

'Patches' to Retire After Many Hits

By Sgt. Tony Bazzie

PHAN RANG AB, Vietnam (7AF) — If the Air Force gave Purple Hearts to airplanes, a C-123 here would have over a thousand.

The plane is known as "Patches" for obvious reasons. Its skin is speckled with dozens of them, covering bullet and shrapnel holes inflicted by enemy ground fire during its 10 years of flying missions in Vietnam.

The unofficial count of hits received by "Patches" well exceeds 1000. Although metal patches cover many places on the plane, all of the hits cannot be seen. "Patches" has had whole sections "reskinned" several times, covering many of the veteran Provider's battle scars.

Scheduled to be retired, either to the Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, or to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., the plane has earned the right to be displayed among some of the most historic aircraft in Air Force history. All available information, including the names of all pilots who have flown the plane, has been collected and authenticated.

The aircraft now is with the 310th Tactical Airlift Sq. at Phan Rang. Before being assigned to the 310th TAS, "Patches" belonged to the 12th Special Operations Sq. at Bien Hoa AB.

The aircraft's commander during the past year, Maj. Stanley O.

Swanson, speaks of the plane with admiration. While flying the aircraft on insecticide missions during two tours here, one in 1964 and the other this year, he has flown through most of the enemy ground fire directed at "Patches." The spray plane was hit 855 times during his two years in Vietnam. On one mission over the delta, Major Swanson said the plane was hit 69 times.

Due to the number of hits received by the C-123, armor plates have been installed around much of the cockpit area. Major Swanson explained that the plates were added mainly for protection against shrapnel flying around each time they are hit. The crewmen also wear bullet-proof vests for added protection.

Major Swanson stated that during his tour in Vietnam in 1964, "Patches" was hit an average of eight times per mission.

Major Swanson, who has more than a thousand flying hours in the durable plane, said that the crews fly insecticide missions over 15 bases every nine days. In 1964, during the veteran pilot's first tour, "Patches" flew the lead on every spray mission over South Vietnam.