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MSgt. Lawrence Lentz
(413) 557-2072/2572

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PATCHES: THE HOLE STORY

By: MSgt. Lawrence H. Lentz 439 CSG/PA
Lt. Col. Arthur Sorenson 439 TAW/DOO

WESTOVER AFB, Mass.....At a constant 130 knots, the four C-123s held tight formation 100 feet over the Vietnamese landscape. Both the low altitude and slow air speed greatly reduced maneuverability while increasing their vulnerability. Yet the aircraft remained 'on target' as heavy ground fire strafed and damaged each plane.

Their destination that day in March 1965, was a dense mangrove swamp in Rung Sat, near the port of Saigon's shipping channels. From the swamp the Viet Cong attacked allied ships then retreated under cover of the swamp's foliage.

The C-123s were en route to help knock out the "VC" by flying classified tactical airlift missions.

The planes were extensively used because of their versatile design and flying capabilities. Originally designed to be a post-World War II, all metal assault glider, the C-123 evolved by equipping the glider with Pratt & Whitney R-2800 reciprocating engines. They're the same power plant that pulled the B-29. Later J-85 jet engines were added for STOL (short takeoff/landing) operations.

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The jet assisted take-off and steep backed tail were the ideal combination for the Vietnam terrain. From battle zone airstrips, some less than 2,000 feet long, the C-123s quickly could exchange up to 58 troops and their equipment with 46 medical evacuees on litters. Or the Providers could airdrop paratroops, supplies, or equipment in the middle of the fighting. Many could be equipped for aerial spray missions.

One of those C-123s, 56-4362, was a four year veteran of those missions. Actually, it was one of the first six Provider aircraft into the Vietnam Theatre. By its final return to the States, in 1972, it would be one of the Air Force's most extensively used aircraft. And it had the battle scars to prove it!

"We kept an accurate record of damage because so few planes were available during those early days," recalls retired Maj. Jack Spey, the pilot who flew "362" from Pope AFB, N.C. to Tan Son Nhut, Vietnam, the day after Thanksgiving, 1961. "I know there were over 1,000 bullet entry holes in her when we stopped counting in 1966. Double that for the exit holes to figure the number of patches we completed."

Because of the type and scope of its battle damage, 362 was unique among its peers. Soon, 362 was known as "Patches" throughout the Southeast Asia theatre. The name is still proudly painted on its nose.

362 also wears another memory of those war years. Seven purple hearts, displayed over the crew entrance door, recall the seven airmen injured or killed while in combat.

In addition, Patches claims another distinction not widely known. "I believe it was the first C-123 to travel around the world," explains Major Spey. "In May, 1962, Capt. Charles Haggerty and I flew her to Iran and then to Afghanistan where we sprayed against locusts. Next we went to

Langley AFB in Virginia before returning to 'Nam the following September."

Those war time experiences for Patches and many other Providers were logged with the Air Force's RANCH HAND program.

No matter how hostile the target, 362 was in the midst of the aerial action. On return to her home base at Tan Son Nhut, the enemy's wrath was clearly visible all over Patches' airframe.

The Provider's "significant historical data" log reads like an aircraft mechanic's nightmare: For example, during a four day period, March 31 through April 4, 1967: "March 31 -- Battle Damage: Front Part of Left of Horizontal Stabilizer, Leading Edge of Left Wing. Repaired as Necessary. April 1 -- Battle Damage: Left Main Gear Door, Repaired as Necessary. April 2 -- Battle Damage: R/H Side of Fuselage. Repaired as Necessary. April 3 -- Battle Damage: Right Side of Sta. 500, Both Sides Vertical Stabilizer, Repaired as Necessary." And the list continues.

Maj. Ted R. Kroese, now flying F-15 Eagles with the 58th TFS at Elgin AFB, Fla. flew many fighter escort missions for Patches and her companions in Southeast Asia. "Those C-123s crews were terrific. Steady on track, a bunch would come in close on the deck. No matter what the VC threw at them, they pressed right in until their run was completed. Patches was usually in the lead. We knew her by the big bull's-eye painted on the nose," he recalled.

"We had a special interest in Patches, because we all knew her history. So did the Viet Cong. They knew that bull's-eye too, and tried to use it for target practice. That was the whole point. It was unit pride. They could try, but nobody could shoot Patches down."

By 1968, Patches was receiving a great deal of attention from flight crews, support personnel as well as publicity from local news media. Those associated with the plane wanted 362 to end her proud career retired in a permanent place of honor rather than to an anonymous scrap heap.

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To reduce the potential of further damage, Patches was reassigned to insecticide spraying duty with the newly-designated 12th Air Commando Squadron (Ranch Hand-Vietnam). One of the missions of the 12th ACS was control of malaria-carrying mosquitos throughout South Vietnam under "Operation Flyswatter." Patches was the sole aircraft selected for the mission.

"When Patches left combat, her brown and green camouflage was removed and she was repainted silver. She was the only aircraft that color," remembers Capt. David Bothwell, then a member of the 19th TAS flying C-123s at Tan San Nhut. He's now assigned to the 71st Flying Training Wing at Pease AFB, N.H. "Everyone was glad to see her during those spraying missions. Even the Viet Cong, who were affected as we were by the mosquitos, knew Patches because of her color. They left her alone!"

As America's involvement in the Vietnam action phased down, Patches returned to the United States in August 1972, and was assigned to the Air Force Reserve's 911th TAG at Greater Pittsburgh Airport.

Within three months, she was transferred to the 731st TAS, a part of the 901st TAG, at Hanscom Field, Mass. Patches remained with the 731st through the organization's relocation to Westover AFB, Mass. in October 1973. Six months later the unit joined the newly formed 439th TAW.

Due in good part to the efforts started 12 years ago by the RANCH HAND crews and continued by her friends at Westover, at the age of 23, Patches has retired to a place of honor. After 10,000 hours, her final flight took her to the Air Force Museum at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio.

"There will be tears of joy in some very happy peoples' eyes when they learn Patches is on permanent display," forecasts Major Spey, who now heads the Ranch Hand Association. "Patches fought long and hard for her country and deserves the recognition due any hero. She was, and is, a great ol' bird."