

MACV Army Pho-Tog flies A-37

A decade long obsession came true for me in Vietnam. During my high school years, I worked part time at the local airport, washing and waxing airplanes, mowing grass, cleaning up barf from air sick passengers, or any other work to gain flight instruction time, in my log book. In the late 50's Flying Magazine had photographic Ads depicting the T-37, a new jet trainer Cessna was producing for the U.S. Air Force. Right then I wanted a ride in that new jet trainer. However at graduation I opted for an Army photographic career, instead of the Air Force.

MACV had 5 photo teams. The Air Force, Navy and Marines each had one team, and 2 Army teams. In 1968, I was sergeant in charge of Army Photo Team "A". Walking into our coordinating office at MACV Public Affairs Office, I glanced at the project board and spotted A-37. Asking our supervisor a Lt Comdr, who himself was an EX naval carrier jet jockey, if the A-37 was taken. Stating it wasn't; I immediately told him I wanted that story. Not knowing what branch of service the A-37 might belong; it could be a marine corp new armored vehicle, a naval ship or anything; yet I was absolutely certain the air force had modified the T-37, with upgraded powerplants, armament and re-designated the aircraft ATTACK-37. The Lt Comdr informed the team the A-37's were at Bien Hoa Air Base, which was an easy drive from MACV HQS or our office at The Brinks BOQ (Bachelor Officers Quarters)

The next morning the Air Police at the gate to Bien Hoa Air Base gave us directions to the A-37 squadron. It was some distance within the base complex from the gate. During our introduction and stating our business, the officers and NCOs were polite yet non-committal. we were instructed to return the following morning, when the commander would be there and gave us a certain time, which we complied with.

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The air was stiff, the squadron commander, a LTC was present and a definate tone of committal today. They asked why a army photo team was doing this project, when Bien Hoa had qualified air force photographers available? Then came a battery of training questions. Did I have parachute training? Am I ejection seat trained? What about classes in escape and evasion training? How long since I had counter-insurgency Training? On and on the list of question continued. All I could say was NO or NEVER to the quizzing. By now if I were a roach, I'd crawl under my jungle boots, I was wearing. The LTC squadron commander stated; further, he reached over picking up an open three ring binder, he said the U.S. Air Force Vietnam Regulation states; as he began reading from the air force rule book, his eyes became the size of quarters. Virtually verbatim it read; " any military photographer on active duty on official assignment over friendly territory, below 10,000 feet may go."

That was music to my beleagured ears. I knew all of South Vietnam was considered friendly territory. North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia was hostile territory. I never knew why the difference, I can only infer, that if a plane crashed it would be the duration until help arrived. Be it FAC (Forward air Controller) air force C-130 gunship, skyraiders, army attack helos, rescue helo or a host of other friendly aid in the crash site area. My concern was the altitude clause. I didn't know how high the A-37 flew while on patrol. The squadron commander just dropped the regulation on a desk and called several pilots into his office, and telling a captain to usher me into the equipment (ready) room, where I'd be fitted with a helmet, flight suit and parachute.

In the equipment room several sergeant peers told me the squadron was a jink where passengers were concerned. While getting the right size flight suit, one NCO stated the flight surgeon wanted a ride. The unit took him up where he passed out over the control stick, causing the plane to crash. The sergeant major was given a ride in the A-37, and he barfed up ruining a \$200.00 head-set. That was why the officers were hostile towards me. How I wanted to tell them my flight instructor was an ex-barnstormer, and I had performed stalls, wingovers and tailspins, but would the officers believe their NCOs? Probably not; plus the realization was I had gotten this far by a loophole in the air force regulation. I better keep my mouth shut and best not try pressing my luck!

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Heading back to the orderly room after finishing the equipment fitting, we were instructed to report back at a given hour the next day. Driving back to Saigon we all knew the other photo team members wouldn't get to fly. They wondered how I pulled the deal off in the first place. We discussed; I'd get the inside the plane, air to air and air to ground shots. They would get the taxi, take-off and landing sequences on film and sound track. Knowing the edited version was for television network news, the edited screen time would be 2 minutes at most. I hoped the sound track would last that long.

In the equipment room, the next day, I met the two pilots that would fly this sortie with me. One was a major the other a captain. The major stated because I was along, they would do bomb runs on a 30 degree angle instead of the usual 60 degree attack angle. He also said, they never bring back live ordinance. Explaining their main mission was convoy security and ground forces in combat. They had a two hour fuel supply, if nothing happened in their sector of operation, the FAC had a list of priorities of alternate targets to be hit before returning to base.

A quick step van ride to the flight line, there sat two modified T-37s, outfitted with three hard points on each wing for carrying a single 500 pound conventional explosive or napalm bomb on each hard point. Additionally machine guns were installed in the nose. The plane sat low to the ground, it was impossible to slide a yard stick under the plane. I was to fly with the major, he guided me on the wing and into the right side spare seat. He got in on the left side. Once the headsets were connected we could communicate on the intercom.

Starting the engines, leaving the canopy open while taxiing, the major showed me the oxygen control valve and instructed me on the ejection seat mechanism. Telling me lifting up on the entire handle ejects the canopy, squeezing the inner handle, then I would be the bullet of a 50 caliber machine gun round. and shot out of the plane. He warns me not to touch the yellow ribbon holding the firing pin in-place. He further tells me that if he yells eject don't hesitate, or I'll be in the plane by myself.

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I felt uncomfortable hearing the majors instructions. The NCO's in the equipment room flatly said it would be a bitch. You'll have snaps and buckles holding the chute on you, plus the seat belt. You'll be flying through the air and in a split second you'll have to be cognizant which buckle is which. You won't be able to open the chute until your free of the seat.

The instrument panel was more complex than I expected. Many gauges were in pairs for the twin powerplants. The radio equipment and navigation systems were familiar with altimeter, artificial horizon, air speed indicator, compass etc. It seemed difficult for one person to monitor all the instruments. Near the runway both planes stopped for static run up and conducting the pre-flight checklist.

A truck parked close by carried the armament crew, with the checklist completed, the major instructed me to put both hands atop the windshield. The armament crew chocked the wheels. This was an intense segment. One person stood by the truck watching our hands and his co-workers. Two others approached the left wing. Each bomb fuse had a red ribbon hanging from a safety pin. One man carefully watched as the third person cautiously extracted the safety pin from the fuse. Then to the next bomb then the third. The same was repeated on the right wing. Opening the nose the machine gun safety pin was removed. Once completed the chocks were pulled from the wheels. We would be wing man for the other plane. I told the major, this first flight I would mostly observe what they did.

With a pair of F-100s touching down in tactical formation we were cleared to enter the runway. Side by side we sat on the runway, closing the canopy, the major reached over pulling the safety pin on mine and his ejection seat. Awaiting the F-100s to exit the runway, the major told me to put my feet on the rudder peddles, telling and demonstrating the toe breaks. The tower cleared us and the captain roared down the runway. The major immediately aloud said; thousand one, thousand two, thousand three at 14 he released the breaks, ramming wide open the throttles. I never felt so much thrust, if I wasn't strapped in, I swear my butt would have been on the fin

I was surprised by the speedy throttle opening. I heard abrupt throttle movements, especially on jets caused flame out. Both planes racing down the runway in a tactical take-off, I could see ahead as the lead plane lifted off. Looking out I felt the nose wheel lift off as we approached the 5000 foot marker. About another 1000 feet and the main gear cleared the runway, and the A-37 carrying 1½ tons of bombs was airborne.

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10 to 15 feet off the runway, the major deliberately holds the plane down, retracting the landing gear, as he gained air speed from lift off to maneuvering speed. He eased back on the control stick maintaining 210 knots, and eased off the flaps from 20 degrees to no flaps. Heading Northwest for Tay Ninh and Black Virgin Mountain. The mountain looks like a volcano cone, standing I think, 900 feet above the rest of the terrain. Between 3000 and 5000 feet elevation we leveled off, adjusting the trim tabs, for straight and level flight. We turned North toward Bam Me Thout.

Some radio chatter, I deduced as notifying various (FAC) Forward Air Controllers, that we were on station orbiting above them. We weren't up here alone. Beside A-37s and F-100s, Bien Hoa had a squadron of F-5s. Close by Saigon, with its Tan Son Nhut Airbase had squadrons of F-4s, F-100s and skyraiders with sorties up patrolling, plus Cam Ranh Bay wasn't that far away in a jet.

The major tells me, if I want to go faster, just push the throttles ahead. To go slower ease back on the throttles, with that he folds his arms,, I had the controls.

About 75 minutes of flying around and nothing, we contacted a FAC, flying an L-19. Moments later we began circleing above the FAC, in less than one minute time turns. The L-19 dove firing a 2.75 inch smoke rocket, marking the target, an abandon bunker complex. Allowing time for the L-19 to clear the target area, the lead plane began his dive from our circleing altitude. I was blind, all the action was on the pilots side. We had gone $\frac{1}{4}$ turn from the lead planes dive, when the major reaches onto the instrument panel lifting a cover over a series of toggle switches. They are all straight out. A sign above the switches says armed, below states release. The major using his thumb raises one toggle switch up, to armed position.

I couldn't see anything until the CPT's plane reached our altitude and leveled off about a mile from us, nearly 180 degrees from us. I couldn't see the dive, bomb release, nor explosion, nothing until his plane was back up with us.

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With the lead plane at altitude, the major eases left rudder and stick with forward pressure and we start our 30 degree dive. Now I can see the target area and a dissipating puff of brownish-black smoke, that was a 500 pound bomb. The major's helmet is against the bomb site atop the instrument panel. We ease out of the bank as the major sites through the bomb aiming device. On target, he flips his right thumb down, releasing one bomb. Then back pressure and left rudder to climb out as the bomb goes off. Again I'm blind, the opaque portion of the canopy, ejection seat and wing block my view.

The major looks my way and I hear on the intercom, He's OK lets do 60 degree dives. As we orbit above the FAC flies in to inspect the damage and requested another strike. With one plane at a time on actual bomb run, we acted as guard for the lead plane, and he protected us while on our bomb run.

The Fac requested another series of bomb runs to destroy the bunker complex. It must be stated, that the bunkers and tunnels opening was smaller than a good size trash can. with bombs exploding making 10 to 15 feet craters still didn't guarantee destruction. It was like hitting bullseye in a dart game. Again the action was on the left side of the plane.

Then the FAC directed us about 200 yards away to more bunkers and a grass hut in the jungle. Diving to fire another smoke rocket, than bomb runs followed. Between the lead plane and our bomb run, the FAC spotted movement on the ground and requested a strafing run, which the major did. I think the lead plane also did a strafing run. Then back to bombing the complex until the munitions were exhasusted.

Flying back to Bien Hoa, I looked up to see the lead plane flying right above up and slightly forward, instead of side by side as had been most of the sortie. This enabled us to check the CPT's plane for a hang bomb or other damage. A hang bomb is one that didn't drop properly. It got hung up on the bomb rack. We inspected the fuselage and under wings for bomb fragment or bullet holes from unseen ground fire. The process was reversed and the CPT checked the underside of our plane.

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During the inspections required considerate radio conversation to avoid mid-air collision while moving into position, yet inspect the planes. With the base in site, contact with the tower was necessary for landing instructions. During my two plus years in Nam, I had seen many tactical take-offs and landing and knew the normal flight pattern was tossed out. There wouldn't be an approach to the airport downwind, then a 90 degree turn onto the base leg. Another 90 degree turn into the wind for final approach.

The tactical formation was approach the runway into the wind at an elevation of 800 to 1000 feet. As the CPT's planes wings passed over the end of the runway, he pulled a hard left turn in a diving circle and onto the runway. I believe the major counted to five before he made the hard left turn cutting power. We did have an elongated downwind pattern, then a semi-circle onto final approach, leveling out about a $\frac{1}{2}$ miles from touchdown. That runway was coming up fast and still lower and lower we sank toward the asphalt. We were so low, I was scared, that the major forgot to drop the landing gear. Remember the fuselage sits less than three feet off the deck, that I actually raised my feet off the floor. Speed man, we had been cruising around 250 knots and the descend added probably 50 miles an hour more. This was like going 250-300 miles an hour on a go-cart, and no flaps used to slow us down.

Rolling to the end of the runway, the major opened the canopy and reached over replacing the safety pin in the ejection seat. I shut off the oxygen control valve, I don't recall using any oxygen. The armament crew met us, again both hands on top of the windshield. I don't remember what they performed, besides opening the nose and insert a safety pin in the machine or gatling gun, preventing us from shooting up the flight line.

Back at the revetment and out of the plane, I told the major, " This is one hot little plane." The flight line truck took us back to the squadron HQs, where I was informed to report back tomorrow. This had been a morning flight and we'd have all afternoon as down time. I was at the air force mercy, so turn in the flight gear and head back to Saigon.

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Frustration was setting in it seemed Murphy's Law,; If something can go wrong, it will go wrong". was controlling this project. From the outset, I envisioned a quick simple one day job, with maybe two airborne sorties. MACV wanted us photo teams to finish one project a week, yet it took 4 days to get the first flight completed.

The most compelling problem was I needed an explosion, preferably a controlled explosion, one that I knew would go off where, when and how I wanted the blast, not some residue puff of smoke. I had options, each had pluses and minuses. One was 3rd Ord Depot with their nightly blast. I knew where, when and how the explosion would take place. The negative was instead of a quarter ton, the blast would be 5 tons. Rather than under realistic, that would be over real or theatrical, but the 3rd Ord was an option.

Another hopeful option was that on one A-37 flight, the planes would arc upward to the right, on the side I was sitting. This wouldn't guarantee that I'd see or be able to film anymore than climbing out leftward. The wing would obscure a portion of the bomb run and the confined space in the plane, there wouldn't be room for the camera between my helmet and canopy.

Another option was to ask the air force for a third plane just for filming the action to my needs, but they were only barely tolerating the army doing the project, not supporting it.

The last option was fly with A FAC. They seemed to have an aerial ring side seat for the action. There were plenty of them around. The 1st, 9th and 25th Infantry Divisions in the Saigon area all had Forward Air Controllers. The negatives were how many days would be required flying with them until one called an airstrike? Also they had to be out of harms way, so that the action on the small 17 to 21 inch TV screen would resemble miniatures. The L-19 is a high wing aircraft, thus the wing would block some of the bomb run. FACs could also call for artillery fire. Lastly with the variety of fighter/bomber, what were the chances of getting an A-37 airstrike I could see an A-37 taking off, A-37 aerial side by side, A-37 release the bomb, then cut to a propeller driven Skyraider follow through on the bomb run. That would go over like a lead balloon.

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The 2nd and 3rd flight missions in the A-37 were no different than the first. I flew with different pilots and armament was a mixture of 2 napalm and 4 high explosive (HE) bombs. The Forward Air Controllers used (HE) rockets for marking the target. For the most part we flew around until the fuel got low, then contacted A FAC and we dropped the payload of bombs and flew back to Bien Hoa. All the missions had been less than 75 miles from base. Several occasions we saw U-2 spy plane land or take-off.

Changing rolls of film was unvelievably slow. I never timed myself, but one minute under normal circumstances to change film would seem reasonablely normal. I don't recall, but we must have worn gloves, for it took, I bet 5 minutes to preform this simple task while harnessed in the cramp confines of the cockpit. One spare roll of film was in a zipped up calf pocket of the flight suit. It seems it took a good minute just to fish out the film from that pocket. Then undo the cloth tape that sealed the spool of film and carefully save the tape for reuse. Now open the camera extracting the exposed film, putting it in the can and resealing that can, once the camera was open and exposed film gotten out. Open the gate and drop in the raw roll of film, check the loop and close the gate. Find the slit in the metal spool and insert the end. Take up the slack exposed film and drop the reel in the camera, closing the camera.

The 4th sortie was memorable, after taking off, we headed South East of Saigon. The entire delta region was the responsibility of the 9th Infantry Division. We continued to climb higher and higher we went. As a first, I went on oxygen full time. Between Saigon and the Mekong River, looking out the pilots side I saw Vung Tau, a town I never did get to visit in the three years in Vietnam. The ground below was lust green, not jungle brown, with numerous towns, villages and hamlets dotting the landscape.

Over the instrument panel lay the entire dendritic Mekong River emptying into the Pacific Ocean's South China Sea. It looked like the Mississippi River South of New Orleans, but much better defined. Crossing the Mekong, looking out my side, I saw Can Tho and up stream Long Xuyen with a wart on the horizon that was Nuy Sap rock quarry. Straight ahead I could see the Southern most land tip and the combining of the Gulf of Thailand with the South China Sea at lands end.

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About half way between the Mekong River and the Southern tip of Vietnam, we were contacted, I deem by a Vietnamese FAC receiving ground fire. I say Vietnamese FAC, because there was no villages or hamlets anywhere in sight, plus it was way out in the boonies for the 9th Division. We dropped down to aid the FAC. I started getting ear aches, the A-37 wasn't pressurized. The Cpt pilot tells and demonstrates, using his hand closing his nose and blow out. It helped some.

The FAC fired an HE rocket marking the target. As the lead plane started his bomb run, he saw tracer rounds coming up and he switched to gatling or machine gun strafing run and informed us to do the same. On our initial run the VC or NVA were still shooting at us, we also saw tracer rounds coming our direction. There after empty the bomb racks, one at a time until all 12 bombs from both planes were exhausted. Then we climbed out of there for home. Along the way I glanced at the altimeter, it read 14,000 feet, we were slightly higher than I was supposed to be, but my ears stopped hurting in the lower air pressure. We landed with my ears hurting all night. My left ear adjusted to ground pressure after 7 days and the right ear didn't fully pop until 10 days after that flight.

The 5th and final flight, I was again linked up with the major from the first day. As soon as we were in the cockpit, he tells me to get on the controls. I mostly followed and felt his movements as we taxied to the runway's end. We went through the pre-flight checklist and the armament crew had their session with both planes. We were cleared to enter the runway and for take-off.

The second the lead plane started roaring down the runway, the major tells me breaks and open both throttles to quarter power. At his aloud count of 15, he hollers go! Releasing the breaks, I shove the throttles wide open. We start drifting to the right of the center line. I push left rudder, but at low speeds the control surfaces are unresponsive. Shoving more rudder peddle and we drift back to the center line. Soon we're drifting to far to the left, and I push right rudder. Hell I'm going down the runway like a drunk driver. Once I felt the major tap left toe break to get us back on course, other wise I had the controls.

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Probably about 100 knots, I eased back slightly on the control stick, but no response, we were still far below flying speed. Finally about the 4000 foot runway marker, the speed was sufficient for the nose to barely respond. Another 2000 feet of zig-zagging down the runway, when the main gear left the runway. We probably took off somewhere around 160-170 miles an hour. I eased forward on the stick in order to gain airspeed up to maneuvering speed. I had to literally fight to maintain control of the plane. Realizing the trim tabs were set for the previous flight, returning home bombless and empty fuel tanks, not fully loaded. I struggled! The plane flew like driving a car without power steering.

Meanwhile from holding the plane to 10-15 feet off the runway gaining speed, the A-37 drifted to about 75 feet high over the end of the runway; not what I planned. Finally at 210 knots, the major tells me to ease back and maintain that speed. Then the major instructs me to cut the pattern short to catch up with the lead plane, so I ease left rudder and stick in a climbing bank. Now the air speed was at 225 knots, so more back pressure and a steeper climb. Finally we reached our cruising altitude, where I throttle back and the major adjusts the trim tabs. Now the little fighter/bomber flew with ease.

I had last had the flight control of a plane during the fall of 1962, while at the Army Photo School and Red Bank, N.J. airport was right outside the post gate. Now I rated myself as clumsy and rusty flying the A-37. Never before nor since have I taken off a plane loaded with 3000 pounds of bombs, but I'm glad for the experience in ~~May~~, 1968.

SAW

I'm thinking there was a button on the pilot's control stick to actually release the bomb or fire the machine gun, instead of toying with the crude toggle switches, I can't remember that detail.

Departing the A-37 squadron, on the way back to Saigon, we stopped at the 3rd Ord Depot. We still had time before the nightly blast, but were told the EOD Team had already departed to set the charges. It was against regulation to allow non-ordinance people to freely wonder about the depot. Thus we were told to come back tomorrow a half hour earlier.

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The next day we followed the EOD Team as they set charges to three pads of un-issueable ammo. The pads were located behind a woods a good 3/4 of a mile out the rear gate of the depot. Then climbing a guard tower I set up the camera on a tripod. The EOD Sergeant pointed the exact direction where the first explosion would occur. Then the second and the third. Even being this distance away and a woods between us and the pads, shrapnel flew all around us, but we got the monstrous explosions we so desperately needed.

TRIM TABS: ARE NOT THE AUTO PILOT

Trim tabs are minor adjustments on most, if not all flight control surfaces. Rarely does a flight have direct head or tail winds. Cross wind push the plane off course. The rudder trim tab corrects for this drift. The elevator trim tab corrects for minor imbalance of the center of gravity, allowing the plane to fly straight and level. The aileron trim tab compensates for mis-judgement of weight from the center of gravity.

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