

THE DRAGONSHIP -- FLYING
A PROUD MISSION IN VIETNAM

NHA TRANG (7AF)--The history of the AC-47 Dragonship in the Vietnam war is one of unlimited success. The converted C-47 Skytrain has become one of the most effective close air support weapons in the Air Force inventory and is ideally suited for its role of defending friendly hamlets, outposts and units.

The Dragonships operate from bases throughout Vietnam, with the 3d and 4th Special Operations Squadrons of the 14th Special Operations Wing controlling all their activity. Wing headquarters is at Nha Trang Air Base.

Recently, Dragonships flew their 20,000th mission in combat while defending a CIDG camp in II Corps. The "Spookies," as they are affectionately known by the troops on the ground, also have attained an unblemished record of successful outpost defense.

The idea of making a gunship of the slow-flying C-47 was conceived by an Air Force officer who had served a tour of duty in South America. He had noted that mail and vital supplies were sometimes lowered to remote villages in a bucket tied to the end of a long rope suspended from the cargo door of a slow-flying aircraft. As the plane circled in a steep pylon turn, the bucket tended to orbit in one spot over the ground.

The officer envisioned a line of fire in place of the line of rope. Side-firing guns in the transport could be aimed by the pilot and kept bearing on a ground target as long as the plane orbited in a tight bank overhead.

In the first tests of this principle, the modified C-47 used ten .30 caliber machineguns protruding from the passenger windows and cargo door on the left side of the aircraft. In later modifications, the machineguns were replaced by three 7.62mm miniguns firing up to 18,000 rounds a minute.

Following testing, the first AC-47s were assigned to the 1st Air Commando Squadron under the 2nd Air Division in Vietnam. Their first mission was to provide fire support for the defense of old French forts that extended from the mountains of the DMZ to the canals and rivers of the Delta. The missions were flown day as well as night.

In addition, the Dragonships also performed forward air controller (FAC) duties for close air support and interdiction strikes by A-1s, B-57s, F-4s, F-5s and Navy aircraft.

They flew their own interdiction missions of roads, canals and trails, attacked enemy base camps, and acted as command and control ships during other heavy air assaults and ground strikes. They also flew search and rescue sorties, hauled cargo (which was the original purpose of the aircraft in the late '30s), and dropped psychological warfare leaflets.

In June 1966, the first commander of the AC-47s, Lieutenant Colonel Max L. Barker, recommended to 7th Air Force they be used primarily as a fire support weapon in night defense of friendly forces. The idea was accepted and the aircraft has been used extensively for night defense missions ever since.

The Dragonships remained under the control of the 2nd Air Division from August 1965 to March 8, 1966, when the 1st Air Commando Squadron was transferred to the newly activated 14th Air Commando Wing. The wing was formed to embrace all special operations activities in Vietnam under one headquarters for control purposes.

Since their arrival in Vietnam, the old planes have established an almost human relationship with the men on the ground. They write the Dragonship fan letters in appreciation of the protection it has given them. "Spooky, if it weren't for you, we'd all be pushing up daisies now," one soldier wrote following an attack on his outpost.

In its short time in Vietnam, the Dragonship has had a variety of names -- all given by the troops it supports. Marines called it "Puff, the magic dragon," after a popular song of the day because the red tracers pouring out of its three mini-guns resembled a fire-breathing dragon.

Some prefer the World War II nickname of "Gooneybird," which the C-47s were called. Most prefer its radio call sign of "Spooky." During the enemy attacks on the Duc Lap CIDG camp in August 1968, it was called the "Guardian Angel."

By any name, the AC-47 in Vietnam is creating a proud record in performing one of the most effective and important missions of the war.