

# *Spectre: The First Year*

## **Cal Taylor**

By February 1968, I had been at Charleston AFB, SC for six months, after 27 months in the B-52H at Grand Forks AFB, ND. That was long enough to get checked out in the C-141A, with the 41st MAS, and to become engaged to Navy nurse Ltjg Vicki Jackson. In early April, base personnel called and asked, "Capt. Taylor, how would you like to go to Thailand?"

I thought long and hard for about 30 seconds, then said, "Sure." Followed by, "Where and what airplane?"

The answer was that another navigator had been pulled from an assignment to the AC-130A gunship because his wife was sick. His replacement had to be at Ubon Royal Thai AFB by the end of April. I had to wrap up things at Charleston, complete Jungle Survival School at Clark AB, Philippines and show at Det. 2 of the 14th Special Operations Wing (later redesignated as the 16th SOS) at Ubon before the end of April. The first and very difficult challenge was to tell Vicki! Not a happy time for a couple that had already been looking at houses in Charleston.



*The Death's Head Spectre patch was not in accordance with regulations but told the unit's story (Cal Taylor)*



*Author at Clark AB. Jul 68, with 41626 (Cal Taylor)*

The next and nearly as difficult task was to tell my parents. My father answered the phone and I told him, before my mother took the phone. Years later, I learned that he took it pretty hard and I should perhaps have informed her, first.

My last C-141 mission at Charleston was a local flight on 5 Apr 68. In less than two weeks, I turned in my flying equipment, moved out of my apartment, got a few more shots and made my way to Clark AB, arriving about 15 Apr. What follows is a largely anecdotal account of my combat tour. In that year, the AC-130 operation at Ubon grew from a single airplane and two crews to five airplanes and more than a dozen crews, as well as all of the necessary support personnel.

What was jocularly termed "Snake School" consisted of a few days of classroom instruction followed by two nights in the woods, a few miles from Clark. The classes covered escape and evasion (E&E), rescue equipment and procedures, useful and harmful jungle plants and what to do if we were captured. In the field phase, we were transported to the outdoor site on the slopes of Mt Pinatubo, which later became known to everyone in the Air Force when it erupted. We spent a day actually seeing the plants we had learned about and setting up a



*Ubon Airport. The USAF facilities were on the north side of the runway. (Google Earth)*

camp with parachutes. Dinner was plain rice cooked in green bamboo tubes over an open flame plus a salad from banana heart.

In the E&E phase, we departed the base camp with a 30 minute lead over Negrito trackers. The object was to avoid capture for 12 hours. I managed to do so by sliding under low-hanging branches to spend a night on the ground listening to strange rustling and creeping noises. The next day, we practiced boarding a Sikorski H-19 rescue helicopter. That gave us the experience of donning the "horse collar" by which we were winched into the aircraft. The most important thing I remembered from the school was the advice to "never take a pineapple from a field in a survival situation. That Vietnamese farmer knows exactly how many pineapples he has." I finished Snake School on 22 Apr 68.

I flew to Ubon on a C-141, arriving about 26 Apr 1968. In-processing to the base and the unit went quickly and my first combat flight was on 30 Apr, 26 days after my last C-141 flight at Charleston. Because I was not yet checked out in the AC-130, I flew with one of the Blind Bat crews on a night FAC (forward air controller) mission over Laos. The Bats would drop flares to mark targets or illuminate the area and then direct strikes by USAF and Navy jets. Less than a week in theater and I saw my first hostile fire. From a seat on the sextant box behind the copilot, there was a great view out the right side. My first thought was, "Wow! That's pretty." Next was "Hey, they're shooting at us!" Then, realizing I couldn't do anything about it, I relaxed and observed the mission.

The base began in 1950 as a Royal Thai AFB and United States use dated to 1965. The field was located adjacent to the northern edge of the provincial capital of Ubon Rachatani. The Mekong River and Laos were 40 miles to the east. Flanking the base were Nakhon Phanom RTNAB, 146 miles north and Korat RTAFB 186 miles west, halfway to Bangkok. By my arrival, the base was well established with all the expected facilities. It was home to the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing, host for three F-4 Phantom squadrons. RAAF 79 Sq. provided air defence with CAC-27 Sabres. Shortly before I arrived, Wing Commander Col Robin Olds and Vice-Commander Chappy James completed their tours. Besides the fighters, assigned aircraft were the Blind Bat operation with C-130As equipped to fly the night FAC missions over Laos and into North Vietnam and the Black Spot AC-123Ks.

The then-single AC-130A.41626, known as Gunship II, was assigned to Ubon in February 1968, after combat evaluation in Vietnam and Laos in late 1967 and early 1968. The first commander was LtCol Ross Hamlin. The airplane had been blooded in serious combat during a mission supporting the embattled base at Khe Sanh, RVN. Then Capt Terry Jorris recalled that attacking north Vietnamese forces were plentifully equipped with 37mm AAA. The Gunship left a string of burning trucks while under near-constant 37mm AAA fire. The entire crew was awarded DFCs, something previously unknown in Seventh AF. Spectre also operated from Tan Son Nhut AB during the Tet Offensive in Feb 68.

The relocation was probably to put the gunship in a



*Maj Keith Gentry, AFSC and LtCol Ross Hamlin, commander of Det 2, 14th SOW (Cal Taylor)*

more permissive threat environment and also to destroy trucks on the Ho Chi Minh trails. Busting trucks was far more difficult for the fast movers. Flying at night, a single pilot in a task-saturated environment and with limited visibility all made truck-busting hard for the fighters.

Spectre operations at Ubon were first flown by the Air Force Systems Command (AFSC) crew. The project manager and originator of the gunship concept was Maj Ron Terry. Another AFSC pilot was Maj Jim Wolverton. Two C-130 pilots from Tactical Air Command (TAC) completed that roster. They were Maj Jack Kalow, who had flown 41626 as a lieutenant, and Maj Keith Gentry. Gentry was infamous as "Magnet Ass," for his ability to direct the flight into areas with previously unknown 37mm AAA.

The AFSC team was further implementing Ron Terry's concept, that of shooting at a target from an orbiting airplane. The inspiration for this idea was missionary pilots in South America who learned that a bucket could be lowered to a single point on the ground by an orbiting airplane to deliver and retrieve small parcels. AC-47 Spooky gunships had already operated in Vietnam since 1965 and AC-119 Stingers joined the fray in 1969.

"There were three navigators, senior of which was Maj

Jim Krause. Working with Texas Instruments, Krause helped develop the FLIR system. Capt Chuck Meny came from TAC and was especially good at situational awareness over the trails in Laos. Terry Jorris was the third and the specialist for ground aligning the guns. RAF Wing Commander (LtCol equivalent) Tom Pinkerton designed and built the analog fire control computer. Pinkerton actually "visited" Ubon during my time there, when there were fire control problems.

The first two operational crews included many with extensive C-130 experience as well as those from other backgrounds. I was able to recall most of the officers' names from old orders. Unfortunately, I did not keep good track of the many experienced and dedicated enlisted personnel in the unit. Some people had flown or served in other services during WWII. Others had more recent and dramatic experience. The pilots included:

LtCol Garvie Fink, with C-119 time supporting the French in Vietnam;

LtCol Charles Koeninger, a Navy machinist's mate in WWII and C-119 pilot in the Korean War;

Maj Paul Zook, Maj Bill Olsen, Capt Tom Sparr and Capt Bob Reneau.

During most of my time in Spectre, Col Fink was the unit commander with Col Koeninger as Operations Officer.

The chief navigator was LtCol Alva Cross, a B-24 navigator in WWII and the finest gentleman and officer I met during a 26-year career. The others were Capt Tom George (with B-47 experience), Capt Hal Welch, Capt Bill Tunnicliff, Capt Thurston Yoshina and myself. Welch had the dubious distinction of being an RB-66 navigator shot down in East Germany by the Soviets.

Some of the enlisted crew included flight engineers TSgt Charles Beasley and loadmasters TSgt Tom Bailey and Sgt Art Leath. Four of the gunners were MSgt Joe Blanton, TSgt Bill McGee, SSgt Virgil Yarborough and SSgt Bob Dodson. Other enlisted personnel were MSgt Bill Spoor, SSgt Warren Coffey, SSgt Roger Eichler, Sgt. Bill McGahey, Sgt Mike Kleiber, SSgt Ron Gagnon, SSgt Lance Timm and Sgt Jim Perry. Also among the early personnel were SSgt Norm Grover.

The gunships during my year at Ubon were all C-130As. Their tail numbers were 41626, 41627, 41629, 41630 and 33129. The prototype Gunship II was 41626, which was returned to Lockbourne AFB (later Rickenbacker AFB), OH in mid-November 1968. In late summer 1968, 33129 arrived. It was the first production C-130A and had been fairly well treated flying airline-type support



*41626 at Clark AB, Jul 68. Note travel panels in gun ports for high altitude flights (Cal Taylor)*

missions on the Eastern Test Range, island hopping in the "West Indies.

As the prototype Gunship II, 41626 was heavily modified at Wright-Patterson AFB, OH. Four large apertures about 24" x 36" were cut into the left side of the airplane, two forward of the wheels and two aft. In each, a 20mm M61 Vulcan Gatling cannon was mounted. Four smaller holes similarly arranged and higher than the Vulcans sported 7.62mm GAU-2/A miniguns, which were particularly effective against personnel. In the crew entrance door, a large night optical device (NOD) was mounted on a swivel. In the forward portion of the left wheel sponson was the sensor dome for a Texas instruments forward looking infrared (FLIR). Both sensors fed displays on a screen to the left of the pilot and in the booth that was built on the cargo deck between the wheel wells. On the loading ramp was a large flare dispenser and an IR searchlight was mounted on the left side of the airplane. The flares were both "log" type that fell to the ground and burned and million candlepower parachute flares. Later aircraft during the first year were similar, except for the absence of the NOD.

A normal crew on the early AC-130s was at least nine. They were two pilots, three navigators, a right scanner, aft observer/flare operator and three or four gunners. At first, one nav was at the cockpit nav table, tracking aircraft position. The other navs ran the NOD and the FLIR. By summer 1968, the NOD was removed and that nav moved into the booth to help operate the FLIR. It was exciting to be on the NOD. There was a brightly lit display, rather like a landscape in very bright



*LtCol Al Cross at Tan Son Nhut AB Jul 68, during planning for rocket suppression missions (Cal Taylor)*

green moonlight. Ground fire tracers made bright streaks up from the woods below. We quickly learned that as long as the track appeared to diverge, we were safe. It was the straight ones that were trouble!

The gunship mode of operation was simple. Once a potential target was found, the pilot would put the airplane into a left bank and standard rate turn at 5,000' above ground level (AGL). The IR sensors generated a bright cross that was the target, visible on the pilot's display. He maneuvered the airplane to bring another cross that was the guns' hit point into exact alignment with the sensor, at which time he pressed the trigger button on his yoke. A long burst was two seconds! That was 35 minigun rounds or 100 from the Vulcan gatling gun.

The digital computer made allowances for airspeed so that the shells would strike on target. The bank angle from that height made all rounds impact on a single spot with devastating effect. While the pilot was working his sight picture, the copilot ensured that the airplane was flown safely. Crewmembers in the rear watched for ground fire and other hazards while the gunners fed ammunition and maintained the guns. When necessary, flares were dropped to mark or illuminate the target or the IR searchlight was used. When firing, the sight was dramatic, even from the airplane. The 20mm rounds were high explosive

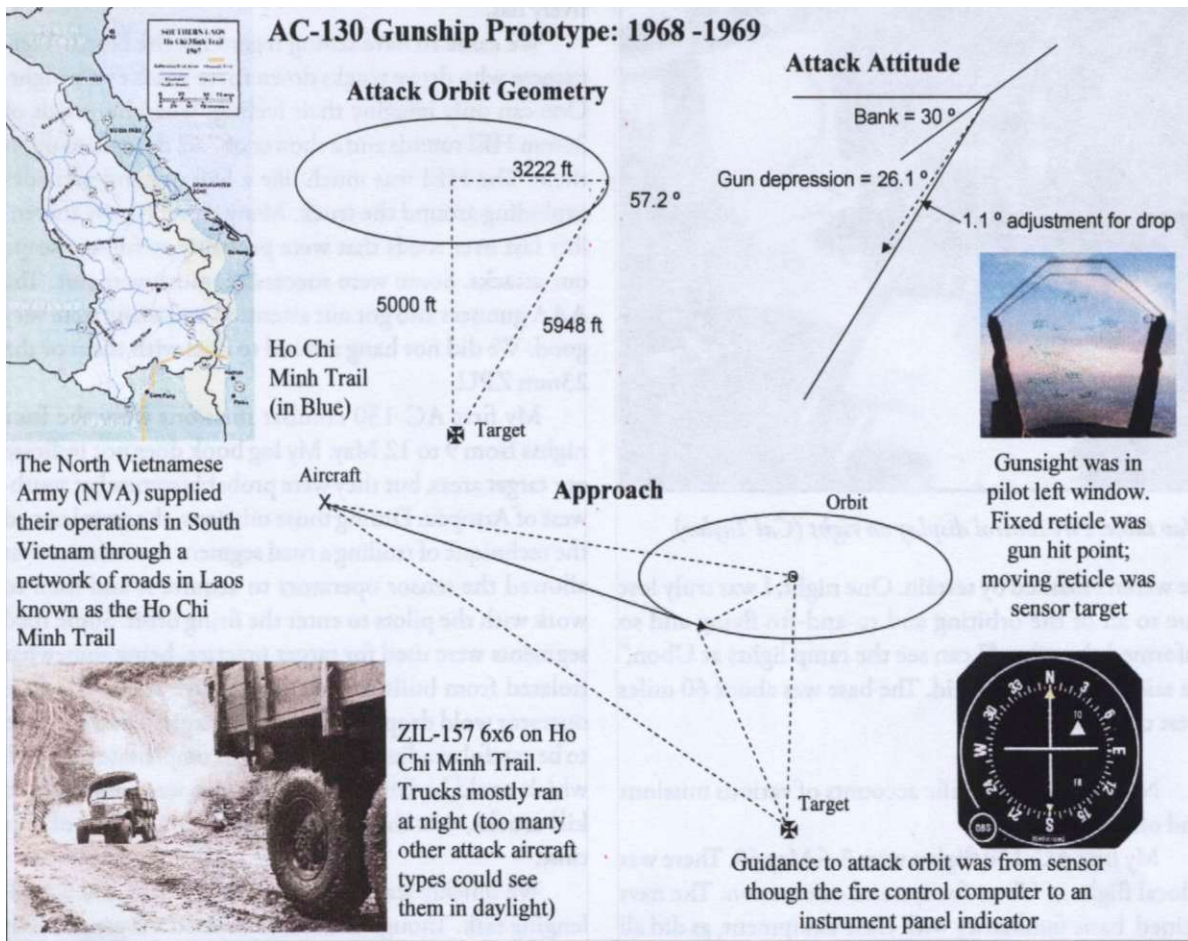


Diagram showing firing orbits and pilot's sight picture (Terry Jorris)

incendiary (HEI) with tracers and the miniguns also shot tracer round. The result was a segment of a brightly lit cone with its apex on the ground.

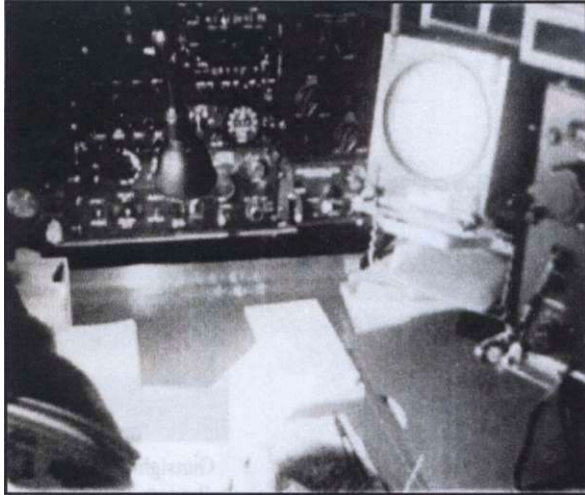
Gunship combat missions were all at night. The airplane could not operate in a high threat environment, which was basically anything with guns bigger than .50 calibre or with radar guidance. Still, we saw plenty of 23mm ZPU and 37mm AAA, both visually aimed. At 5,000', we were well within slant range of both.

Initially, our operating area was southern Laos, working the various segments of the Ho Chi Minh trail to find and destroy trucks. Beginning in June 1968 and periodically into 1969, Spectre operated out of Tan Son Nhut AB (TSN), near Saigon. Initially, Seventh AF wanted Spectre at TSN to detect and destroy launch sites for the 122mm rockets that were used frequently against the base and the city. We soon found that it was impossible to detect the pair of crossed sticks that was the typical launcher. Our primary mission then moved to supporting special forces camps, for which Spectre was well suited,

and a couple of special missions which will be discussed later.

For Laos missions, Spectre was scheduled on various road segments chosen because there was intelligence that there was or expected to be truck activity. The five-hour mission began with a takeoff after dark and a flight of about 30 minutes to the target area. During mission preparation, we were advised of any known ground fire hazards, often referenced in relation to so-called Delta Points. All over Laos, specific locations, such as a prominent peak or a river junction, were given a number, such as Delta 23. With these plotted on the nav chart, it was quick and easy to modify our operations from one point to another.

Of course, once we had located our targeted road segment, much navigation was a combination of input from the Mark One eyeball, the NOD and even radar. With a darkened cockpit and clear nights, visual navigation was surprisingly easy. We were also close enough to Ubon that we could use TACAN ranges and bearings, if



*Nav table. Fire control display on right (Cal Taylor)*

we weren't masked by terrain. One night, I was truly lost due to all of the orbiting and to-and-fro flying and so informed the pilot. "I can see the ramp lights at Ubon," he said. "Go there!" I said. The base was about 60 miles west of our position.

Now for more specific accounts of various missions and other flying.

My first AC-130 flights were 3-6 May 68. There was a local flight at Ubon for systems orientation. The navs gained basic familiarity with their equipment, as did all other crew members. Then, the crews deployed to Nha Trang AB, RVN, on 5 May for initial firing training. The flare operator launched a log flare that ignited and floated on the ocean for about 45 minutes. That was plenty of time for us to acquire the target and set up a 5,000' orbit. We fired many bursts at the flare, giving everyone on the crew multiple opportunities to perform their functions. Of course, we were flying in daylight and nobody was shooting at us! Back at Ubon, on 6 May, another flight was for further sensor operator and pilot training.

We were well into the process of learning our primary operating area, which was southern Laos, south of Savanavone. Several names would become very familiar to us, among them Pakse, Attopeu, Tchepone and the Boloven Plateau. Also to become familiar were several Delta points and a number of road segments. We also soon learned that the so-called "Trail" was actually an intricate network of tracks through sometimes deep forest and also open areas. The Bolovens Plateau was rather rugged, with roads twisting and turning across the terrain. To the southeast, the terrain around Attopeu along a large river was rela-

tively flat.

We came to have strong regard for the North Vietnamese who drove trucks down these roads every night. One can only imagine their feelings when hundreds of 20mm HEI rounds and a shower of 7.62 descended upon them. The HEI was much like a hail of hand grenades exploding around the truck. Many drivers drove incredibly fast over roads that were probably awful, to escape our attacks. Some were successful, most were not. The AAA gunners also got our attention and many were very good. We did not hang around to duel with them or the 23mm ZPU.

My first AC-130 combat missions were the four nights from 9 to 12 May. My log book does not indicate our target areas, but they were probably somewhat southwest of Attopeu. During those missions, the crew learned the technique of trolling a road segment in a manner that allowed the sensor operators to acquire it and then to work with the pilots to enter the firing orbit. Some road segments were used for target practice, being somewhat isolated from built-up areas and active trails. The flare operator would drop a log flare for a target. The pilots had to be careful to adjust bank angle to compensate for wind, which could be fairly strong. But, we were out there to kill trucks, which pursuit took the majority of our time.

We quickly learned that finding trucks was a challenging task. Though the NOD showed the ground as if it was lit by a very bright green moon, the scene was subject to the drawbacks of even daylight. Forested areas had dense shadows that easily concealed even large trucks. Of some help was the light amplification nature of the NOD that made even small lights more evident. The FLIR



*Bill Tunncliff, Tom George and Corky Yoshina "mission planning" at Tan Son Nhut, Jul 68 (Cal Taylor)*



*Katum Special Forces A-camp, III Corps, Republic of Vietnam. Thien Ngon was the same shape. Other camps were triangular (www.sgtmacsbar.com)*

detected heat differences and warm truck hoods or a campfire at a stopping point stood out better, especially if not obscured by trees. Convoys were certainly easier to spot than single trucks and strikes on a line of vehicles could bring sometimes spectacular results.

From the first, the scoring criteria for truck kills was stringent. It was not counted as destroyed unless the truck burned. We claimed "damaged" if there was clear evidence, such as smoke. We did not use the term "probable" in any case. These standards were loosened in later portions of my year at Ubon, leading to some rather extravagant statistics for truck kills.

Our first truck kills probably came in these first days. Though I can't tie specific events to particular missions, details remain in memory.

In one instance, we attacked a group of trucks working its way up a lengthy grade. One hit was stopped the last vehicle, with more hits on the lead truck. Suddenly, there was a river of burning liquid flowing down the road, touching off fires in much of the rest of the column. The lead truck may have been carrying fuel or it was his fuel tanks full to the brim.

On another mission, we were firing upon a group of trucks coming out of a forested area. To pin down the location while we changed orbits, the flare operator dropped a log flare. Suddenly, as we headed away, a voice from the rear shouted, "Goddamn! The whole hill just blew up." Apparently, the magnesium flare dropped into a sizeable ordnance cache and set off explosions.

When working a road on the Bolovens Plateau, we tracked a truck that had to negotiate a hairpin turn into and out of a river. Though he wasn't moving fast, the speed variations and angle changes enabled him to escape,

thought not without plenty of scary tales to tell his compatriots.

Our familiarization with the trails in Laos was interrupted for a week by a few days on Okinawa, in early Jun. The airplane had to go through a 150-hour phase inspection, which was done at Naha. This was the first of five such visits to Okinawa during my year at Ubon. When we had a single airplane, there was little limitation on the crew list for the trips. On Okinawa, there was plenty of free time to explore a fascinating island at leisure.

When we returned to Ubon, we learned that Seventh AF had directed the airplane to Tan Son Nhut AB (TSN), at Saigon, to detect and destroy the 122mm rocket launch sites from which the base and city were being hit. Spectre's capabilities had been sold so successfully to Seventh that it was seen as the answer to the rockets. The deployment was on 14 Jun. \*

At TSN, we discussed the mission with the intelligence people and rapidly concluded that we would not be very useful. Most of the 122mm rockets were launched from a set of crossed sticks or other simple sites. Their accuracy was poor but the randomness of the impacts was one of the concerns. An example of that came when my crew was billeted in a small hotel in Saigon. There was a huge, rushing noise overhead, followed by a loud explosion. We all hit the floor, then looked around to see all of us realizing that our actions were too late.

It did not take long for an alternate mission to come up. There had been reports in the north of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) of helicopters flying in from the coast then along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Could Spectre possibly acquire and shoot down the choppers? The task seemed possible so planning went ahead. In the period 18-21 Jun, Spectre would stage through Danang AB from TSN, to and from the area of the DMZ. The airplane would orbit parallel to the coast, just south of the DMZ. We would both look for helicopters ourselves and respond to reports from ground sites, primarily Marine Corps, of any activity. During its orbit time, all other air activity in the area would be suspended. If a helicopter was located, the concept was that Spectre would fly parallel and rake the chopper with a broadside while rolling the gunship back and forth a couple of times.

We established the orbit with the northbound leg about two miles offshore. The northern end was set up to go north of the national border, enabling us to count the mission as being in North Vietnam. In South Vietnam, fifteen missions were required to qualify for the Air Medal, but only ten in North Vietnam were needed.



*The gate view shows some of the protective measures at Thien Ngon (25thaviation.org/littlebears/1c1039.htm#7)*

We orbited for two or three hours, doing a very boring pattern about six miles long. On one of the two nights, we were tracked by a bright light located in the dunes along the shoreline. Not until a planning session for another helicopter hunt during the period 22-26 Aug did we learn what the light was. During that session, a Marine colonel advised Col Fink that, if we had come closer to the shore, a quad-50 would have engaged us, from Marines who had not been told of the Gunship mission. Col Fink advised the Marine that our 20mm probably would have surpassed .50 cal.

Neither effort was successful in finding and downing a helicopter. The most exciting moments I experienced came while refueling at Danang. The airplane had just been connected to the fuel hose when rockets began to impact some distance away. Everyone dove into a nearby slit trench until the explosions ended. Then, we gassed up and departed. Spectre did succeed in downing a helicopter in Laos, on 8 May 69, a week after I departed Thailand.

A more substantial Spectre mission in RVN began in Jul 68. This was to support Special Forces camps, mostly in III Corps, the area around Saigon. Vietnam was dotted with Special Forces camps which that targets of enemy actions ranging from harassment to large-scale attacks. The camps were rather primitive, manned by a small number of Americans, some ARVN soldiers and other troops, such as Montagnards, depending upon the area. They were usually close to the Cambodian or Laotian border and subject to frequent attacks. Some camps used CONEX shipping containers surrounded by earthen

berms as shelter. All of my missions from Jul through Nov 68 were to work threats to or near SF camps.

Initially, we drove to Bien Hoa AB, 15 miles NE of TSN, to meet SF intel and operations personnel for planning. This was the only time I made an extended auto trip in Vietnam. We discussed what the threats were to the camps and how Spectre might be able to respond. Probably, details of coordination and communication were important issues. Of great help to us was SF Major Don Faircloth, who was detailed to fly with us for some time. He had operated on the ground in northwestern III Corps, around Tay Ninh and various camps in that area. On one mission, the major became so frustrated at what was going on that he emptied his pistol into the night though one of the gun ports.

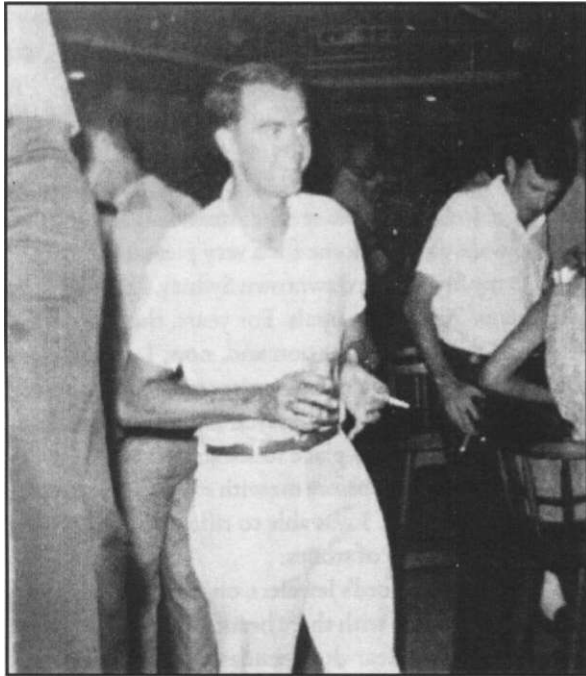
From 17 through 23 Jul, my missions were to support SF camps at Thien Ngon and Katum, in northwest III Corps, near the Cambodian border. We worked these camps several times for each as well as a number of other camps. Contact procedures were established so that the camps would know when we were in the area and would provide us with locations to check and attack.

Sometimes the evening was relatively smooth and unhurried. In other cases, we got word on the way in about troops in contact near or even on the camp perimeter. On the night of 18 Aug, Katum was under attack by a large force which had already penetrated one or more protective barriers. The camp commander told us that all friendly personnel were under cover so we should "put the fire on the fence." We did and were able to break the attack.

Another night near Katum, we detected a vehicle with its lights on barreling along the road. We made several attempts to acquire the vehicle and fired a number of times. The wind was strong, that night, so we could never quite pin him down. That was fortunate both for him and for us, because I got a TACAN fix that placed us over Cambodia (or California, to use our on-board code), about six kilometers north of Katum. We broke off and turned south, into Vietnam.

The first battle damage to a Spectre aircraft was on 26 Sep. A AAA shell just ticked the inboard aft corner of the right elevator. It exploded, sending fragments up the side of the vertical fin. Later, another airplane had more serious damage, when a shell penetrated the outer skin between the wheel wells and exploded between the skin and the cargo deck. One of the new navigators in the booth was able to say, "Ground fire in the booth!" He didn't say anything else for about 24 hours. The ceramic armor on the floor protected them but fragments damaged





*Capt Hal Welch in the Ubon Officers Club (Cal Taylor)*

other interior surfaces. The only aircraft damage to any of the airplanes I crewed was a tiny flak strike to the aircraft skin, straight out from my feet when seated at the nav table. The damage was about the size of half a silver dollar bent into the skin.

In addition to the camps, we often responded to requests to work other locations where enemy activity. In some instances, we found nothing; in others, we detected activity or evidence that merited attack. We could not simply open fire, in many cases, except when the target lay within an area designated as a free fire zone. Under the rules of engagement (ROE) established by joint American/Vietnamese agreements, we first had to contact American control who then went to the Vietnamese for permission to fire. This could take frustratingly lengthy times. The tension was elevated when we could hear excited Vietnamese voices on the radio.

One lesson learned when working targets in rice paddies was that the 20mm HEI round often did not appear to detonate when they hit the ground. As far as we could tell, the rounds simply disappeared in the soft ground of the rice paddies.

On 26 Jul, I got a more detailed view of the area we were working in northwest III Corps. Major Faircloth arranged for me and pilot Tom Spaar to spend the day on the supply chopper, resulting in nine hours logged in the UH-1D.

The mission began at the Army helicopter field near

the city of Tay Ninh, 52 miles northwest of TSN. Thien Ngon camp was 18 miles NNW of Tay Ninh and Katum was 25 miles NNE. A third destination during the day was Nui Ba Den (Black Virgin Mountain), eight miles NE of Tay Ninh. The mountain dominates the area, rising to 2,650 feet elevation from the surrounding alluvial plain that is about fifty feet above sea level.

We probably went first to Katum, as it was farthest away. I sat on the left side of the Huey, camera in one hand, M16 rifle in the other and the seat belt left unfastened (at least for a while). Facing out, I had a great view down into the forest that was barren in long strips from application of Agent Orange. At least once, I actually fired the M16, doing nothing more than causing a few remaining leaves to drop.

Katum lay about 4 km from the Cambodian border. It was star-shaped, the same as Thien Ngon and many others, with multiple concertina wire barriers and an adjacent short runway. We landed close to the camp entrance and spent a short time inside. There was nothing fancy about the place. It was absolutely utilitarian, providing basic protection for military personnel and, often, civilians from the surrounding area.

From Katum, we flew southwest to Thien Ngon, to deliver mail and some small supplies and to meet camp personnel. These personal contacts helped when we were radioing from Spectre, at night.

The final stop was atop Nui Ba Den. I recall that we were close to a low cloud layer for landing and departure. The chopper simply flew in to the helipad near the peak and flared for landing. The clouds gave some protection from the bad guys who owned the lower portions of the mountain. Departure was a bit exciting. The chopper pilot lifted into a slight hover then converted to forward movement out into the clouds and down slope before pulling away from the peak. The gunship never actually operated on Nui Ba Den, at least during my time, so this was for Spaar and me simply a stop of more casual interest.

I became the first 16th SOS crew member to go on R&R (Rest and Recreation) to Sydney, Australia. I could have gone to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Taipei, or Hawaii, but a long interest in Australia led to that choice. The trip began with a flight to TSN and overnight billeting in Camp Alpha, the replacement depot there. I was assigned a cot in a screen-wire sided hooch for one night, with departure the next day on a contract jet airliner.

I had an interesting experience in points of view, when I went to bathe in the shower hooch. I found only



*Aree Nirasing was one of the Lovely Thai waitresses in the O Club (Cal Taylor)*

one handle to turn on the water, which proved to be cold. Before I had much time to complain, two young Army troops entered, still in uniforms with mud stains to the chest. They stripped off and turned on the water. As they did so, one young man exclaimed to the other, "God damn! Running water!" I thought to myself that it all depended upon where a person began.

Before boarding the airplane, there was one more examination of all personnel to meet Australian requirements. All passengers (entirely male, as far as I can remember) lined up, unzipped and presented themselves for a visual check that there were no signs of venereal disease. All ranks and services were involved.

The flight to Sydney was long, with a fueling stop at Darwin, Northern Territory. Once at Kingsford Smith International Airport, everyone was bussed to the R&R briefing center in the Kings Cross area of Sydney. There, we were briefed on the ROE for the week and assigned quarters. I was billeted in the Chelsea, a nice small hotel with six or eight rooms only a block away.

The part of the R&R briefing I remember best was the prohibition on renting automobiles. The first reason was that the Australians drove on the "wrong" side of the road. Secondly, we were advised that a great distraction

was the Australian women who wore miniskirts so short "you can see the lace on their knickers." That was certainly true!

One of the first things I did was to locate and meet David and Penny Bishop, whom I first met on Sweden's Gota Canal steamer, in 1962. They lived near Taronga Park Zoo, so I was able to see the Australian animals and then to walk to their home for a very pleasant dinner.

On my first day in downtown Sydney, I explored the wonders of Australian opals. For years, these beautiful gems had drawn my attention and, now, I was where I could see stones of a color and variety not possible before. For much of the day, I wandered from one jeweler to another, asking at each place to see their opals. Many of them simply set a box before me with stones stuck to cards with rubber cement. I was able to rifle through them to see the great variety of stones.

Finally, at Stafford's Jewelers, on Castlereagh Street, I bought a necklace with three beautiful stones on either side of a fairly large tear-drop pendant. I asked the jeweler to mail it to my parents. He suggested that the stones be removed from the settings, because the duty would be less on "parts of a necklace." That was done and a few days later, the jewelry "parts" arrived in Eugene where a local jeweler reset the stones.

The rest of the R&R was spent exploring the magnificence of Sydney. The shopping arcades were fascinating, extending sometimes clear across a block under buildings above. The Domain, Sydney's great central park, contained all sorts of native plants and gave views of the dramatic curves of the Opera House. I went as far as The Rocks, the rugged area beneath the Harbor Bridge, an area of fancy restaurants, drinking establishments and expensive apartments. One evening, I treated myself to a drink and dinner in the Top of the Cross restaurant, which was on the highest floor of a very tall hotel. The huge plate glass windows afforded a superb view of downtown Sydney in all its night-time glory. I filled the cultural squares with a chamber music concert by the Bach Festival Ensemble and a performance of Swan Lake, Act II, by the Australian Ballet Company.

Finally, it was time to return to our war. The airliner to TSN was full of troops who had spent a week in sometimes wild activity and now faced returning to fighter cockpits, SF camps and the hot, dangerous work of Army and Marine infantry. The atmosphere was much different than on the southbound flight!

When I returned to TSN, in late Aug, I flew more missions against targets in III Corps as well as another



*Corkie Yoshina, Clark AB, Jul 68 (Cal Taylor)*

helicopter hunt on the DMZ, from 22-26 Aug. With a brief interruption to fly to and from Naha AB, Okinawa, all of my missions operated out of TSN, until I took leave.

In late Sep, I went on mid-tour leave, returning to the United States to see Vicki, most of all. In those days, it was easy to get a space-available (Space-A) travel to and from the US. I was able to get hops all the way to Charleston AFB. Surprisingly, when I entered the passenger terminal, I met Vicki, who was trying to get a hop to California, where her sister had been injured while hitchhiking. We were able to get a ride on a C-141 to Travis AFB nearly immediately. I spent much of that ride standing up, because my butt was really sore from so much time enroute. Once in California, we dealt with her sister's situation and I met Vicki's mother and other family members.

Before returning to Ubon, I bought about 20 paperback books and mailed them to myself. Though the Ubon base exchange had paperbacks, the selection was somewhat limited for my interests. The return trip to Ubon went as quickly as the journey to the US. Happily, when I reached Okinawa, the AC-130 was again at Naha. So, I signed off of leave and returned directly to Ubon on the unit's own airplane.

government recognize the 14th SOW's accomplishments with the award of the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Palm. Besides Spectre, the 14th had units flying the AC-47, AC-119, C-130 airlift and C-123 support to unconventional operations. At that time, this was the only US AF unit to be so recognized. Earlier, the 14th received the US Presidential Unit Citation. Two months later, the AC-130 and AC-123K operations at Ubon were redesignated the 16th Special Operations Sq (SOS) and assigned to the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing at Ubon,

Soon after returning to Ubon, I flew to TSN and combat missions in III and I Corps. The latter was in the north of the RVN, featuring more rugged terrain around some of the SF camps. I flew both I and III Corps missions from 31 Oct to 12 Nov. A mission to support the Thong Due SF camp brought me the Distinguished Flying Cross. Thong Due was 35 miles southwest of Danang, lying just south of a river junction across from the town of Ha Tan. In late Oct, we flew a successful mission to help the camp, which was under siege. Our fire forced the enemy to break off its attack and to withdraw. After this mission, I flew only twice more against targets in RVN. The unit returned to Ubon and the trails.

By this time, the 16th SOS had five airplanes and many more crews. What we called the "follow-on crews" began to arrive by Oct, many after being in the pipeline for lengthy periods of time. They were very eager to get checked out and start working the trails, to kill trucks. They had heard how effective the gunship was at the task and were eager to get in on the action. Many were very high time crew from Lockbourne and some were not completely willing to accept instruction from those of us who had been in-theater since the spring.

In one instance, I was instructing a couple of the new navs and one, a major to my rank of captain, said "IN, shut up!" I let it pass, because the cockpit was no place for a quarrel. However, one of the other crew members mentioned the event to Col Cross. He later informed me that he had taken care of the situation. I did not have to fly with the nav in question, so that was one of those things that went under the bridge!

From 25 Nov to 12 Dec, I was once again on the crew of an airplane going to Okinawa for phase inspections. With 18 days on the island, there was plenty of time for Christmas shopping and exploring the island. I also bought more silk brocade matching some purchased earlier, from which my mother was making Vicki's wedding



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*(Per Bob Reneau) The back row has Lt Col Charlie Koeninger (Ops Officer), Myself (instructor pilot), Lt Col Al Cross (Chief Navigator), Cal Taylor (Nav), and Bill Tunnicliff (Nav). The NCO's on the front row include Yarborough (2nd from L), Klieber, and Smith. I don't remember the first and fourth crewmembers' name. This wasn't a hard crew. They just called us out and grouped us up for the shot. We were all original crew however. We didn't fly in hard crews until later. (This aircraft is not the prototype).*

dress.

Once back at Ubon, I then flew my last combat missions in Vietnam, in I Corps, operating from Danang AB. Just before Christmas, I crewed on a gunship that flew to Clark AB, PI, for a one-week phase. Overall, I did very well in spending a total of 28 days out of theater for phase inspections. These were in addition to a week on R&R and a ten-day mid-tour leave. (I did not realize how blessed I was until I prepared this article!)

In the time that the AC-130 was working in Vietnam, the number of guns on the trails had increased significantly. No longer could we be fairly certain that there were areas with truck traffic that were still low threat. Not only were there more 23mm ZPU and 37mm AAA, some 57 mm guns had appeared. The ZP39 37mm was visu-

ally aimed and had a slant range of 30,000'. The 57mm S60 gun could be radar-aimed to a slant range of 20,000' and visually aimed to 13,000'. The AC-130 operated well within the ranges of both guns.

Upon returning to Ubon, I got involved in a community service project. The 16th SOS, working with the Men of the Chapel, decided to do a Christmas airdrop to a nearby mission school. I went to the school to coordinate planning with the French priest. He spoke only French and Thai, so my high school French got quite a workout. The school served two villages and had about 230 students.

The mission was to drop school supplies - paper, pencils, crayons, notebooks and candy. Initially, the plan was to use small parachutes but, in the end, the bundles were gravity-assisted. All of the students and others kept



*One of the follow-on Spectres ready to go to war. (Charlie Spicka)*

under good cover while the C-130 made a couple of low passes. The ballistics of the large boxes were quite interesting, with boxes bouncing very high. But, everything was salvaged and the children were very excited and totally uncritical.

Though my log book shows flights on Christmas Eve and the 26th, Christmas Day was off. The Officers Club prepared a magnificent meal and all of the Thai waitresses were dressed in their most elegant finery of floor-length Thai silk skirts with matching long-sleeved blouses., Especially when decked out in such finery, it was easy to see how young American crew members could fall in love with the often very beautiful young Thai women.

The period from 26 Dec to early March was a busy one for flying. In 64 days, I flew 26 combat missions in southern Laos, where the AAA threat to Spectre and other airplanes had grown dramatically. To counter this threat, the 16th SOS coordinated with the 8th TFW to fly missions with F-4 fighter cover. This mission profile came out of a Seventh AF study that concluded the gunships would be able to kill more trucks with fighter escorts than alone.

The first mission proved the concept. When two 37mm AAA sites fired at Spectre, F-4Ds from the 497th TFS took both of them out. By the end of January, four Spectre aircraft had destroyed 28% of the truck kills in southern Laos. At the end of March, the 16th had raised the results to 44% of all truck kills in a thirty-day period while flying only 3.7% of the interdiction sorties. But the North Vietnamese had increased AAA coverage in the area by 400%! The environment was no longer nearly

as permissive as when I arrived, most of a year earlier. It was a good thing that my year was drawing to an end.

In forecasting for my next assignment, I had requested Military Airlift Command bases near Navy bases. These were Charleston, Travis and McChord. Our hope was that Vicki could get an assignment to a Navy hospital nearby. In about January, I was informed that I would be going to Travis AFB, CA and the C-133 Cargomaster. In late February, I had a quick flurry of excitement when I got a phone call during which I was asked if I were interested in going to Hickam AFB, HI to work with computers.

Instead of simply saying, "Absolutely, How can I do it?", I told them that they would need to get me released from the Travis assignment. It was probably easier for them to simply choose another guy, for I heard nothing more about that assignment.

In the end, I went to Travis. Vicki got an assignment to Keflavik, Iceland, reporting there about the time I arrived at Travis. Things came to a personally unhappy end in Nov 69, when her letter informed me that she had met a guy there and was going to be married to him. My quick decision at Charleston was certainly a huge factor in this outcome.

Summarizing my year in Southeast Asia, I flew a total of 139 missions between 30 Apr 68 and 10 May 69, with 494 hours in the AC-130. Combat missions included one in Blind Bat and 101 in Spectre. The AC-130 combat missions totaled 51 in Laos, 45 in South Vietnam and five in North Vietnam. I also had the nine hours in the UH-1D and 36 non-combat sorties in the AC-130.

Overall, I had experienced a challenging assignment

during which I flew a variety of important combat missions in a new weapons system. Forty years later, Spectre continues to be an important part of the USAF arsenal, fitted with weapons and instruments that weren't even blue sky dreams in 1969.