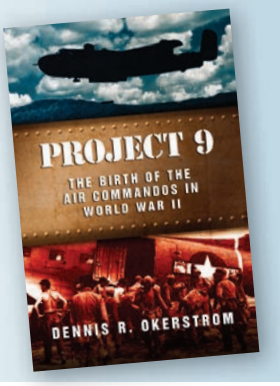
Fortunately, technological upgrades would soon improve our situation. While planning Operation Just Cause, we had also been flying test missions on the Special Operations Forces Improvement (SOFI) modification to the AC-130H. With an F-16 HUD, digital fire control, ring-laser gyros, GPS, advanced navigation algorithms, and better sensors, the AC-130H was becoming a modern weapon system. Although it was fielded too late for Desert Storm, the SOFI mod would prove crucial for all contingencies to follow.

Defensive improvements were also long overdue. The antiquated flare system carried by Spirit 03 was useless against later-generation man-portable SAMS. In the years following Desert Storm, modifications included modern chaff and flare dispensers, infrared missile-launch warning, and modern electronic countermeasures.

The AC-130U was also undergoing tests as we fielded the SOFI modified AC-130H. The "U-Boat" started as a newer C-130H2 and boasted dual-target attack, limited through-the-weather capability, and better situational awareness for the pilots, but proved to be only a modest improvement over the SOFI AC-130H.

A Renaissance in Tactics

One of the truisms in the profession of arms is the



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motivating effect of loss or failure. Accordingly, the loss Spirit 03 has provided much for the gunship community to debrief and debate. Many of us became deeply committed to improving our tactics, taking full advantage of the new capabilities, and avoiding unnecessary losses in the future. We experimented, innovated, talked, and debated. Not every idea was good, nor were all the innovations fully accepted. There were some who resisted change or did not like ideas "not invented here." Sadly, some of those dynamics persist to this day.

Because of the new fire control system's ability to handle off-nominal shooting, we were no longer handcuffed to the nominal orbit, altitude, and airspeed. Moreover, the innovators did not want to train that way anymore. We experimented with limited orbits, standoff shooting (the aircraft will fire in a slight right bank, although the guns are still depressed below the horizon), and more.

Crew coordination with 14 souls onboard was always a challenge, but we actually learned from the rest of the joint force and introduced brevity into our antiquated, training-focused dialogue onboard the aircraft. Dispensing with unnecessary comments like "pilot's in the sight" and shortening the "FCO Hymn" to essential data, we expedited the still burdensome crew coordination and set new professional standards. Improved SOFI navigation systems and better night-vision goggles (NVG) improved our ability in low-level operations—a tactic of dubious utility for gunships that must employ at medium altitude, but one that built critical crew-coordination skills. Standard low-level turn briefings, combined with other brevity terms, dramatically changed onboard communications.

We also relearned some lessons of the past, like minimizing our exposure to hostile fire, which is easier said than done when providing persistent support to a ground force, but we tried. We planned to fly a limited number of orbits before briefly moving away. We flew loose orbits, maintaining visual contact and remaining unpredictable. For the first time, we routinely went high, often above 10,000 feet which required going on oxygen in the unpressurized cabin. "Going on the hose" was not particularly comfortable or popular with crews, but I can think of nothing else that prepared us better to succeed in the contingencies that lay ahead. Conveniently, wearing an oxygen mask reinforced the need for brevity. Again, improved fire control and better sensors really helped, but it was a commitment to be tactically sound that really made the difference.

Thus, in the spring of 1993 when Capt Hicks, 16th SOS Chief of Weapons and Tactics, briefed Col Schwartz, the 1st SOW Deputy Commander for Operations, on the plan for conducting operations over Bosnia as part of Operation DENY FLIGHT, I briefed going in high and staying high. This was revolutionary, but necessary in the sophisticated and uncertain threat environment and the severe terrain of the Balkans. When we deployed to Brindisi, Italy, we established standard operating procedures, including the requirement to be "feet wet" (out of Bosnia and over the Adriatic See) 30 minutes prior to begin morning nautical twilight (BMNT, sometimes called "first light," when the first rays of dawn begin to come above the horizon). We discussed contingencies, coordinated with our Pave Low brothers for CSAR options, established bail out criteria for a two engine drift down—tragically presaging the Jockey 14 mishap the following year, and more.

We still had much to learn, including concerns over the bends when operating unpressurized above FL 180 and cold injuries on the frigid gun deck. One night, when climbing above clouds, we hit FL 250 over Sarajevo one night and it was -42 degrees Fahrenheit outside and only slightly warmer on the gun deck. We also learned about the limits of the standard C-130 25-liter liquid oxygen (LOX) bottle with a 14-man crew. The current dual oxygen-bottle configuration on the AC-130H is a result of one particularly long night over Bihac, Bosnia, while supporting the French. After two tankers we were forced to return to base in order to trade aircraft as we ran out of LOX on the first gunship. While far from perfect, those initial deployments to Brindisi were a clean break from the past and a sea-change in the way we would operate thereafter. We had a solid plan for operations in a hazardous environment and the plan worked. Subsequent successes in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq are directly and inextricably linked to the early 1990s when we had a cohort of operators driven to avoid a repeat of Spirit 03. And, we finally had reliable, capable systems, both in the SOFI modified AC-130H and the new AC-130U.

The innovation and experimentation could not have happened without support from squadron leadership. As a captain in the squadron, I was allowed to completely rewrite our employment document, which was then offered to HQ AFSOC for publication. In Brindisi, we removed external fuel tanks to save drag, pulled the 20 mm cannons off because they were no longer effective at our employment altitudes, and improvised better environmental controls. We studied and questioned planning and employment assumptions, which led to a major change to defensive tactics while in operations in the Balkans. With support from my predecessor in HQ AFSOC/A3, Col Howie Chambers, we rapidly developed and conducted tests to validate our theories, which have stood to this day. The unwavering support from most of the leadership enabled what Col Mike Byers called a "renaissance in tactics" through the first half of the 1990s.

Missed Opportunities

Unfortunately, not all of the leadership was supportive and not all innovation was welcome. Obvious initiatives like urban-target arrays on the live-fire ranges, NVG take-off, landing, and ground operations, as well as hot refueling and rearming to prepare for serious contingencies on blacked-out airfields, were all blocked by myopic leadership. These concepts were not stretches. When Howard AFB shut out the lights in the opening hours of Operation JUST CAUSE, we were not prepared to operate blacked out. As far as I know I had the only set of NVGs and then only by choice and chance. The fact that we were not aware it was going to happen demonstrates the substantial planning deficiencies, overconfidence, and complacency of the day. Each of these initiates would be reborn after further combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq encouraged new leaders to support the aircrews' innovations.

High-Illumination Nightmares

The same loss that inspired the renaissance in tactics also fueled fear and overreaction that has haunted us for decades. Spirit 03 had been shot down just after sunrise by a missile that required its operator to see the target. We had flown daylight missions in Panama a year prior and there had been no clear guidance to land before sunrise during Desert Storm. There was substantial controversy regarding what guidance the crews did have however, or perhaps should have had. Learning from this, we established the requirement to be feet wet 30 minutes prior to BMNT in Bosnia, giving the extra thirty minute pad to reduce the probability of a backlit sky highlighting an aircraft. In the context of policing a no-fly zone in a troubled land with no American and few NATO forces on the ground, this seemed a prudent policy.

I retain a vivid memory of flying out of Bosnia toward Croatia one morning and looking over my shoulder to see a distinct and disturbing glow on the eastern horizon. Peering under my NVGs returned a scene of complete darkness, demonstrating that the 30-minute pad was about right. The fact that I was wearing NVGs at high altitude was equally remarkable. We had taken techniques from our low-level training, applied them to high-altitude operations, and would never again go into combat without night vision systems.

Unfortunately, concerns about our safety and the fear of being seen haunted us into combat in Afghanistan. These missions were usually to support US and coalition forces engaged in desperate combat with the enemy—clearly demanding a higher acceptance of risk on our part. Policies were established though, not just against flying in daylight, but also against flying on high-illumination nights regardless if the moon was up or not during the flight period. While well intentioned, I believe arbitrary limits against flying on high-illumination nights needlessly put American and coalition forces at risk because they did not have our support. Additionally, it damaged our credibility among an elite group of SOF warriors who were risking their lives all day, every day. We must always balance our personal survivability, and that of the aircraft we fly, against the utility of the mission—and that is decision is commander's business. As the Air Component Commander for Special Operations Command, Central, I had the opportunity to veto ground missions where, in my judgment, air support was too hazardous. I also ordered, and flew, daylight missions that made sense.

While the loss of Spirit 03 clearly demonstrated the hazards of a backlit sky, the night is no sanctuary. We must balance environmental factors, such as illumination and even daylight, with all other factors in our risk estimates, which must also be balanced against the requirement of the mission.

Wrapping Up

The AC-130 community went to Desert Storm ill prepared for combat on a modern battlefield. We had grown complacent over years of peacetime operations, permissive environments, and little investment in modernization. Modernization efforts, the AC-130H SOFI and AC-130U, which had been programmed in the mid-1980s were on the horizon, like the sun over the Persian Gulf on the morning of 31 January 1991, but they were too late to save Spirit 03.

The crew of Spirit 03, while far from the most cohesive or experienced, was not incompetent, nor were they heroically defending Marines under fire. In hindsight it's clear that they made a tactical error in remaining too long in a relatively high-threat area with a backlight sky and no friendly forces engaged to justify the risk. What is most disturbing is that the error was not clear at the time, but only in hindsight. Had we been better prepared as a community, that crew would likely have had better training, more explicit guidance, and would have made better decisions.

Technological advances, like the AC-130H SOFI and AC-130U, were necessary, but insufficient for the continuing relevance of AC-130 gunships. This was evidenced best during the fielding of AC-130U from the test program at Edwards AFB. There the test team was made up of some Desert Storm veterans who, by virtue of the test program, had missed the tactical renaissance period and the initial deployments to Bosnia. When I became an initial-cadre evaluator in the AC-130U as we expanded the 16th SOS and stood up the 4th SOS, I was shocked at the antiquated state of their tactical development which was frozen in a time from before Desert Storm. They had the latest technology, but lacked the latest tactics, ironically proving the first SOF Truth that "humans are more important than hardware."

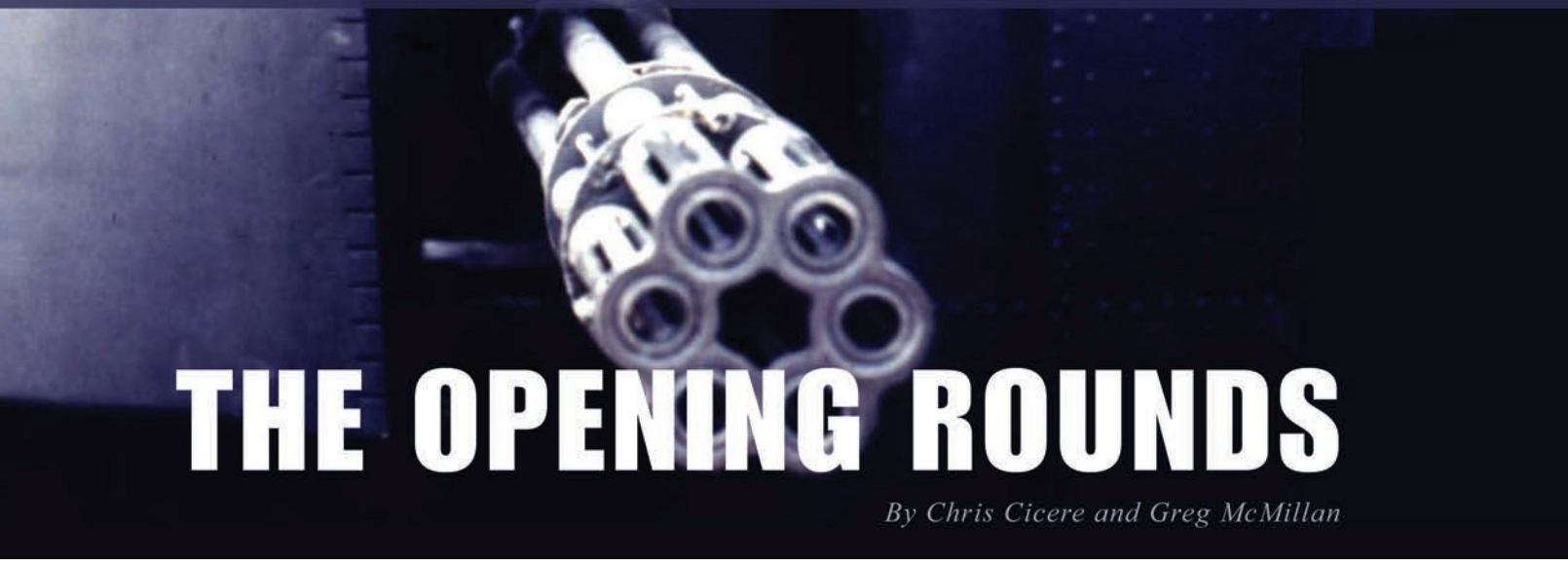
Thus it took the catalyzing effect of the loss of Spirit 03 on a sufficiently large group of determined operators to take full advantage of available technology. It was the combination of the motivating impact of the loss of Spirit 03 and advanced technology that enabled the renaissance in tactics through the 1990s, that set conditions for the golden age of the AC-130 gunship in Afghanistan and Iraq.

We owe much to those who sacrificed everything aboard Spirit 03, not only because "they gave the last full measure of devotion" for us, but also because they bequeathed to us, at a critical point in history, the decisive motivation to reinvent the AC-130 for a new challenge and a new century. We did not get everything right and there remains much to be done, but the fact that the AC-130 remains a close-air-support platform of choice with forces on the ground in Afghanistan, and that no gunship has been lost in combat since Desert Storm despite tens of thousands of combat hours in Bosnia, Somalia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq suggests that we are on the right track.

About the Author: Maj Gen (S) Mark Hicks is the Director of Operations, Assessments and Lessons Learned for Air Force Special Operations Command. A Command Pilot, Weapons Officer, and career gunship pilot he commanded the SOF Weapons Squadron, the Joint Special Operations Air Component for SOCCENT, and the 374 AW. His HQ staff experience includes HAF, Joint Staff, PACOM, ACC, and AFSOC.

The views expressed in this article belong to the author and are not the official views of the USAF or the position of any organization.

The AC-130H Spectre Gunship in Action Over Afghanistan:



THE OPENING ROUNDS

By Chris Cicere and Greg McMillan

The first day was the worst. We all knew our lives had changed on 11 Sep 2001—we just had no idea how much. Just like everyone else in America, we stared at the images from New York and Washington, we grew angry and we were saddened. The commander called the squadron together and put everyone in crew rest, except one "Slick" crew. He sent the rest of the squadron home to be with their families and get ready for what we all knew was the coming war.

Of course the wing started spinning: planning, generating aircraft, checking recall rosters, and confirming TDY personnel (who were all stuck wherever they awoke that morning). But, as the wing's plans began to congeal, the 16th SOS was not really a part of it. It felt like we were on the outside looking in.

As many of the other squadrons made plans to deploy, the 16th waited. The call finally came late in the third week of September. The 16th Special Operations Group (SOG) commander told us to replace the 4th SOS and fly three gunships and crews to Jordan to support an exercise. An exercise? Not exactly the claxon we were waiting to hear. But, it was better than sitting at Hurlburt as the other squadrons launched for combat.

The 4th SOS did a tremendous job passing their exercise plans to us, specifically their great commander, Lt Col Hart Franklin. In the middle of their own real world spin, the 4th SOS planners took the time to set us up for success.

We would be part of a Joint Special Operations Air Component (JSOAC) made up of the 16th, 9th SOS and 3rd Battalion of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (3/160 SOAR), created to support a joint special operations task force (JSOTF) led by a battalion from the 5th Special Forces Group. This exercise was known as Early Victor and we were told it was the USCENTCOM commander's #1 priority (next to winning the war).

We departed Hurlburt on 27 September and finally arrived at a Royal Jordanian Air Force Base in early October. Of course, there were no tankers available to drag us across the Atlantic… aircraft deploying to an exercise did not rate that kind of support in times of impending war.

We'll never forget crossing France at night on the way to NAS Sigonella, on Sicily, Italy. We were intercepted by a French Mirage, obviously flying defensive combat air patrol in case the enemy also decided to attack them with commercial aircraft. The Mirage pilot took one look at the highly armed left-side of our aircraft and promptly took up a position off the starboard side. The electronic warfare officer saw the signature of the Mirage's radar on his equipment and promptly sent him an electronic "message" back through our jammer. We don't think the French pilot thought this was as funny as we did because he immediately sent a more serious electronic "reply." He eventually flew off and we flew on.

We arrived at the Jordanian air base and immediately fell into exercise mode--make the tents our own, study the scenario, plan the deliberate missions (no surprises in this exercise), integrate with 9th SOS and 3/160th, and turn ourselves from three disparate units into a joint special operations air component (JSOAC). The leadership of the 9th SOS and 3/160th SOAR made this easy. They too, wished they were somewhere else, planning for combat instead of playing it, but professionalism won the day and we made the best of the situation.

On 7 October, we awoke to see the air strikes in Afghanistan had begun, and our morale sank with every news story. We thought, "At least we're in the Middle East, we can move forward from here." But that did little to soothe the disheartened air commandos at the exercise. We wanted in.

The crews continued their professional execution of the exercise, but we could see it in their eyes…when will it be our turn? We hoped the answer would come when the commander of Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT), Rear Admiral Burt Calland, came for a visit. This was at least an

indication of the importance of the exercise…in the middle of a war with huge SOF involvement, the SOCCENT commander came to see us. In a small group of senior officers, when asked if our Spectres would soon see combat, he answered, "Don't worry, we'll get those old H-models into the fight."

Many of us had known the admiral for years and had nothing but great respect for him. Referring to our AC-130Hs as "those old H-models" however, nearly caused us to explode. We restrained our feelings in front of the admiral, but quietly vowed to make sure he knew these great airplanes had a lot of fight left in them.

As the end of the Early Victor exercise approached, we continued to call back to the 16th SOG in hopes of getting the order to not fly home, but to go forward to support Task Force Dagger in Uzbekistan. Any amateur tactician, studying a map of the fight in Afghanistan, could see a need for increased fire support in the north. The gunship was perfect for this environment, but there was not yet an approved deployment order to get us there.

The trip back was a long slog, and again there were no tankers available (just like the trip over) for aircraft flying home from an exercise. But we stayed in contact with Col Tommy Hull, the acting 16th SOG commander, calling twice a day from each location. We finally pleaded with him one last time from RAF Mildenhall before making the North Atlantic crossing, "don't make us do this Tommy!" But again, there were no orders so he had to tell us, "Come home."

We arrived home on 5 November to an empty ramp at Hurlburt, which didn't help morale, either. Four days later though, a friend of the squadron commander's, who worked in the Pentagon on the Joint Staff, called him at home at 0200 (on a secure phone) to say, "The Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) just signed your deployment orders—four gunships to Uzbekistan." We were ready to hand out a long string of "I told ya so," but there was too much to do.

After much preparation and planning four Spectres finally departed Hurlburt on 11 November. We had SECDEF orders, but had not yet received approval from the President of Uzbekistan to bed down gunships in his country. We did have tanker support this time and flew directly from Hurlburt to Lajes Air Base in the Azores. From there, we flew to NAS Sigonella, again staying in close touch with Col Hull and waiting for the final diplomatic approval for the last leg into Uzbekistan. At each location the orders remained the same, "We'll get approval tomorrow, keep going."

The orders to "keep going" ran out of real estate when we arrived at Naval Support Activity Souda Bay, Crete, on 19 November. We could go no farther without the president of Uzbekistan's approval.

We sat and brooded at Souda Bay for six days. The crews kept a good focus, studying the Afghanistan Air Tasking Order Special Instructions, so they knew how to safely fly in and out of and operate in the combat zone. The navigators worked with a local detachment of KC-135s from the 100th Air Refueling Wing to plan what we hoped would be an eventual air refueling track over the Black Sea and into Uzbekistan. This studying and preparation would pay huge dividends for us later.

It was not all bad, though. The NSA Souda Bay personnel were great hosts and served a tremendous Thanksgiving meal on the 22nd. The delay also gave the crews plenty of time to take in some Greek culture in the picturesque fishing village of Hania, and to enjoy some great food and a local aperitif, Raki, which is reminiscent of gasoline.

The final presidential approval came on 25 November, with one caveat, only three gunships, not four, were allowed to land in Uzbekistan. The decision of which airplane and crew to send home was easy…the heaviest aircraft would go back. All of the AC-130Hs had a slightly different configuration and thus the weight of each was different. With the extra weight, the heaviest aircraft would have less loiter time at a more dangerous lower altitude. Of course, the aircraft commander protested vehemently, but he knew it was not a dig on his crew, just the luck of the draw. He still regrets that decision.

With final orders in hand, we got with the detachment commander from the 100th Air Refueling Wing to make final preparations. He was puzzled. Days before, they had not had orders to support us, but today he said, "I was just told you're my number one priority, what do you want?" That was an easy one to answer, "Gas, over the Black Sea, tonight."

We arrived at Karshi-Kanabad (K2), Uzbekistan, on the morning of 26 November and told the crews to go into crew rest as soon as feasible. But, the excitement of the experience did not lend itself to getting much rest and so they spent the next few hours customizing their tents and what little personal space each person had.

The squadron leadership fanned out and met with Col Frank Kisner, the 16th SOG commander, the senior airman at K2, and the Task Force Dagger deputy commander, LTC John Buss, the commander of 2/160 SOAR commander and JSOAC commander, and Lt Col Scott Schafer, the 16th Special Operations Support Squadron commander and JSOAC J3.

Lt Col Schafer was the first friendly face we saw, but he was a different man than the one we had said goodbye to back at Hurlburt in September. He was a shell. This former Air Force Academy starting quarterback and punter looked as if he had not slept in weeks. He appeared malnourished and completely fatigued. Col Schafer was as mentally sharp as ever, but his appearance was an omen for what lay ahead for us.

As night fell on our first day at K2 and we continued to settle into our new environment, a member of the task force's fire support staff came into our work tent to say that a Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) attached to Rashid Dotsum's Northern Alliance force was in need of fire support near the northern Afghanistan town of Konduz. As stated earlier, the crews had not been able to get much rest and one of the three aircraft commanders, Capt Sean, happened to be standing in the staff tent. In one of the great displays of "line-of-sight-scheduling," we asked Sean if he and his crew were ready to go. Of course he said yes.

Our only instructions to Sean before he and his crew took off were to cross the border and find an "empty" spot to tweak the guns. He took off with only the location of the ODA, their call sign (Boxer), and radio frequencies on which to contact them. The AC-130H call sign, appropriately enough, was

"Grim," as in Reaper.

This crew took off on their first combat mission within 18 hours of arrival in Uzbekistan. At that moment we were never so proud to be Spectres.

We then alerted the second crew an hour later, Capt Dutch. We planned to have Dutch's crew relieve Sean's so that the ODA would have continuous fire support until daybreak. A few hours later, Dutch and his crew launched and he and Sean executed an airborne target hand-off. Sean had not expended any ammo as Boxer had not required any fire support, so we thought Dutch might have a similarly quiet night. We were wrong.

A few hours later, as dawn approached, Dutch called back to the ops tent and reported "Winchester," which is shorthand for "all ammunition expended." We all looked at each other dumbfounded. "Did he say Winchester," we asked. Dutch and his crew had taken off with 400 rounds of 40mm and 100 rounds of 105mm ammunition. How could it all be gone? We were flabbergasted!

During the debriefing and battle damage assessment (BDA) video review, it was found that Capt Dutch and his crew had executed a devastating attack on the Taliban in their last stronghold in northern Afghanistan.

Three targets stood out from that mission. The first was 40mm rounds striking a loaded, vehicle-mounted, multiple-rocket launcher. This was the first time any of us had seen the effect of a gunship igniting rocket fuel! We would see it again a few weeks later, but the flash, brightness, and the size of the explosion was stunning.

The second sequence was a 105mm strike on a Taliban building with at least 100 enemy combatants inside. As Dutch's crew prosecuted the attack, the enemy poured out of the building. It reminded us of a clown car at the circus. "How could all those guys be inside such a small place," we wondered.

The third target followed the strike on the building. As the enemy fighters came out of the building, they moved across the street and into some adjacent fields. The enemy initially stayed in small groups, but eventually began to group back together into a larger formation. The gunship crew held their fire to allow the enemy to regroup before shooting again. As we sat in the tent reviewing the footage, it occurred to us that this was the first time the Taliban in the north had been "chased." They were unable to move to a safe place because the Spectre's deadly fire followed them unmercifully. It had to be not only terrifying, but disheartening, as well for those Taliban fighters and their commanders.

When Boxer returned to Karshi Kanabad, they tracked us down to tell us stories from their mission and they presented us with a captured AK-47 to say thanks. There is nothing more gratifying to a gunship crew than the thanks from a ground force. No medal, no ribbon, no trophy, no recognition of any kind is more appreciated than a simple thank you from one of those heroes.

The ODA told us one story that will forever be part of Spectre lore, and has often been repeated and published. Dutch's navigator was a female, Capt Alison. She is one of the finest navigators the Spectre community had ever produced. That is why we took her on the first deployment—she was that good. On a gunship, it is the navigator who communicates with the ground force, and in this case, Alison took in the fire support requests from the ODA. While General Dostum and the ODA observed the devastating strike from the hills surrounding Konduz, he heard the radio chatter. As the ODA told the story, Gen Dostum looked at them and asked, "Is that a woman?" They said, "yes, sir," and he immediately laughed out loud and picked up his personal radio.

16th SOS aircrew and support personnel preparing for a combat mission in the K2 planning tent. (Photo courtesy of author)

One of the results of the frequent changes in loyalty that characterized the relationship of the Northern Alliance and the Taliban was they knew each other very well. Gen Dostum radioed the besieged and confused enemy and told them to surrender, saying, "Even the American women are killing you, listen!" He then held his radio up to the ODA's radio so the Taliban commander could hear Alison raining death down upon them. Hundreds of Taliban soon surrendered and from that moment on she was known as the "Angel of Death."

Days later, in his official situation report, one of the high-ranking Special Forces commanders credited this close air support mission as being the decisive factor in the fall of Konduz.

We had little time to rest on our early success. The next day, tragedy struck as the US suffered its first casualty of the war, a civilian paramilitary officer named Johnny Michael "Mike" Spann from Alabama.

Taliban prisoners staged a riot at a 19th century fort called Qala-i-Jangi located in northern Afghanistan and during the melee, Mike Spann was killed. The fort also served as Dostum's headquarters and 13 miles away, in Mazar-i-Sharif, RDML Calland also had a small forward headquarters. The fort was divided by a wall that ran through the center of it. By the time Spectre arrived overhead that night the Taliban controlled the southern half of the compound and the US Special Forces and combat controllers, and their Northern Alliance allies controlled the northern half.

We decided to send two gunships, in serial, one after

another, to provide maximum fire support coverage during the night. The first aircraft arrived overhead and immediately had a maintenance problem and had to return to Uzbekistan. We scrambled the second crew who got over the fort, established contact with the combat controller on the northern wall, and immediately began to fire on the Taliban in the south. As the attack began, the combat controllers reported they were under mortar fire and tried to talk the gunship onto the probable enemy position. The gunship crew fired onto the sites to no avail…the mortars came closer and closer to the friendly position.

Even with the sophisticated optics on a gunship, a mortar tube is very hard to find as it is small and has a relatively low heat signature…unless you can catch the round coming out of the tube.

The crew continued to fire on probable mortar positions as the mortars continued to creep closer to the friendlies. The crew ceased firing as the ammo load approached Winchester in order to concentrate on catching a glimpse of the mortars exiting the tube. The crew also asked the friendlies if the mortars were coming in steep. This would indicate that the tube was closer to their position than the crew thought.

The combat controllers did verify that the mortars were coming almost straight down, so the crew concentrated their sensors at the center wall, the closest possible enemy position to the friendly position. Sure enough, one of the sensors spotted a mortar signature right next to the wall, in a small alley between two buildings. The Taliban could not have picked a more concealed firing position. One of the two buildings was also an arsenal, giving the Taliban quick access to a large supply of mortar rounds and other ammunition. This advantage to the enemy was soon turned into a liability.

The crew quickly zeroed onto the enemy's mortar position and fired one of the few remaining rounds of 105mm exactly on top of the mortar tube. The next rounds hit the adjacent buildings.

The buildings quickly caught fire. At first the crew could see flames coming out of the windows…then the fire spread quickly. Within 30 seconds the buildings were completely engulfed in flames and then we saw the biggest explosion any of us had ever seen. Both building were erased in an instant. In pictures made by US Special Forces the next day, there was nothing left of the buildings bigger than a softball. It was complete destruction.

The gunship was Winchester and as it rolled out to the north for the return flight to K2 the airborne mission commander (AMC) contacted RDML Calland's radio operator. Since the explosion of the buildings had been so big, the AMC was sure it could be heard 13 miles away. Sure enough, the radio operator confirmed that, "It was quite a show." The AMC asked the radio operator to ensure the Admiral knew "those old H-models" were responsible for keeping him up that night. Rarely has a more satisfying radio called emanated from Spectre.

As the Northern Alliance cemented their victories in northern Afghanistan, it became apparent that the 16th SOS needed to begin preparation to contribute to the fight south of the Hindu Kush Mountains. This southern area included the key Taliban stronghold of Kandahar and the Tora Bora Mountains where Al Qaeda was trying to consolidate its force. The Hindu Kush bisects Afghanistan, west to east, and averages over 14,000 feet in altitude. This was a huge obstacle for the heavy, unpressurized gunships to overcome.

The 16th SOS Operations Officer led the staff through the planning for nightly crossings of the mountains. In the end, he and the staff came up with multiple routes in order to keep a random flight signature and determined we needed to remove the external fuel tanks from the aircraft. Removing the tanks was necessary to reduce the aircraft weight and give us 3-engine capability over the mountains. Otherwise, if we lost an engine while over the Hindu Kush, we were going in. On some routes, when crossing the highest point, the aircraft would only be 2000 feet above the terrain. The squadron commander spoke to the wing commander, who was deployed to another location with the 4th SOS, and he approved these plans to cross the mountains.

As soon the crews established this process, Spectre and Spooky (AC-130Us of the 4th SOS) began to meet over the battlefield. It was clear we needed to deconflict our forces to maximize close air support to the ground forces. The 16th and 4th SOS commanders conferred and agreed to divide the hours of darkness into four coverage windows. Since the AC-130Us had a longer en-route time to Afghanistan and needed air refueling on entry and exit, the commanders determined that Spectre would take the first and last window so that Spooky could refuel during hours of darkness. This deconfliction provided the ground forces almost continuous close air support coverage. Since the loss of Spirit 03 and its 14 crew members in January 1991, gunships were required to limit

Gen Rashid Dostum (center) and members of the US Army's Special Forces. (Photo courtesy of author)

their time over a battlefield to the night time only.

Days later, this effort would prove to be decisive. Two missions stand out, both in the vicinity of Kandahar. The first proved a concept and the hard work of a former gunship squadron commander, and the second earned a Silver Star for a future gunship squadron commander.

The first mission, 3 Dec 2001, was to provide close air support to the Special Forces team that was accompanying Hamid Karzai and his fighters who were approaching Kandahar from the north. As this force approached the Taliban's stronghold they met strong resistance. Spectre rolled into an orbit over the friendlies and established radio contact. To the crew's surprise, they recognized the voice of the special tactics airman on the ground with the ODA. They had trained with him at Hurlburt only months before.

The airman directed the gunship crew to scan the area around the ODA for possible enemy activity. This was a difficult task since the enemy and the friendlies looked very much the same from the gunship's altitude. If not for a new piece of gear that had recently been added to Spectre this mission could have turned out very differently.

A former 16th SOS and 16th Maintenance Group Commander and at the time the 16th SOW Vice Wing commander, Col Ray Kilgore, had worked tirelessly to add an Infrared Zoom Laser Illuminator Designator (IZLID) to the aircrafts' sensor array. The goal was for the IZLID to aid in identifying friendly forces and enemy targets, and to lessen the chance for a friendly fire incident. On this night, the IZLID did all three.

As the crew scanned the area surrounding the friendlies they spotted a small unidentified group moving in tactical formation to the south, exactly where they thought they might find the enemy. As the Spectre crew communicated with the special tactics team (STT), they used the IZLID mark this group. The STT saw the laser and immediately identified those individuals as their scout team…they were friendly. As the gunship crew continued to scan, they spotted some vehicle traffic to the east. Again, they marked it with the IZLID and this time the STT saw the laser spot and reported that as enemy movement and the Spectre was "cleared to fire." The subsequent fire from Spectre halted the Taliban's effort to flank Karzai and the ODA's position.

After the crew landed and debriefed, the squadron commander called Col Kilgore back at Hurlburt to report that his efforts to modify Spectre with the IZLID had paid-off by preventing a possible fratricide and facilitating an attack on the enemy, just as he had envisioned.

The second mission was a few days later and was flown in support of the Special Forces ODAs to the east of the Kandahar airport. Soon after the gunship departed K2 Col Kisner informed the squadron commander of heightened threat information coming from the airport. It appeared the enemy was intent on making a stand and taking out as much of the US's air armada as possible. Col Kisner ordered, "No aircraft will overfly the airport." This order was passed to the aircraft commander, Capt Nate, as he made the long flight over the mountains to the southern plains of Afghanistan.

AFSOC Chaplain (Capt) David performs his pre-flight on an AC-130H prior to a combat mission out of K2. (Photo courtesy of author)

As Capt Nate coordinated with the Special Forces team and prosecuted his attack in the vicinity of the airport, the sensor operators noticed what appeared to be stored ammunition sitting in the open, right next to the airport. The target was too good to pass-up, but there was that order from Col Kisner preventing a normal gunship attack on this target. The gunship's orbit would take it right over the high threat environment of the airport.

Capt Nate and his crew decided to execute a "partial sector attack." This is an attack profile that the AC-130U can calculate automatically, but the AC-130H's computers cannot. Instead of a normal 360 degree left-turn orbit, a partial sector attack cuts off a section of the orbit and requires a right turn (like removing a piece of pie). This seems simple, but AC-130H crews did not practice this maneuver and their flight computers did not have the software to automatically command this maneuver. Capt Nate and his crew had to devise the plan and execute this unique orbit as they were under the watchful eyes of a determined enemy with surface-to-air weapons.

The gunship's unique attack resulted in the single best battle damage video to date. Capt Nate and his crew were able to ignite stored surface to air missiles…big missiles. As his fire raked the munitions, the rocket fuel ignited and sent one missile on a wild, whirling trajectory hundreds of feet into the air. The blast was so intense and bright that it illuminated the aircraft thousands of feet up and allowed the enemy to fire a MANPAD (man portable air defense system—a shoulder-fired air defense weapon) at the aircraft. For his clever application of the partial sector attack while under fire, and the destruction of a key enemy ammunition storage area, Capt Nate was awarded the Silver Star.

As Christmas approached, we began to receive much appreciated cards and packages from families, friends, and complete strangers. All were much appreciated, but none brought a smile to our faces like the hand-drawn card from an anonymous 3rd grader. The card read, "If you make it home, Congratulations!" We howled with delight.

We also began to get word of a large planning effort going on at Bagram AB in Afghanistan. Bagram was a former Soviet

base about 30 miles north of Kabul and was now home to US forces. We sent the squadron's operations officer to Bagram to ensure the gunships were fully integrated into the plan. Eventually this plan would become known as Operation Anaconda.

The decision was made to begin swapping out crews in early January, once winter had set in and while the number of engagements declined. For the most part, things were pretty quiet at that point. We'll never forget meeting the new crews on the ramp. These were our friends and our squadron mates, but they looked at us strangely and seemed to keep their distance. It was not until later that SMSgt Jerry told us, "They said we all look really thin." Apparently, we looked to them like Lt Col Schaffer had looked to us two months earlier.

For Operation Anaconda, a task force was formed from elements of the 101st Airborne and the 10th Mountain divisions and numerous SOF organizations. Anaconda officially lasted from 1 to 16 March, but further details of the overall mission can be found in *Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda* by Sean Naylor.

The first night of Anaconda did not get off to a good start for any of the forces involved. In one very unfortunate instance, a lethal combination of equipment malfunctions and other factors led to a fratricide incident. A gunship crew fired on a convoy that included US and Afghan forces. Sadly, an Army warrant officer was killed. This was obviously a low point for the squadron, but like the true professionals they were, the crews continued to fly critical missions during subsequent Anaconda flights. Reportedly, the US Special Forces battalion commander told his soldiers something along the lines of, "Spectre saved our asses many times. We can't let this horrible accident affect our faith in them. We need them!"

Capt Dean's crew distinguished themselves the next night by supporting the exfiltration of troops from the 101st. These conventional soldiers had never used a gunship before. The fire control officer, Lt Col Jerry, provided a short tutorial on gunship employment to the troops on the ground. For their great actions that night Capt Dean's crew was awarded the MacKay Trophy for aiding in the rescue of 82 soldiers, 28 of whom were wounded. Their precision firepower for over two hours allowed two USAF HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopters to rescue the beleaguered force.

The next big event occurred two nights later during the battle of Robert's Ridge. Capt DJ and crew responded to a "Mayday" call, radio shorthand for a life-threatening emergency, and were the first aircraft on-scene. They were soon followed by Capt Rich and crew. During the night the 16th SOS provided on-call fire support during a very confused situation. Capt DJ and crew did all they could to provide fire support and used the aircraft's sensors to provide situational awareness to the ground commander. The gunship stayed on station despite radio calls to return to K2 until relieved by F-15Es as the sun came up. Capt DJ refused to leave the ground force without relief. As he rolled out of the orbit over the battlefield, Capt DJ put on his sunglasses and flew into the rising sun back to K2.

After 10 days the main effort of Operation Anaconda ended. It was, for many, the 16th SOS' finest hour. With only 3 crews and 3 aircraft, the 16th SOS flew 100% of its assets 6 out of 10 nights, logging 322 combat hours, killing 45 enemy troops, and destroying 12 buildings. During the following days and months, many thank yous and war stories came back to us in many forms. Here are just a few of our favorites:

A young enlisted Air Force Tactical Air Control Party member came by the 16th SOS months later and described his experience during Anaconda. To him and the US Army troops with him, it appeared none would survive their dire situation. He told us it was the AC-130H support that saved them one particularly bad night. After the gunship completed its attack they did not receive any enemy fire the rest of the night. The controller described how the troops from the 10th Mountain Division stood up and cheered after Spectre cleared the hillside of the enemy that had pinned them down for so long.

The gunships (both the H & U models) fast became the weapon of choice during the night. As one soldier was given a choice of taking immediate close air support from a fast mover or waiting on a gunship, the soldier replied to air battle manager overhead, "I'll wait for the gunship."

An Army chaplain on the ground watching the gunships devastate the enemy said it reminded him of a verse from Psalm 144, "Lord come down, touch the mountains and they shall smoke. Flash forth lightning and scatter them."

A father who was employed at Eglin AFB and had a son in Anaconda wrote to the 16th SOW wing commander. He wrote, "Sir, my eldest is a 1st Lt with the 101st Airborne in Afghanistan. He spent nine days in the mountains during Anaconda and is now relaxing somewhere in Pakistan. He called me this morning and said. 'Dad, if you know anyone out at Hurlburt who is in charge of the AC-130s, you give them a big @#$% thank you'."

Months later, when the squadron commander was at Nellis AFB helping to plan the invasion of Iraq, an A-10 pilot told him his son was a member of the 101st Airborne. His son told him, "Dad, if it wasn't for those gunships, I wouldn't be here." A gunship crew member never gets tired of hearing stories like this, but when it comes from a Father, it can be tough to take. All we can ever say is, "We're glad we were there for you."

For the opening round of Afghanistan, the great airmen of the 16th SOS earned the 2002 MacKay Trophy, the 2002 American Legion Valor Award, the 2002 Air Force Association Citation of Honor, 11 Distinguished Flying Crosses, and a Silver Star…and that was just the beginning.

About the Authors: Col (Ret) Greg McMillan is a former 16th SOS Commander and has been inducted into the Air Commando Hall of Fame. He is currently the Deputy Operations Officer at Special Operations Command Central.

Lt Col (Ret) Chris Cicere was the 16th SOS Deployed Mission Commander in Uzbekistan during Operation Anaconda. He is currently on the staff in the Athletic Department at the Air Force Academy.

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The SPECTRE MAINTAINER

27th Special Operations Aircraft Maintenance Squadron

The AC-130H Spectre gunship embodies the "cradle-to-grave" maintenance philosophy. From the moment these mighty birds of war rolled off the assembly line they have been passionately maintained by US Air Force aircraft maintainers.

By Maj Ahave E. Brown Jr. and Capt Cassidy J. Bair

For more than half a century these aircraft have earned the respect and admiration of all who have had the unique opportunity to work on them. It's comforting to know that the retirement of each of the last remaining eight gunships will be handled by the same men and women who launched the aircraft out on countless high-profile combat missions.

The AC-130H, arguably the most feared gunship in the world, started out as a C-130E platform that was later modified to AC-130E. Over the years, the weapons systems have evolved from employing 40mm, 20mm and 7.62mm guns in differing configurations to the current weapons system configuration composed of a 40mm and a 105mm weapon. Of note, the first 105mm gun was installed on aircraft 6570 "Bad Company" during the Vietnam War; it was also the first AC-130H to be retired at Cannon Air Force Base, New Mexico.

There is no greater sense of accomplishment than when an aircraft returns from a mission with nothing but expended brass, a term we call "Winchester." This joy is not ours alone, but is shared by all who have been protected by the constant vigil of a Spectre gunship overhead.

Additionally, we relish in the camaraderie and legacy of the Spectre with United States Army Rangers, United States Navy Seals, Vietnam Veterans who have first-hand accounts of how this mighty bird of war has saved their lives and of course, maintainers past and present.

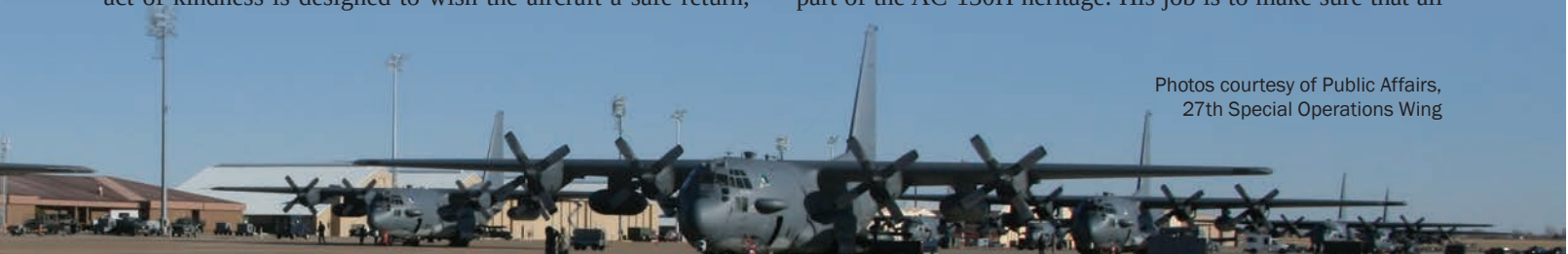
"Spectre Pride" is always visible before launch when aircraft maintainers can be seen rubbing the nose radome of the aircraft. After considerable discussion on the topic we are not sure how this symbolic tradition started. However, this act of kindness is designed to wish the aircraft a safe return, mission success and finally, to let the gunship know that it's "ready to go." SSgt Anthony Vorpahl, 27 Special Operations Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, stated it this way, "…it's my way of asking the bird to come back Alpha One" (meaning to return safely without defects).

SSgt Samuel Pearson, an engine technician on the Spectre for more than 12 years, explained how proud his grandfather was that his grandson is a gunship mechanic. Pearson's grandfather was an Army infantryman during Vietnam when his unit was pinned down without rations by enemy forces.

When the Army unit requested air support, battlefield coordinators selected the AC-130H to assist instead of the F-4 Phantom or one of the attack helicopters. The mighty Spectre quickly arrived on the scene raining down fire on the enemy and saving the Army unit. It goes without saying that the Pearson family owes a lot to the Spectre gunship and its maintainers.

TSgt James Price and SSgt Micah Fernandez, both Spectre maintainers, explained how they know the true meaning of being "quiet professionals," a term associated with special operations. Both NCOs take great pride in knowing they have deployed multiple times with the AC-130H. Most of their deployed locations are still classified, but the impacts of the gunship's work in these austere locations are felt world-wide. Both Price and Fernandez agree that it is a symbol of pride knowing your aircraft is so highly regarded throughout the world.

SSgt Korry Shields, a Spectre communications and navigation technician for more than 10 years, is proud to be a part of the AC-130H heritage. His job is to make sure that all



Photos courtesy of Public Affairs, 27th Special Operations Wing

signals leaving the gunship are accurate and precise. Shields is truly one of the unsung heroes of Spectre, who works tirelessly every day to ensure the armored flying fortress is ready for battle when called upon.

Additionally, in this capacity Shields has the added responsibility of modifying the gunship with advanced communications systems. The challenge of ensuring existing technology marries with legacy technology is a huge undertaking. However, Spectre maintainers young and old not only accept this fact, but embrace the challenge.

MSgt Stephen White, the lead production superintendent for the 27th Special Operations Aircraft Maintenance Squadron's 16th Aircraft Maintenance Unit, explained his feeling as he flew with the AC-130H "Bad Company" 6570 for the last time.

The aircraft was on its way to the "boneyard" at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona for storage. According to White, it was an emotional experience flying on the aircraft for the last time. It's easy to see why White has such a strong bond with the aircraft; he's spent several years of his life proudly maintaining the AC-130Hs.

White went on to add, "The emotion also comes from thinking about all the lives that this aircraft has saved downrange during its tenure." Finally, it's important to note that White was the lead production superintendent when Cannon launched and recovered all eight remaining AC-130Hs at one time—a feat that has never been accomplished before, and will never be accomplished again.

There really is no perfect way to summarize how the maintenance team feels about the retirement of these legendary gunships. However, this short anecdote from one of the current Spectre maintainers, SSgt Joseph Johnson, paints a pretty good picture:

"My father owns a 60's model Chevy. Her name is Ol' Blue. Don't laugh, we're from Tennessee. She smells of vinyl and clay dust from decades as a work truck. He dated my mother in that truck, and it was the first vehicle my sister and I drove. The retirement of the Spectre feels a lot like when we stopped driving that old truck. Dad was putting more time into keeping Ol' Blue running than driving her. Grave Digger, Heavy Metal, and Iron Maiden have all served their purpose well, and it's time to let them take a much needed rest. Blue gets to sit in dads' garage and Grave Digger gets to sit at Cannon's front gate. These machines have done everything we've asked of them and more, and deserve our respect as much as any veteran. I am proud to call myself a Spectre maintainer."

About the Authors: Maj Ahave E. Brown Jr., entered the United States Air Force at the age of 17 on June 24, 1986 as an Aircraft Maintenance Communication Journeyman. He has deployed to Afghanistan, Iraq, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Masirah Island, and various other locations around the world. Additionally, Maj Brown has been stationed in Japan, England, and several states within the US. Finally, Maj Brown, in addition to his duties as an Air Force officer, is an Adjunct Instructor for Embry Riddle Aeronautical University teaching graduate and undergraduate-level courses.

Capt Cassidy J. Bair entered the United States Army at the age of 18 on May 27, 1999 as an Apache Helicopter Repairer and obtained the rank of SSgt He commissioned in the Air Force on May 15, 2009 and is the 16th Aircraft Maintenance Unit officer-in-charge. He has deployed to Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan, Qatar, and various other locations around the world. Additionally, Capt Bair has been stationed in Germany, and several states within the US.

Airmen and retirees young and old pose with "Gravedigger," a retired AC-130H Spectre gunship memorialized May 6, 2014 at Cannon Air Force Base, N.M. Veterans from conflicts stretching from Vietnam to Operation Enduring Freedom were recognized during the aircraft's retirement ceremony. (US Air Force Photo by A1C Chip Slack)

An Everlasting American Legacy

FIRST ENLISTED SENSOR CLASS 1975

By A1C Chip Slack

Seasoned members of the 16th Special Operations Squadron enter the room like unsung heroes. They exude confidence and a collective experience level that has been repetitiously applauded. A humbling sense of sadness fills the room as they sit down to conduct what will be one of their final interviews as sensor operators for the mighty AC-130H Spectre gunship.

For more than 40 years, sensor operators have played a pivotal role in establishing the USAF as the world's most dominant air and space power. Once a job specifically designed and reserved for officers, in April 1975 the enlisted sensor operator soon came to answer the Air Force's call during a period of overwhelming manning and financial needs, and since then, they have exceeded every and all expectations.

"We know coming into this job that a lot is going to be expected of us," casually said TSgt Jonathan Kidd, 16th SOS sensor operator. "One thing that sets us apart from other people is our ability to take that in stride and not think anything else of it."

The job of the sensor operator is simply defined: being the eyes of the aircraft.

"Our main job in this aircraft is to identify the friendlies, find the targets and work with the rest of the crew to employ the weapons, which are sometimes very close to friendly positions under fire," said TSgt Matthew Colbert, 16th SOS instructor sensor operator.

For the lives of the thirteen crew members that make up the crew, those "eyes" couldn't be more invaluable. Constantly scanning the surrounding area for danger, being a second set of eyes for every member of the crew, is a responsibility that these crew members take very seriously.

"We have the opportunity to look at the whole battlefield in a big picture sense because we're constantly moving, searching, locating, and maintaining situational awareness of the battlefield," said TSgt Nicholas Peloquin, 16th SOS evaluator sensor operator.

Countless Air Commandos, allied forces and friendlies have made it home unscathed, whether knowingly or not, because of the tireless awareness of the sensor operators dutifully doing their job. In addition to finding and managing targets, the job of the sensor revolves around neutralizing the threat and protecting individuals who have no hand in the fight. Because of this, and the extreme situations that can be a matter of living another day, most air crews are notably decorated and honored for their missions.

"All of us have been decorated, … awards, medals, coins what have you," MSgt Dana Timpany, 16th SOS evaluator sensor operator, expressed. "But when allied forces, the most capable and skilled members of the armed forces, personally thank you for saving their lives, to me that means more than any medal or decoration," he continued.

The humility that these Airmen embody is staggering. As a whole, the sensor operators are completely attached and dedicated to their missions, often overcome with a sense of pride and accomplishment.

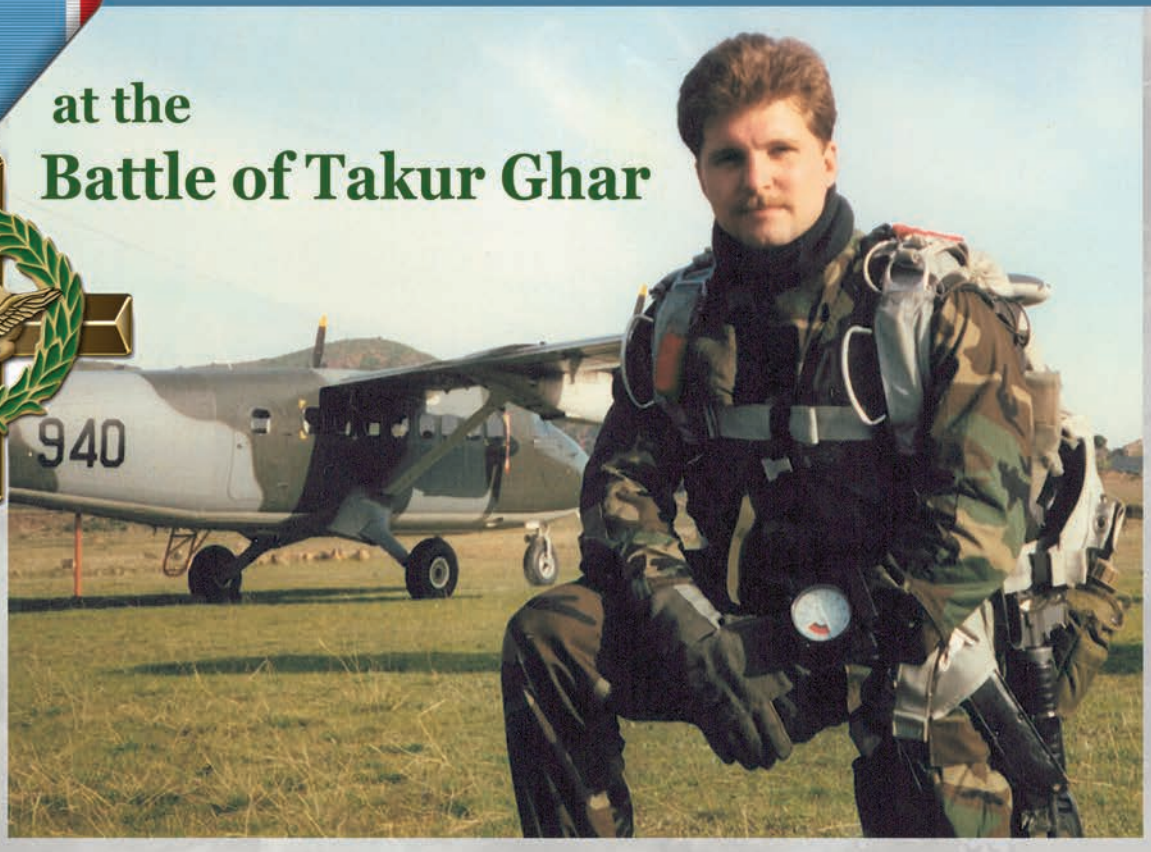
"We participate in the mission as it develops and endure the challenges of war that go with each and every mission," said Peloquin. "Seeing the direct action and your individual impact only intensifies the notion of knowing that the job was done and a difference was made."

As their piece of the legacy that accompanies the AC-130H comes to a close, their heritage will live on in the constant appreciation from their fellow Airmen. The legacy is so distinguished and remarkable, that the sensor operators that have been privileged to work with these aircraft aren't quite ready for this chapter of their lives to be finalized.

About the Author: A1C Charles W. Slack is a photojournalist in the United States Air Force, He is also the Social Media Representative for the 27th Special Operations Wing/ Public Affairs office at Cannon Air Force Base, N.M.

COMBAT CONTROLLER JOHN CHAPMAN

at the Battle of Takur Ghar



By CMSgt (Ret) Gene Adcock, USAF (CCT)

In the early morning hours of 4 March 2002, on a mountaintop called Takur Ghar in southeastern Afghanistan, al Qaeda soldiers fired on an MH-47E helicopter carrying a Special Operations Forces (SOF) reconnaissance element. This fire resulted in a Navy SEAL, ABH1 Neal Roberts, falling out of the helicopter, and began a chain of events culminating in one of the most intense small-unit firefights of the war against terrorism; the death of all the al Qaeda terrorists defending the mountain top; and, sadly, resulting also in the death of seven US servicemen. Despite these losses, the US forces involved in this fight again distinguished themselves by conspicuous bravery. Their countless acts of heroism demonstrated the best of America's Special Operations Forces (SOF) as Army, Navy, and Air Force special operators fought side by side to save each other, secure the mountain top and inflict serious losses on the al Qaeda.

US SOF had been monitoring for well over a month a large-scale pocket of forces in the Shah-e-Kot valley, southeast of Gardez, Afghanistan.

In February, the headquarters for US ground forces in Afghanistan, Task Force (TF) Mountain, commanded by US Army Maj Gen Franklin Hagenback, conceived a classic military "hammer and anvil" maneuver, code-named OPERATION ANACONDA, to clear the threat. US and Afghan forces in Gardiz would push from the west in an effort to clear an area of reported high concentrations of al Qaeda in the western part of the Shah-e-Kot valley. Anaconda planners believed this maneuver would cause the enemy to flee east into the blocking positions of awaiting American soldiers from the 10th Mountain and 101st Airborne Divisions located in the eastern sector of the valley. Augmenting the conventional forces would be small reconnaissance teams.

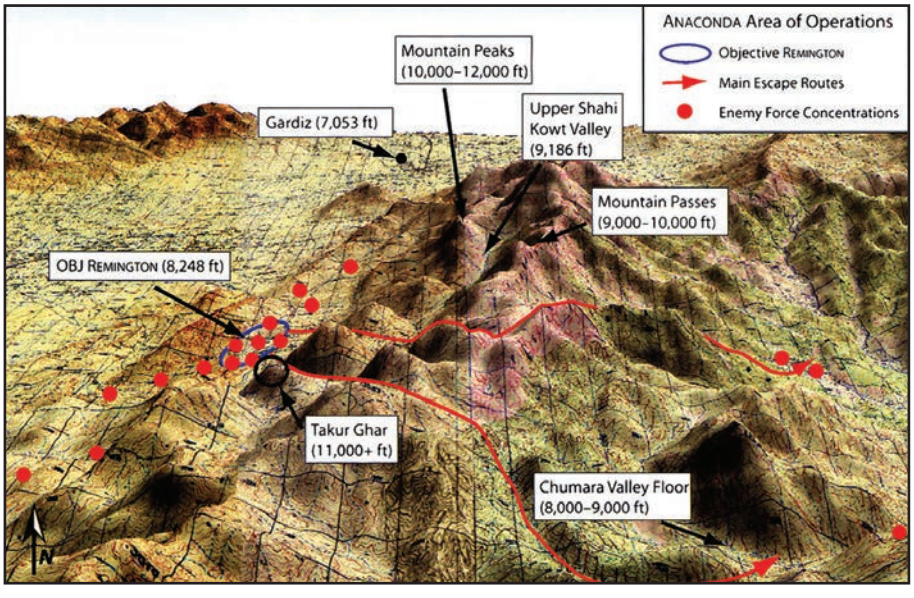
These teams were drawn from US and Coalition SOF - they included US Navy SEALs, US Army Special Forces, and US Air Force special tactics operators. The plan was to position these reconnaissance ("recon") teams at strategic locations where they would establish observation posts (OPs) to provide information on enemy movements and direct air strikes against observed enemy forces. This was done in several locations resulting directly in effective airstrikes on observed al Qaeda positions and the death of hundreds of al Qaeda in the Sahi-Kowt area. ABH1 Neil Roberts served in one of these reconnaissance teams. In war, however, things rarely go exactly as planned - the enemy has a "vote." OPERATION ANACONDA proved to be no exception. Rather than flee, these disciplined and well trained al Qaeda soldiers stood and fought, and at times were reinforced – all along a series of draws and trails at the southern end of the valley near Marzak, dubbed the "ratline." The enemy halted the Afghan forces pushing east toward "the Whale" – a distinctive terrain feature southeast of Gardiz – and

the Afghan forces then withdrew back to Gardiz. Because of a brief period of bad weather and the unexpectedly heavy enemy resistance, only a portion of the TF Mountain troops inserted into their intended positions on D-Day. Some of those that did insert fought under intense mortar and small arms fire. SOF, well hidden in their observation posts, used direct fire weapons, and coordinated close air support bombing onto enemy fighting positions. This provided some relief for the TF Mountain forces, especially in the south at Helicopter Landing Zone (HLZ) Ginger east of Marzak. Maj Gen Hagenbeck repositioned his soldiers to the northern end of the Shah-e-Kot valley and attacked the al Qaeda from this direction. As the battle became more fluid, TF Mountain commanders recognized the need to put US "eyes" on the southern tip of the valley and the "ratline." They needed additional observation posts near HLZ Ginger to provide surveillance and to call in US air power on the numerous concentrations of enemy forces. An 11,000-foot, snow-capped mountain, named Takur Ghar, appeared to US planners as a perfect location for an observation post. It dominated the southern approaches to the valley and offered excellent visibility into Marzak, two kilometers to the West. The mountaintop also provided an unobstructed view of the "Whale" on the other side of the valley. Takur Ghar was a perfect site for an observation post, and unfortunately, the enemy thought so too. The enemy had installed a well-concealed, fortified force, which included a heavy machine gun perfectly positioned to shoot down coalition aircraft flying in the valley below.

On 2 March, US forces began planning to insert forces into two observation posts the following night. Two MH-47Es from 2nd Battalion, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment would insert two teams. One MH-47E - Razor 04, would emplace a team to the north while the second aircraft - Razor 03, would deploy a team of US SEALs and an Air Force combat controller (CCT) on Takur Ghar. Late the next evening, the two helicopters took off from their base to insert the teams.

At approximately 0300 (all times are local), Razor 03, carrying ABH1 Roberts' team, approached its HLZ in a small saddle atop Takur Ghar. Originally planned to go in earlier to an offset HLZ, maintenance problems with one of the helicopters and a nearby B-52 strike in support of TF Mountain delayed the insert. As Razor 03 approached, both the pilots and the men in the back observed fresh tracks in the snow, goatskins, and other signs of recent human activity. Immediately, the pilots and team discussed a mission abort, but it was too late. A rocket propelled grenade (RPG) struck the side of the aircraft, wounding one crewman, while machine gun bullets ripped through the fuselage, cutting hydraulic and oil lines. Fluid spewed about the ramp area of the helicopter. The pilot struggled to get the Chinook off the landing zone and away from the enemy fire. Neil Roberts stood closest to the ramp, poised to exit onto the landing zone. Roberts and an aircrew member were knocked off balance by the explosions and the sudden burst of power applied by the pilot. As Neil and the crewman reached to steady each other, both slipped on the oil-soaked ramp and fell out of the helicopter. As the pilots fought to regain control of the helicopter, other crew members pulled the tethered crew member back into the aircraft. Un-tethered, Neil fell approximately 5-10 feet onto the snowy mountaintop below. The crew managed to keep the aircraft aloft until the pilots could execute a controlled crash landing some seven kilometers north of the HLZ. Petty Officer Roberts was now alone and in the midst of an enemy force.

There were no surveillance aircraft over the mountaintop at the time Roberts fell from the helicopter. Based on forensic evidence subsequently gathered from the scene, it is believed Roberts survived the short fall from the helicopter, likely activated his signaling device, and engaged the enemy with his squad automatic weapon (SAW). He was mortally injured by gunfire as the enemy closed in on him. Meanwhile, following Razor 03's controlled crash landing, the SEALs did a quick head count that confirmed what they already knew—Petty Officer Roberts was missing. TSgt John Chapman, the team's Air Force combat controller, immediately contacted a nearby AC-130 for protection. A short time later, Razor 04, after inserting its "recon" team, arrived on the scene and picked up the downed crewmen and SEALs, taking them to Gardez. The SEALs and pilots of Razor 04 quickly formulated a plan to go back in and rescue Roberts, despite the fact that they knew a force of heavily armed al Qaeda manned positions on Takur Ghar. An



A map of the ANACONDA area of operations.
Strategic map for US Army operation Anaconda. The area outlined in blue is the Shahi Kowt Valley, about one hundred miles south of Kabul, Afghanistan, near the Pakistani border. (Graphic courtesy of www.wikipedia.org)

The helicopter nose was pointing up the hill toward the main enemy bunkers. From the painting, The Battle of Takur Ghar by Keith Rocco, Kentucky National Guard Heritage Series (Released)

AC-130 gunship moved to Takur Ghar and reported seeing what they believed to be Roberts, surrounded by four to six other individuals. Knowing how the al Qaeda brutally treated prisoners, Roberts' teammates and commanders knew that time was running out on Neil Roberts. Razor 04, with its cargo of five SEALs and TSgt Chapman, departed Gardiz and returned to Roberts' last known location on the mountaintop. There were no known nearby, suitable landing zones - other than where Roberts had fallen. Inserting the rescue team at the base of the mountain was not an option – they would lose valuable time making the 2 to 3 hour climb up the mountain. Their only real chance of success was to reinsert in the same proximity of where Razor 03 had taken intense enemy fire.

At about 0500, Razor 04 approached the HLZ atop of Takur Ghar. Despite enemy fire cutting through the MH-47E, all six members of what had been a "recon" element were safely inserted, and the helicopter, although damaged, returned to base. Once on the ground near Roberts' last known location, and using the waning darkness for cover, the team assessed the situation and moved quickly to the high ground. The most prominent features on the hilltop were a large rock and tree. As they approached the tree, TSgt Chapman saw two enemy personnel in a fortified position under the tree. TSgt Chapman and a nearby SEAL opened fire, killing both enemy personnel. The Americans immediately began taking fire from another bunker position some 20 meters away. A burst of gunfire hit Chapman, mortally wounding him. The SEALs returned fire and threw hand grenades into the enemy bunker position to their immediate front. As the firefight continued, two of the SEALs were wounded by enemy gunfire and grenade fragmentation. Finding themselves in a deadly crossfire with 2 of their teammates seriously wounded and one killed and clearly outnumbered, the SEALs decided to disengage. They shot two more al Qaeda as they moved off the mountain peak to the Northeast - with one of the wounded SEALs taking "point." As they moved partly down the side of the mountain for protection, a SEAL contacted the overhead AC-130—GRIM 32—and requested fire support. GRIM 32 responded with covering fire as the SEALs withdrew.

Back at the US staging base, a US Army Ranger quick reaction force (QRF)— on standby for just such situations, was directed to move forward to a safe landing zone at Gardiz. There, the 23-man QRF loaded on two waiting MH-47Es: Razor 01 and Razor 02. Razor 01 carried 10 Rangers, an enlisted tactical air controller (ETAC), a combat controller (CCT) and a Pararescueman (PJ). Razor 02 carried 10 Rangers. Taking off from their base, the QRF had little knowledge about what was actually happening on Takur Ghar due to very limited communications. As the QRF flew toward Gardiz, the embattled SEALs, withdrawing from Takur Ghar, requested their immediate assistance. Headquarters approved the request and directed the QRF to proceed quickly to the problem area and insert their team at an "offset" HLZ - not the same landing zone where Razors 03 and 04 had taken fire. Due to intermittently functioning aircraft communications equipment, the Rangers and helicopter crews never received the "offset" instructions. Communications problems too plagued headquarters' attempts to determine the true condition of the SEAL team and their exact location.

At about 0545, Razor 01 and 02 flew toward the original Takur Ghar landing zone. At this point, the QRF was unaware that a squad of al Qaeda fighters, who by this time had already killed two Americans, were poised and expecting their arrival. The sun was just beginning to rise above the mountains to the east when Razor 01 approached from the south. On final approach, an RPG round exploded on the right side of the helicopter, while small arms fire peppered it from three directions. The pilots attempted to abort the landing, but the aircraft had taken too much damage.

(From left to right) TSgt Keary Miller, SrA Jason Cunningham and SSgt Gabe Brown about three weeks before the battle. Behind them is a MH-47E, the same type of helicopter that took them to Takur Ghar. (USAF photo)

DAYTON, Ohio - The Warrior Airmen exhibit, highlighting the Battle at Takur Ghar, on display in the Cold War Gallery at the National Museum of the US Air Force. (USAF photo)

The right side gunner, Sgt Phil Svitak, opened fire but was hit by an AK-47 round and died almost immediately. The helicopter dropped ten feet and landed hard on the snow-covered slope of the landing zone. Both pilots were seriously wounded.

The helicopter nose was pointing up the hill toward the main enemy bunkers - where TSgt Chapman had been killed. The impact of the crash knocked everyone to the helicopter floor. The Rangers, CCT and the eight-man Chinook crew struggled under intense fire to get up and out of the helicopter fuselage. The rear door gunner and a Ranger opened fire out the back of the aircraft, killing an al Qaeda soldier. Sgt Brad Crose and Cpl Matt Commons survived the initial landing but were struck and killed by enemy fire as they exited the rear of the aircraft. Another Ranger, SPC Marc Anderson, was hit and killed while still inside the aircraft.

Despite the intense small arms fire, the PJ, SrA Jason Cunningham, and another medic remained inside the helicopter and began treating the wounded. At the same time, the surviving Rangers quickly assembled at the helicopter ramp to assess the situation and fix the enemy locations. Using their M-4s, the Rangers killed two more al Qaeda, including an RPG gunner. Using natural rock outcroppings as cover, they began maneuvering to better positions. The Ranger platoon leader formulated a plan to assault the bunkers on top of the hill - but after an initial attempt to do so, he quickly realized he would need a larger force. Instead, Air Force combat controller SSgt Gabe Brown worked to get close air support on station. Within minutes, US aircraft began to bomb and strafe the enemy positions, dropping 500lb bombs within 50 meters of the SOF positions. By 0700, the Rangers were no longer in danger of being overrun. They consolidated their position and established a casualty collection point to the rear of the helicopter.

After the shoot down of Razor 01, Razor 02 was directed to move to a safe area and await further instructions. Later, Razor 02 inserted the other half of the QRF with its force of 10 Rangers and an additional Navy SEAL at an "offset" landing zone, down the mountain some 800 meters east and over 2,000 feet below the mountaintop. The Navy SEAL linked up with the SEAL "recon" element, which was by now some 1,000 meters from the mountaintop. The Rangers' movement up the hill was a physically demanding 2-hour effort under heavy mortar fire and in thin mountain air. They climbed the 45-70 degree slope, most of it covered in three feet of snow, weighed down by their weapons, body armor and equipment.

By 1030, the men were completely exhausted, but still had to defeat the enemy controlling the top of the hill - a mere 50 meters from their position. With the arrival of the ten men from Razor 02, the Rangers prepared to assault the enemy bunkers. As the Air Force combat controllers called in a last airstrike on the enemy bunkers and with two machine guns providing suppression fire, seven Rangers stormed the hill as quickly as they could in the knee-deep snow - shooting and throwing grenades. Within minutes, the Rangers took the hill, killing multiple al Qaeda. The Rangers began to consolidate their position on the top of the mountain, which the platoon leader deemed more defendable and safer for their wounded. The Rangers, Army crew members, and Air Force personnel began moving the wounded up the steep slope. However, it took four to six men to move each casualty.

As the soldiers moved the wounded, additional al Qaeda began firing from a small ridgeline some 400 meters to the rear of the downed helicopter's position. The wounded at the casualty collection point were completely exposed to the enemy fire, as were SrA Cunningham and the Ranger medic tending to them. While the Rangers maneuvered to return fire, enemy rounds struck the Army medic and PJ at the casualty collection point as they worked on their patients. Rangers and helicopter crewmen alike risked their lives, exposing themselves to enemy fire, to pull the wounded to the relative safety of nearby rocks. Once again, the combat controller called in close air support, and a few well-placed bombs and Ranger machine gun fire eventually silenced the enemy fire. Unfortunately, this attack claimed another life. The stricken PJ, SrA Jason Cunningham eventually succumbed to his wounds. Throughout the ensuing hours, the Americans continued to take sporadic sniper and mortar fire.

The Rangers consolidated their position, moved their dead and wounded to the top of the hill, and waited for a night extraction because the enemy air defense and ground situation in the vicinity of Takur Ghar did not lend itself to another daylight rescue attempt using helicopters. Throughout the day, observation posts on adjoining hilltops, manned by Australian and American SOF, called in fire on al

TSgt Chapman in the days prior to the Takur Ghar operation.
(USAF photo)

Qaeda forces attempting to reinforce the mountaintop.

At about 2015, four helicopters from the 160th SOAR extracted both the Rangers on Takur Ghar and the SEALs down the mountainside. Two hours later, the survivors and their fallen comrades were back at their base. A team of experienced medical staff of the 274th Forward Surgical Team, operating out of the Bagram airport tower, awaited the eleven wounded personnel. Their quick and professional medical treatment likely saved the hand of a wounded pilot. By morning, all the wounded were headed to hospitals in Germany and elsewhere. OPERATION ANACONDA would continue for another 19 days. These same units continued to play a decisive role in defeating the al Qaeda in the largest Coalition ground combat operation thus far in the war against terrorism.

About the Author: CMSgt Gene Adcock retired as Chief Combat Control Inspector, Military Airlift Command, Office of the Inspector General on 31 January 1977. As a combat controller he deployed to Vietnam in 1965 and three times during the period 1969 - 1971 to Laos in support of Project 404. He was awarded two Bronze Stars, the AF Meritorious Service Award, six Air Medals and the AF Commendation medal with Combat "V".

During his second career, he was instrumental in the introduction of specialized SOF equipment to DOD and allied military forces. Adcock is the author of CCT @ The Eye of the Storm – a history of combat control teams; President of the Combat Control School Heritage Foundation and a member of the Air Commando Hall of Fame, Class of 2010.

Pope Combat Controller Awarded Air Force Cross: A Takur Ghar Story

(Photo courtesy The Benini Heritage Center and Museum, Combat Control School, Pope Field, North Carolina)

By A1C Jason A. Neal
43rd Airlift Wing Public Affairs

Senior Air Force leaders awarded the Air Force Cross to Tech. Sgt John Chapman January 10, 2003.

Chapman, a combat controller killed in Afghanistan while saving the lives of his entire team, was posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross, which is second only to the Medal of Honor as an award for valor.

Secretary of the Air Force James G. Roche said Chapman was "an American's American" and a hero.

"We gather today to pay tribute to the heroic efforts of TSgt John Chapman," said Air Force Chief of Staff Gen John Jumper. "Today we know that John is here with us."

Jumper presented the Air Force Cross to Chapman's widow, Valerie. Chapman's parents, Terry Giaccone and Gene Chapman, each received one of the medals from the chief of staff.

The Air Force Cross has been awarded to 23 enlisted airmen, only three of those since the Vietnam conflict.

Chief Master Sgt of the Air Force Gerald R. Murray said, "Such is the high degree of heroism for the merit of this medal's award."

Chapman and his team were inserted by helicopter into an area of Afghanistan on March 4 for a mission. During insertion, the helicopter came under heavy machine-gun fire and was directly hit by a rocket-propelled grenade. The grenade caused a Navy SEAL team member to fall from the aircraft.

The helicopter was severely damaged and made an emergency landing seven kilometers away from where the SEAL fell.

After landing, Chapman called in an AC-130 gunship to provide close-air support and cover the stranded team before directing the gunship to search for the missing team member.

Chapman called for, coordinated and controlled an evacuation helicopter for the team, limiting their exposure to enemy fire.

According to the award citation, Chapman volunteered to rescue the missing team member without regard for his own life. He engaged and killed two enemy personnel then continued advancing until engaging a dug-in machine gun nest.

"At this time, the rescue team came under effective enemy fire from three directions," read the citation. Chapman exchanged fire at close range with the enemy until succumbing to multiple wounds. "His engagement and destruction of the first enemy position and advancement on the second enemy position enabled his team to move to cover and break enemy contact."

The team leader credited Chapman's aggressive and selfless actions with saving the lives of the entire team.

After the award ceremony, Gene Chapman spoke of how his son always called him "ole man," rather than old man. He then told of his last conversation with his son.

"It was March 1, four days before he died. He called, and I heard that, 'Hey ole man,'" Gene Chapman said as his eyes began filling with tears. "I told him 'what are you calling me for? I told you to talk to Val and the kids if you could call.' He said, 'I took care of that. I only have a minute and a half, and I just wanted to hear your voice.' That was the last time I talked with him."

Air Commando Journal Article Submission Guidelines

Our goal at the ACJ is to tell the Air Commando and USAF Special Operations story, from our beginning to today.

We need your help to do that. We seek quality articles, well written, factually based, and reflecting your experiences living the special operations mission in all of its complexities. Submissions can be of any length, although 1500-3000 words would be an average suggestion. All articles will be edited as per the Air University Style and Author Guide (found online at www.aircommando.org under the Journal tab, and at the Hurlburt Field library).

Hard-copy manuscripts can be mailed to: *Air Commando Journal*, P.O. Box 7, Mary Esther, FL 32569-0007. However, we prefer that they be submitted electronically to: info@aircommando.org. We use MS-Word. We also appreciate accompanying photos. Photos should be high resolution (300 dpi) and must indicate the source, have a release for use, and a brief description. If your submission is copyrighted, we will indicate that on the article.

Please see www.aircommando.org for more information on *Air Commando Journal* article guidelines.

Help us tell our story!

16TH SOS MOVING FORWARD

Members of the 16th Special Operations Squadron pose following the final AC-130H Spectre gunship mission conducted at Cannon AFB, N.M. (USAF photo by A1C Charles Slack)

By SrA Xavier Lockley
27th SOW Public Affairs

The 16th Special Operations Squadron stationed at Cannon Air Force Base, N.M., conducted its final mission for the AC-130H Spectre gunship Jan. 16 at Cannon Air Force Base, N.M.

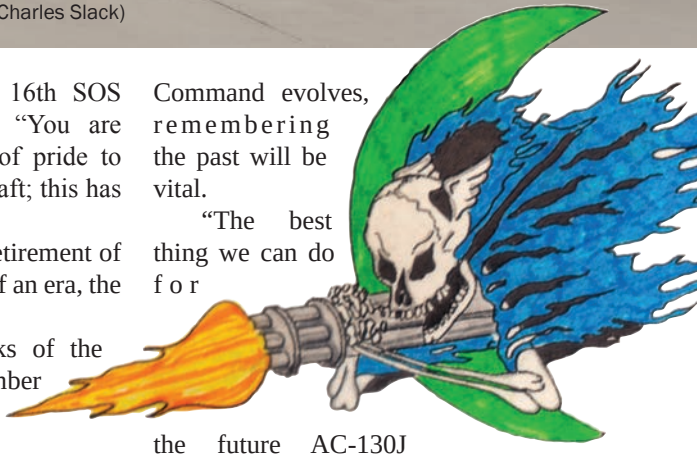
The C-130 began its operational service with the Air Force in 1956. AC-130 development began in the early 1960s. In the Vietnam War the gunships were credited with many life-saving close air support missions. To some, it is a privilege to have flown the Spectre gunship.

"It's an honor to consider all the Spectre pilots who have come before," said Capt John Thompson, 16th SOS assistant operations officer. "You are filled with the truest sense of pride to fly in the last days of an aircraft; this has been a great honor."

Though the impending retirement of the AC-130H marks the end of an era, the future of the C-130 is bright.

"As we close the books of the AC-130H aircraft, we remember how phenomenal this plane was for more than 40 years," said Lt Col James Mott, 16th SOS commander. "Now we transition onto newer models of the AC-130 and begin to write new chapters of Air Force history."

As Air Force Special Operations Command evolves, remembering the past will be vital.



"The best thing we can do for the future AC-130J community is to push forward with tactical principles that the past has taught us," said Thompson. "From all standpoints we can learn something from previous experiences; be it from a flying, maintenance or operations point of view, the past can be your best teacher."

In order to get all eight planes up at the same time, the 16th SOS had to put teamwork on display. Pilots, maintainers, loadmasters and other support members had to be in sync for all eight planes to fly.

"Being able to get all eight of the AC-130H aircraft up is remarkably unique and required everyone to play a vital role," said Mott. "The 16th SOS worked extremely hard to get this mission accomplished and this is truly a testament to the men and women of this squadron. I'm very proud of them; they did a wonderful job."

Spectre gunships taxi into position on the flightline prior to the final AC-130H mission. (USAF photo by SSgt Matthew Plew)

Members of the 16th Special Operations Squadron prepare to fly the final AC-130H Spectre gunship mission conducted at Cannon Air Force Base, N.M. (USAF photo by A1C Charles Slack)

As my brothers and sisters before me, I am proud to step into history as a member of the Air Force Special Operations Command. I will walk with pride with my head held high, my heart and attitude will show my allegiance to God, country and comrades. When unable to walk another step, I will walk another mile. With freedom my goal, I will step into destiny with pride and the Air Force Special Operations Command.

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