

606th SPECIAL OPERATIONS SQUADRON



MISSION

LINEAGE

606th Air Commando Squadron
Redesignated 606th Special Operations Squadron

STATIONS

Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, Thailand

ASSIGNMENTS

WEAPON SYSTEMS

COMMANDERS

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM



MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

early 1961 the U.S. Army Special Forces entered Viet Nam to train the South Vietnamese. Based on this lead the USAF started activating its first special unit for guerrilla warfare since WWII. These units would become known as "Air Commandos". The first Air Commando unit, established on 14 April 1961, was the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron based at Eglin AFB. The unit's original allotment of aircraft were 16 C-47s, 8 B-26s and 8 T-28s. The purpose of this unit, like the Army Special Forces was to train the South Vietnamese. In this capacity, detachment 2A of the 4400th left for South Vietnam on 11 Oct. 1961. For combat purposes, the 4400th was code-named Jungle Jim, and detachment 2A was called Farm Gate. Farm Gate arrived in country with 8 T-28s, 4 SC-47s, 4 B-26s and 151 men. Additionally, all aircraft carried VNAF markings.

Being a training unit for the South Vietnamese, Farm Gate's early combat directive was to "fire back if fired upon". This directive was augmented by one dated 26 Dec. 1961, which required a VNAF crewman aboard during combat operations. T-28s were also authorized to aid the VNAF in emergency situations when the VNAF could not perform the mission. So, like its Army counterparts, the Air Commandos found themselves in a limited combat capacity by the end of 1962.

In addition to Farm Gate's T-28s, the South Vietnamese received 30 T-28s on 13 Nov 1961. This allotment would allow the VNAF to form its first T-28 squadron, known as the 2nd fighter squadron. In Feb. 1962 Farm Gate received five re-placement T-28s plus an additional five in Jan. 1963. 1962 would see another eighteen T-28s shipped to Nam to form the nucleus of a new squadron. The squadron, established in Sept. 1962, was known as the 716th recon squadron, and was allotted 18 RT-28s and 3 RC-47s. A RT-28 was simply a T-28 fitted with a special photographic

belly pack. Some of the T-28s used by this squadron were modified Navy T-28Cs with the tailhook removed.

June 1963 marked the end of Farm Gate. The aircraft and personnel of the de-commissioned unit became the 34th tactical group. Under this new structure the 1st Air Commando squadron was activated. During 1963 the Air Commandos would encounter increased ground fire and the resulting losses. In Sept. 1963, .50-caliber ground fire would claim one T-28 during the heavy fighting around Soc Trang airstrip. Then on 19 Oct. 1963 six T-28s were damaged by ground fire while defending the ARVN 21st division. Another T-28 was lost and one was damaged when on 24 Nov. 1963 a mission was attacked by hidden enemy forces equipped with five 7.9 mm guns and a twin .50-caliber weapon. 1964 brought not only more losses by ground fire, but something worse structural failure. Structural failure in the form of wing separations claimed the lives of two men, Capt. Edwin G. Shank Jr. on 24 March 1964, and Capt. Robert Brumert on 9 April 1964. Because the appearance of North Vietnamese regulars and the heavier weapons they fielded made ground attacks in T-28s very unhealthy, and the fact that structural failure was emerging, the Air Force withdrew the T-28 in 1964-65. The Air Force replaced the Trojan with Al-Es in the Air Commando squadrons and with A-1Hs in VNAF units.

T-28D, 49-1591, of the 606th SOS, Special Operations Squadron. Overall color, light grey with dark grey anti-glare panel and black prop with yellow tips. Exhaust area black,

606th Special Operations Squadron (Candlestick)- This unit flew the C-123 Provider aircraft similar to the photo on the right. The primary mission of the 606th was to fly over the Ho Chi Minh trail at night and identify movement of equipment and people down the trail. After identifying the targets, they would call for the fighters, mark the target location(s) with illuminating flares and then hold over the target in a tight circle (tactic adopted in 1969) to control and direct fighters in the target area of operation. The Candlesticks also provided similar operations to assist friendly forces under attack by the enemy while conducting ground operations in northern Laos. Of course, the transport capability of the C-123 was available for many uses. Another element of the squadron conducted psychological operations over the "Trail" using VSTOL aircraft to drop pamphlets. In addition a Military Civic Action group provided assistance to people in nearby Thailand and Laos.

By late 1965 another project (encompassing Water Pump) saw the formation of the composite 606th Air Commando Squadron at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB. The squadron and augmented operation bore the name of Lucky Tiger. The 606th was to have C-123s, T-28Bs, U-10Bs, and CH-3s. In early June 1966 it was decided to also add to the AC-47s because of their operational success. Eight AC-47s and 214 personnel were to be sent to Nakhon Phanom in September 1966.

Air Force headquarters designated Warner Robins Air Materiel Area as weapon system control point for AC-47s destined for the 606th Air Commando Squadron. The contract with Air International of Miami specified that modification of four Gooney Birds into AC-47s begin by July

15, four more by August 1, with the first four due to go to Southeast Asia in early September. When September arrived, however, the gunships were not ready and the deployment date was slipped to October.¹⁰⁵ PACAF then revised the 606th's target date for full operational readiness to November I.¹⁰⁶ Arrival of the AC-47s in late 1966 introduced the gunship concept to the Thais and Laotians. Spooky's utility as a counterinsurgency weapon was spreading. The first full year of gunship operations had already demonstrated the weapon system's versatility and value. The gunship had successfully flown a wide range of missions, from protective cover for friendly convoys to the destruction of those of the enemy. Its around-the-clock operations extended over all areas of South Vietnam and Laos. Its airborne command and control and forward air controller functions became a valuable adjunct to other air operations. Most important, it helped fill the crucial void in night air operations, a void the enemy had been so skillfully exploiting both in South Vietnam and Laos. In early December 1965, for instance, only twenty-five percent of armed reconnaissance missions had taken place at night while eighty percent of the enemy traffic moved during darkness.¹⁰⁷ The gunship had a major part in the effort to correct this imbalance.

The C-123s of the 606th Air Commando Squadron at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand (the Candlestick force), improvised techniques for hunter-killer work with strike aircraft, using the starlight scope and incendiary markers against enemy truck traffic in Laos. In late 1968 two other C-123s were equipped with sensors and a hombet-drop capability and became Project Black Spot. The twelve-ship Candlestick unit was disbanded in June 1971, while Black Spot remained limited to two ships. The fixed-wing gunship evolved from the flareship and cut significantly into the inventory of transport craft. By late 1969, seven AC-130A and twenty-eight AC 119 gunships were serving in Southeast Asia. The Air Force AC-47s were phased out by year's end, many shifted to the VNAF. General Momyer, now commanding TAG, recommended against converting already overworked airlift C-130Es to gunships. TAC's viewpoint and budgetary considerations limited the number of E-models converted to gunships to six, which were sent to Ubon in late 1971 to join twelve AC-130As.

In 1966 the 606th Air Commando Squadron was sent to Nakhon Phanom. This was a composite unit designed to augment and train the Thais in counterinsurgency work. The 606th had C-123s, UH-1Fs, and utility transports (U-6s, later replaced by U-10s), along with strike aircraft. U.S. Air Force helicopter units occasionally joined the 606th for lift tasks in Thailand. These units were based in north Thailand but with primary missions in Laos.

U.S. Air Force missions in Thailand were varied. Crews lifted medical teams to villages, delivered medical supplies for local distribution, and made emergency patient evacuations. Helicopters carried VHP radios to villages for use in informing police of communist activity. 606th personnel helped local residents build strips for the U-10s, and periodically returned to survey field conditions. U-10 pilots flew daily circuits to check ground panels that signaled local security conditions. 606th training teams served at the main Thai air bases. Ships hauled civil engineer equipment and performed lift tasks for American units.

The Americans also joined in offensive troop missions. The C-123s of the 606th, for example, in early November 1966 flew twenty-one missions, each nine hundred miles, to a site identified for

a new government camp and paradropped troops and cargo. The C-123s flew frequent flare-ship missions supporting police or army sweeps. The Air Force helicopters also flew several troop-assault missions, including an extended operation in easternmost Thailand during July and August 1966. On December 21, 1966, five CH-3s and ten UH-1s joined in a simultaneous assault that netted a number of prisoners. Royal Thai helicopters had been scheduled to join, but failed to show up. The success of these and similar operations was questionable, since prisoners usually professed their loyalty to the regime.

Both the U.S. Congress and the Office of the Secretary of Defense were convinced that the Thais should shoulder their own internal security tasks. The UH-1s of the 606th Squadron in January 1967 accordingly were transferred to Vietnam, and the C-123s and U-10s were gradually reassigned to flare-ship, leaflet, and forward air control duties in Laos. Direct airlift support of Thai counterinsurgency operations was "virtually terminated" in January 1968, and the 606th Air Commando Squadron was inactivated in June 1971.

The first deployment, code-named "Lucky Tiger," activated the 606th Air Commando Squadron (Composite) at NKP on 8 March 1966. Formed initially to consolidate ongoing USAF support to the counterinsurgency capabilities of the Royal Laotian Air Force and the Royal Thai Air Force, the 606th was unlike anything the Air Force had put together since the formation of the original World War II Air Commandos. Lucky Tiger brought together a wild mix of aircraft, including (A)T-28 trainer/fighter aircraft, C-123 twin-engined short takeoff and landing transports, UH-1 single-engined helicopters, and the previously described U-10 Helio Courier liaison aircraft. "Composite" was an understatement for such a gaggle, and the Air Force would soon extend the mix even further.

The U-10s in particular would never receive the attention later given the violent nightly forays flown over the Ho Chi Minh Trail by the Air Commando strike squadrons. But they certainly took their share of the risks and carried their share of the load. Tasked to conduct airborne psychological warfare missions in unarmed aircraft over enemy territory, they flew with their own style.

Flying both loudspeaker and leaflet-dropping missions, they proudly used the radio call signs "Loudmouth" or "Litterbug," depending on whether the specific psywar mission called for voice or paper delivery to the enemy below. Sometimes special intelligence gave the U-10 pilot a rare opportunity to spook the enemy in a very timely way.

One such opportunity came in 1968. Joe Murphy, then an Air Force captain serving as an intelligence officer at NKP, recalls a unique experience while working on Operation Igloo White, a special program to detect NVA movement on the Ho Chi Minh Trail through the use of acoustic listening devices. He and others monitoring the listening devices at NKP were flabbergasted to hear two apparently low-ranking North Vietnamese Army soldiers talking about their personal hardships. Incredibly, the two soldiers did not realize they were talking within "earshot" of one of the listening devices, which was transmitting their conversation back to Thailand with excellent

clarity. While the first soldier worried about the fidelity of his wife back home, the second complained of an illness which he feared might be terminal and for which no medical aid was available.

Realizing the psywar potential of this unexpected “gift,” an all-night effort commenced at NKP between intelligence, psywar, and the U-10 squadron to launch a special loudspeaker flight. The following morning, NVA soldiers on the Ho Chi Minh Trail heard Loudmouth overhead, confirming the worst fears of the two soldiers and identifying both by name and unit. The first was assured that the soldiers in a home-defense unit located near his village would indeed be tending to his wife’s needs, while the second was mournfully told his disease would indeed soon prove fatal.

Was the U-10 mission simply a small bit of cruelty inflicted on two unfortunate soldiers? Not at all. For one thing, the cargo of misery and death the two were helping transport to their neighbors in South Vietnam did not permit the Air Commandos the luxury of personal empathy for the two. But far more important from the psywar perspective was the common nature of the fears expressed by two soldiers a long way from home. From this perspective, the two soldiers themselves were not so much the target of the psywar message as they were simply the messengers. The real target of the loudspeaker broadcast was the morale of all NVA soldiers within earshot. If unseen Americans were close enough to overhear their most intimate conversations, then no matter how thick the jungle, how dark the night, how good their camouflage, enemy soldiers were conscious that Americans could always be out there, somewhere, watching, listening . . . waiting to strike.

By early March 1967, the 606th ACS was conducting nightly interdiction operations with 10 A-26s and an equal number of AT-28s.²³ The following month, the 606th was deactivated, with its forces immediately activated at NKP as the 56th Air Commando Wing (ACW), a more appropriate reflection of the size of the unit. In the ensuing months, the 56th grew more, especially in terms of firepower.

C-123K Provider transports belonging to the 606th Air Commando Squadron had a special night mission over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. After observers first detected truck traffic below with a handheld Starlight scope, the C-123 “Candlestick” missions exposed the trucks with six-million candlepower aerial flares. And like sharks following a blood trail, the strike aircraft followed the reddish-tinted flares to the hapless trucks.

Air Force Lineage and Honors

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Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.