

Air Commando Operations

Extraction from Unpublished Memoir 2001

“Warrior, Engineer, Researcher”

an autobiography by

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The material herein is based on a personal diary kept by me during the first of my three Vietnam combat assignments May 19, 1963 to October 8, 1963 as an Air Commando in south Vietnam when I was flying as a combat pilot with the rank of Captain in the U.S. Air Force. Therefore, dates, names, and results presented are accurate, even when conflicts with other reports occur. I have added to the bare facts with memory and background information. I start with the Cuban Crisis background which affected my assignments and provided motivation for me to fight against the Communists in Vietnam. I have provided Air Force crew selection methods and training descriptions prior to detailing the actual combat missions.

The autobiography that this information was taken from was written for my grandchildren and their descendants, and outside of about 10 copies for my family was not intended to be published. However, in the interest of assisting the Veterans History Project, authorized by the U.S. Congress in October 2000, I am contributing my Vietnam War stories and experience to the project at the Library of Congress. However, I retain the copyright for this material including the photographs taken by me.

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Cuban Crisis and Vietnam War

Air Commando Operations

After years of a corrupt Cuban government, Fidel Castro led a revolt against the existing government in Cuba and took possession of that country in January 1959. It soon became evident that his regime was Communist. Soviet Union support for Cuba was set up in 1960. Soon thousands of anti-Communist Cubans went underground or fled the country, mostly to the United States. Castro made the United States the whipping boy in his speeches and in messages to the United Nations and to the Organization of American States. The Soviet Embassy in Havana, Cuba, was the headquarters of Red agents and organizers. Schools for saboteurs were established and the Communists trained groups in Latin American countries to demonstrate against U.S. aid or investment, to obstruct their own government, and to plan revolution. During this time, the United States and neighbor Latin American nations were trying to maintain friendly relations with Cuba. But in January 1961, Castro charged that the United States Embassy in Havana was a center for counterrevolutionary activities. This caused U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower to break off diplomatic relations with Cuba, just before turning over his office to President John F. Kennedy that month. One by one the other Latin American countries broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba, except for Mexico, because of communist subversion within their borders.

Anti-Castro refugees in the United States and elsewhere in the Americas clung to their hope that with outside help Cubans could rise and overthrow the Communist government of Cuba. These exiles carried out hit-and-run raids on Cuban ports and trained for an invasion. Though not publicly admitted, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) organized and launched a counter-revolutionary force composed of about 1,500 of these anti-Castro mercenaries supported by B-26s. In April 1961, the force landed at the Bay of Pigs, 90 miles southeast of Havana. It was expected that when the forces hit the beach, there would be a general uprising within the Cuban military in support of this movement, and a quick victory would be forthcoming. However, this did not happen. Cuban T-33 aircraft, armed with .50 caliber machine guns in their nose, shot down the prop-driven B-26s, and the landing force was heavily outnumbered resulting in about 1,000 men captured and about 500 killed, many by the Cuban T-33s which strafed the beach.

In January 1962, when I finished my BSEE at the University of Colorado under an Air Force Institute of Technology scholarship, I was assigned to Headquarters, Military Air Transport Service (MATS), as a T-33 instructor pilot. While MATS was essentially the multi-engine transport service for the military forces, they had about a half dozen single-engine pilots at headquarters whose job it was to keep headquarters staff pilots current in an airplane. The T-33 was much cheaper to operate than a multi-engine aircraft, so that was the aircraft of choice. I became one of the elite highly experienced single-engine instructor pilots at their headquarters at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois. In addition to instruction, I flew quite a few test flights in the T-33 for airborne maintenance checks. These functional test flights required a minimum crew, just one pilot in the T-33, for safety reasons.

On one test flight in a T-33, I was checking the aircraft for an aileron rerigging that had been completed by maintenance. The test flight required a series of stalls, conducted at 25,000 feet altitude for safety reasons. If all goes well, the aircraft is controllable and recoverable to normal flight. However, on this test, the aircraft left wing dropped sharply, the nose swung down, and the aircraft headed straight down while rolling to the left. The emergency recovery procedure called for putting the throttle in idle, cleaning up the aircraft (the landing gear was down), and using full rudder against the rotation with flight stick full aft. Then, as the procedure continues to say, when the rotation stops, bring the stick forward to break the stall and fly it away with power. However, when the landing gear was raised the left roll speed increased while continuing straight down. At 12,000 feet, the aircraft was still going straight down, accelerating through 300 knots, and the rudder wouldn't stop the rotation. Because I had the flight stick full back and the aircraft was still going straight down, I thought maybe the tail of the aircraft had fallen off. I let go of the flight stick and grabbed the ejection seat handles, preparing to bail out. Then I thought, I may as well try something unconventional, at least until I reach 10,000 feet (seconds away). I threw out the rule book, brought the stick forward and applied full right aileron along with the right rudder. That worked and the roll slowly stopped and I pulled the aircraft level at 9,500 feet and 350 knots. The landing gear had not yet finished retracting and its maximum speed is 195 knots. Therefore, I thought maybe some landing gear doors had ripped off. I held 250 knots in level flight at 10,000 feet altitude as the landing gear finished coming up and had a fellow instructor pilot from Scott come look me over. He could see no damage to my landing gear doors from his aircraft, but I could see that the left aileron (the one that had been rerigged) was angled up about 2 inches above the wing in level flight and I had to hold some right aileron to counteract that effect. Apparently, an aileron cable had come loose. I tested the minimum speed that the aircraft was controllable with the landing gear down and that speed was 160 knots. It was exactly the maximum speed that one could attempt a high speed landing in a control emergency. So I contacted Scott tower for an emergency landing and made a no-flap touchdown at 160 knots on a 6000-foot runway. I didn't think it would stop short of the arresting cables at the end of the runway, so I opened the canopy at 120 knots to slow the aircraft down like a drag chute does. The canopy isn't designed for this treatment but it didn't come off. The disc brakes were applied until they turned cherry red and failed, acting like butter and smoking. The aircraft finally came to rest with the nose hanging over the barrier cable but not touching it. I breathed a sigh of relief. That is what test flights are for, to determine if the aircraft is safe to fly. It wasn't ready for release to normal flight scheduling, but it was the only one that I ever found not ready. On the ground, my evaluation of what happened during the recovery was that in the case of an aircraft rolling when the landing gear is raised (the main gear fold inward), the rate of roll will increase just like a spinning skater bringing their arms in, due to conservation of angular momentum. The published emergency procedure for an out-of-control condition, actually only applied to flat spins by aircraft with no control malfunctions, but it only says, if uncontrollable bail out above 10,000 feet if possible. This means the pilot has to figure out some problems for himself and do so very quickly if he and the aircraft are to survive. A way to save the aircraft is not always available, but during my whole pilot career, I always managed to save the aircraft when an aircraft emergency occurred.

In January 1962, the Organization of American States voted to expel Cuba. In February 1962, President Kennedy proclaimed an embargo on most United States trade with Cuba, hoping to cut off the dollar earnings that had been spent spreading Communism in Latin America. This caused

Castro to sign a \$700 million trade agreement with the Soviet Union to bolster the seriously degraded Cuban economy. After mid-July 1962, shipments from Russia were not limited to peacetime products. Russian freighters entered Cuban ports loaded with military equipment. Thousands of Russians also came to Cuba, saying they were technicians and not military personnel.

At Scott Air Force Base in Illinois, it was time for me to look at my next officer training requirement. Captains should attend Squadron Officer School and if later promoted to field grade rank, they should attend Command and Staff School. Squadron Officer School was 3 months long, and I obtained a slot to go, reporting to Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, in September 1962. Squadron Officer School is probably the most critical educational program offered an Air Force officer. The record he makes there carries considerable weight in the future. It will be reviewed before he is selected for promotion and when he is considered for further professional education. The school is based on an academic and outdoor leadership program with considerable physical conditioning including calisthenics, running, and the group sports of soccer, volleyball, and flickerball.

I managed to get about half way through Squadron Officer School (6 weeks) before outside events upset my plans for course completion. On October 22, 1962, President Kennedy announced, in television and radio broadcasts, that photographs taken by reconnaissance planes showed that Russian atomic-missile sites were being built in Cuba. The short-range missiles already in place had a range of more than 1,000 miles. Sites for longer intermediate-range missiles were also under construction. Further, the Soviet jet bombers already in Cuba were capable of carrying nuclear weapons. President Kennedy charged that the presence of these weapons constituted a threat to the security of the Western Hemisphere nations and violated the Rio treaty of 1947. He called for the withdrawal of the missiles and bombers. He announced that the United States was imposing a quarantine on ships carrying offensive military equipment to Cuba. He warned that an aggressive act by Cuba would constitute an attack by Russia and that the United States would retaliate with its nuclear might.

This Cuban crisis caused the Squadron Officer School to shut down and send the 832 Air Force officers then in the school back to their home base to await further orders in support of the crisis. At Scott Air Force Base, I was assigned as a top secret courier in the T-33 aircraft in support of whatever happened. Within a few days, almost all jet fighter squadrons in the United States were sent to Florida to be ready for an attack on Cuba. Officers who saw any base in Florida could only comment that there were so many fighter planes in Florida that they were surprised that the state didn't sink into the ocean from the weight on the parking ramps. On October 23, the day after President Kennedy's announcement, the Organization of American States authorized the use of military force to enforce the blockade. U.S. Navy ships patrolled the Caribbean and Russian ships carrying missiles turned back. On October 26, 1962, Russia's Premier Nikita Khrushchev, in a letter to Kennedy, offered to remove the missiles from Cuba on condition that the United States did not invade Cuba. President Kennedy accepted this condition, and the Russians ordered the missiles withdrawn on October 28. The Cuban Premier, Fidel Castro, protested the removal of the Russian jet bombers to no avail. The Russians removed them also. Squadron Officer School was not continued for those that had been sent home during the crisis,

though we were credited with school completion on our personnel records with the comment “curtailed course” instead of class standing.

This first brush with the Communists, was not my last. A few weeks later, in November 1962, my boss came to me at Scott Air Force Base and asked me to volunteer to fly with the Air Commandos on temporary duty in combat in single-engine-propeller aircraft. He proceeded to give me five reasons he didn't want to release any of the other five single-engine pilots under his command, but pointed out that MATS needed to find one single-engine pilot volunteer to fulfill their commitment to support that operation. I volunteered. I wanted to go because the Air Commandos sounded interesting and I was angry at the Communists for their Cuban threat. But I didn't tell my boss that I wanted to go, I let him think I was doing him a favor. I was surprised that he had not made the request based on my patriotism and interest in the Air Commandos. The personnel officer for MATS headquarters, a Colonel who took my written volunteer statement, acted as if I had been pressured into volunteering for the combat assignment, and he stated that if there was ever anything that he could do for me in the future, just to let him know. That was a pretty nice offer, and I would remember that when I wanted an assignment in the future. What I had volunteered for was two temporary duty tours of about 5 months each, one for training in the AT-28 fighter in Florida and one for deployment to Vietnam for combat missions against the Communists, though the destination and enemy wasn't being given by the Personnel Officer at the moment (he just said combat with the Air Commandos).

I reported in January 1963 to Hurlburt Field, Florida which was also called Eglin Air Force Base Auxiliary 9, located at Fort Walton Beach in the Florida pan handle. I was to train as a T-28 pilot, not the 800 horsepower T-28A of flying school days, but instead the T-28 B Navy version with a 1450 horsepower radial engine. These Navy aircraft had been further modified to carry



Photo 1. AT-28D with two .50 caliber Machine Guns, two 500 lb. Napalms, and 14 2.75-inch Rockets

two under-wing .50 caliber machine gun pods, and four other ordnance stations for rockets, napalm, or bombs. The models at Hurlburt were designated T-28Ds. I was assigned to the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron of the 1st Air Commando Group for checkout in the AT-28, and training in low level navigation and ordnance delivery. They were also training Douglas B-26 crews for ordnance delivery, and C-47 Gooney Bird crews for parachuting cargo and parachuted flares for night work. My ordnance training included strafing with .50 caliber machine guns, dropping napalm from level at 50 feet above the ground at 250 knots, firing rockets, and dive bombing. Formation flying was routine on each mission as single-engine aircraft were not sent into combat alone, and we were taught a loose combat formation, called tactical formation, which was suitable for aircraft carrying ordnance loads and being more aware of surroundings outside the formation in a combat zone.

The Air Commandos usually wore fatigues when not flying and with the olive green fatigues they added a special unit character of blue scarf and Australian bush hat. Being on temporary duty with them, I was invited to wear the same. The training at Hurlburt included some academics mostly on counterinsurgency techniques of fighting against Communist guerrillas and current Vietnam intelligence reports.

In early May 1963, I prepared to deploy overseas for 5 months with Detachment 2A of the 1st Air Commando Group. My wife Roberta had been in Carmichael, California, since mid-January with



Photo 3. Roberta Pierson, 1963

our three sons staying with her mother and father, Robert and Esther Jones, for my temporary duty period through October 1963.

In mid May, 1963, I returned to Hurlburt in Florida to board a special Air Force C-135 to

take the Vietnam replacements, as we were called,



Photo 2. Captain Dick Pierson, 1963

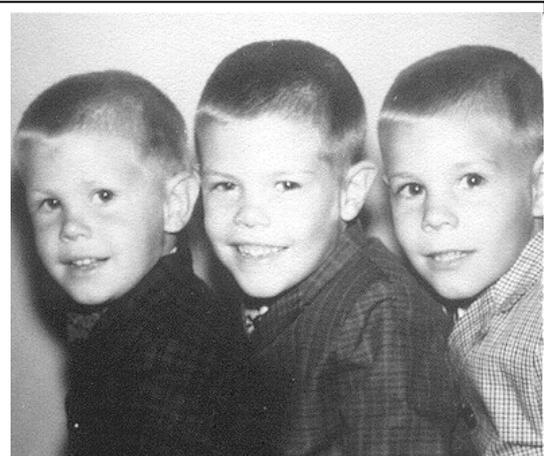


Photo 4. Jeff, Mark, & Scott Pierson 1963

as a group to South Vietnam. In accordance with the briefing, I carried a .32 caliber pocket pistol for use in civilian attire and my father, Karl, had loaned me his .357 magnum revolver to use as a personal survival weapon if I was shot down. During my training at Hurlburt, we had fired the Armalite AR-15 .223 caliber rifle (later called the M-16), .38 caliber revolver, and .45 caliber

automatic qualifying as Expert in all three. We had also been trained in hand-to-hand combat, primarily the use of feet to disable an opponent, and the use of knives of which I carried one Bowie knife with a 10-inch blade for survival and three throwing knives for additional self defense. We also had completed Dix's Air Commando swamp survival course at Hurlburt in April and a 3-week survival course at Stead Air Force Base, Nevada, in February which had included practice treatment and interrogation as a prisoner of war. We departed Hurlburt on May 16 and made enroute overnight stops at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, and Clark Air Force Base, Philippines. We landed at Bien Hoa air base in South Vietnam on Sunday, May 19, 1963, located about 15 miles northeast of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), and this was the principal location of Detachment 2A of the 1st Air Commando Group.

Bien Hoa was to be my home for the next five months. There was an officer's compound where we were set up 5 men to a tent. There were only 2 tents left as the rest had already been converted to wooden huts (5 men to a hut). Consequently, the new guys, called FNGs (fu...ing new guys), were assigned to a tent. Once per month, the rotation aircraft came in with 10 FNGs aboard. A month or two after the tent assignment, when some combat veterans vacated their hut slots to go



Photo 7. Bien Hoa Officer's Club



Photo 5. C-135B Rotation Aircraft



Photo 6. Capt. Dick Pierson, July 1963, with M-16 rifle and flight survival vest, .357 magnum pistol under arm, mustache, cot and tent typical

home, we FNGs would move to a hut. In the tents, T-28 pilots, B-26 pilots and navigators, and C-47 pilots and navigators were mixed. But when we move to a hut, it will be with our own kind. At Bien Hoa, I grew a mustache (the only time in my life) as was allowed in a combat zone, but shortly after

this photo I shaved it off.

Bien Hoa had separate buildings for latrines with showers, but for the first month there, the water pump was broken. So they ran a make-shift device for water pressure only a couple hours per day. They had a Mess Hall and the food was pretty good. For officers (if you were not flying), there was a steak fry every Friday night (fry your own), they provided the raw meat and heated barbecue grills. They had a little wooden officers club (O club) with screened walls and ceiling fans but no air conditioning. The O club served drinks but no food. It was a comfortable place to talk and drink beer. It also had one nickel slot machine, and one Vietnamese waitress. However, those on the flying schedule had to maintain a large space between beer and flying. That meant 2 beers maximum if you had the night off and none if you were on night alert.

The T-28 Flight was a little slow in getting me checked out for combat operations locally, so I flew some copilot time in a twin-engine C-47 cargo aircraft for 4 combat support missions which was just cargo and personnel delivery to dangerous locations near the enemy including Pleiku, 200 miles to the north.

By June 5th, I had flown 5 combat missions in the T-28, three of which I had expended ordnance against the Viet Cong (the local Communist guerillas). On June 5th, I was given a night combat orientation and also informed that I would be in charge of instrument training for the A-1 pilots in the local Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) 514th Fighter Squadron at Bien Hoa. I was given one T-28 to use for instrument training where a Vietnamese pilot, trained earlier in the USA to fly A-1 aircraft, would fly under the hood in the T-28 for low frequency homer approaches to Bien Hoa and radar approach practice at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport. I complained to the T-28 Flight Commander, Capt. Don Randle, that I had volunteered to come to Vietnam to fly combat, not train more pilots. He responded by saying that my qualifications to teach instruments was higher than any one else available, and that the detachment had to do some training as part of its cover for its combat missions. However, he was willing to be fair. He said he would give some one else the instrument job in a month and in the meantime I could stand night combat alert in between my daytime instrument training missions if I wanted to. So I volunteered for night alert every night, 7 days per week. But we didn't always get "scrambled."

Night combat alert was actually the culmination of the Vietnamese hamlet program here. The South Vietnamese farmers, because of previous Communist Viet Cong raids, had been formed into villages with 20-foot-high walls called hamlets in which they slept at night. At the entrance to the hamlet, a triangular fort was built, also with high walls and firing positions for self defense. In the center of the fort was a fire arrow which could be lit at night to point the direction from which a Viet Cong attack was occurring. Usually, the Viet Cong did not attack in daylight because they were easy targets from the fort which was manned by paramilitary (trained villagers) and that is when the villagers went out of their sleeping quarters and tended the crops in the fields, mostly rice. Not only would the Viet Cong wait for the cover of darkness to attack, but in monsoon season (May through October), they would wait for bad weather to attack. The fort and village walls were surrounded by concertina barbed wire rows and land mines. Only the road in front of the fort was not mined. Thus, a Viet Cong attack was usually at night in bad weather through the mine fields and very slow to reach the walls. When such an attack occurred, the hamlet's fort would call for air support by radio. When the call was received at Combat

Operations in Saigon, they would scramble a C-47 flare ship and a flight of two AT-28s. These fortified hamlets were all within a 100 miles of Bien Hoa, so enroute time was 15 to 45 minutes depending on distance. Our alert was a 30 minute alert from sound asleep in quarters to airborne (we could make it in 23 minutes). Essentially, the phone rang in quarters. One pilot answered and heard the word “Scramble.” He confirmed “Scramble” to the others on night alert who had actually already heard the phone ring. You had all clothes at the ready and you jumped into your flight suit, zipped on your boots, grabbed your guns (pistols, survival gear, and M-16 rifle), and ran to the alert van that was parked in front of one of the huts. All crews arrived at the van simultaneously including the Vietnamese observers who rode in the rear seat on every combat mission as part of our cover (they couldn’t speak English or fly). One of the pilots drove the van as fast as possible to base operations about 0.3 mile away. There, the pilots ran into operations for a quick mission briefing which consisted of being handed a piece of paper with the flight call sign, direction, distance, coordinates, and name of destination and flare ship. The operations duty officer also pointed to the destination on a big wall map and said “the fort attack is here”. This briefing took 5 seconds. The pilots ran back to the van where the Vietnamese crew members waited with their parachutes, and drove as fast as possible around base operations to the flight line side where the flight of AT-28s on alert waited on the ramp. The crew chiefs had also been alerted, had opened the canopies, and were standing by for engine start. The aircraft had each been ground preflighted by the pilots at the beginning of the evening before going to bed and their parachutes and helmets already put aboard. The ordnance, usually two 500-pound napalm canisters, 14 rockets, and .50 caliber guns, had already been checked by the pilot. Now the crews just jumped into the cockpits and started the engines. The lead aircraft called the tower and advised we were on a scramble giving our call sign and number of aircraft for this mission. We were usually cleared to taxi and takeoff at this point. The crew chief would pull the landing gear safety pins, and motion us clear of obstacles for taxi. At the runway entrance, after a brief engine runup check, the ordnance crew would remove the ordnance safety pins, and show the task done by holding up the ordnance pins. The lead pilot for the formation would get the nod of ready from his wingman, and advise the tower we were taking off. We would take the runway at a fast taxi and when aligned on the runway, we were off without stopping at full power together in formation. Since the weather was usually low cloud ceiling, and perhaps raining, we worked hard to stay below the clouds as

there would be no way to navigate to target when we got there except visually. Flying the heading given during the operational briefing, we called Saigon combat operations on the radio (call sign Paris), and advised of our takeoff time. Upon arriving over the fort under attack, we

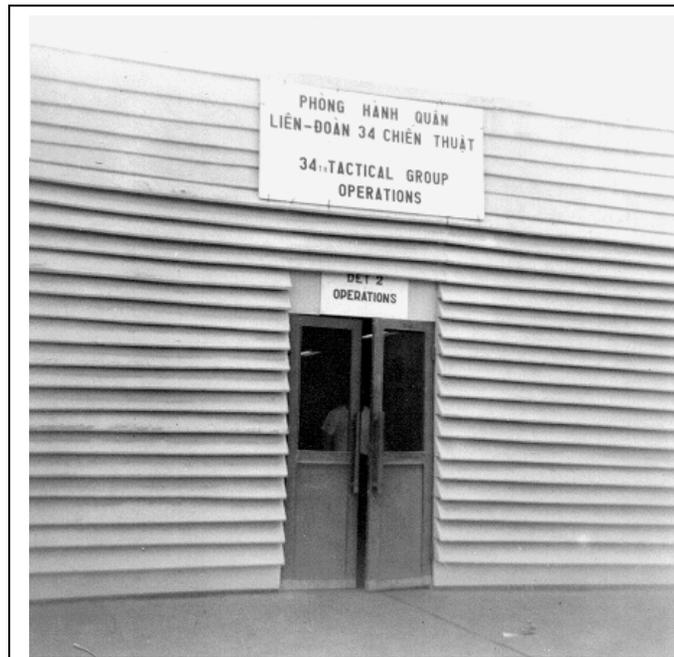


Photo 8. Bien Hoa Det. 2 Air Commando Operations entrance

could usually see the C-47 flare ship by its navigation lights and it would have started dropping 2-million-candlepower parachuted flares as soon as it got there. It dropped 6 flares at a time and before they burned out another six and so on to keep the target area lit constantly while the AT-28s were available. It was good strategy for the C-47 to drop flares even if the fighters were not yet on station as the enemy would not know that the fighters were not there yet. Thus, the Viet Cong attackers usually broke off their attack right at the first flares to illuminate them. The C-47 would communicate with the fort by radio and verify that the fire arrow pointed at the attackers and get a distance out. This information was relayed to the fighters by a Vietnamese forward air controller on board the C-47, who cleared the fighters for attack. Napalm was always dropped first because of the danger of being hit by ground fire with it on board and its weight affecting maneuverability. Napalm is delivered at 50 feet above the ground even at night, thus the parachuted flares being lit is essential. The AT-28 dives in at full power, screaming low over the fort at 250 knots, right at the enemy who usually begin shooting at the aircraft giving away their exact position by muzzle flashes of their rifles and AK-47 hand held machine guns. The napalm is dumped directly onto the enemy muzzle flashes usually covering an elliptical area about 50 meters wide by 150 meters long with burning jelly. For each aircraft, one napalm is dropped per pass, 7 rockets fired per pass, then about 15 passes made strafing with two .50 caliber guns firing armor piercing incendiary bullets. If the Viet Cong are in the open when we arrive, we can easily kill about 80 percent of them. Catching them in the open is the trick and it doesn't happen all that often. If they reach the cover of nearby jungle before we attack, there is little to shoot at, and the forward air controller calls off the air strike.



Photo 9. T-28 Section pilots, Detachment 2A, 1st Air Commando Group.

When I arrived at Bien Hoa, the Detachment had 12 AT-28Bs and 18 T-28 pilots in its T-28 Flight, commanded by Capt. Don Randle. They were never at Bien Hoa at the same time due to one or more forward operating bases. So the photo of available T-28 pilots is missing five pilots who were at Soc Trang at the time. Of the 13 pilots shown in front of the AT-28, that's me in the back row, second from left. Each pilot was to fly 100 combat missions before going home. That normally took about six months. Each pilot would receive one Air Medal for each 25 combat missions flown (four Air Medals for the combat tour). Not all pilots survived, but all in this photo did, though the unit lost four AT-28 aircraft to combat with two crews killed during this combat tour in Vietnam for me. Let me introduce you to these tough Air Commandos. Top row from left: Capt. Joe Potter, Capt. Dick Pierson, 1st Lt. Tom Schornak, Capt. Bob Gochnouer (T-28 Scheduling Officer), Capt. Joe Holden, Maj. Barney Cochran, and Capt. Tom Cain (also on temporary duty from MATS like myself, that little aircraft behind Tom is an L-19 Forward Air Controller aircraft used to direct us onto targets). Bottom row from left: Capt. Don Randle (T-28 Flight Commander), Capt. Bill McShane, Capt. Frank McCallister, Capt. Jim Ahmann (later promoted to 2-star General), Capt. 'Swede' Johansen, and Capt. Jim Martin. The T-28 pilots not shown here that I flew with (some rotated in later) were Capt. Art McNay, Capt. Dean Wadsworth (who was killed in combat before I left), Capt. Jim Tally, 1st Lt. Ron Jackson, Capt. Patty Doyle, Capt. Casey (who flew 200 missions because of re-volunteering), Capt. Jim Boggs, Capt. George Deken, and 1st Lt. Dennie Sides (who also signed up for a second combat tour without leaving). As I mention certain combat missions, I will refer to these pilots by name. I didn't keep track of the names of the enlisted Vietnamese Air Force men that rode in the back seat of each AT-28 since they didn't speak English. English was spoken on the radio for all combat missions including when Vietnamese pilots or Vietnamese forward air controllers were part or all of the attack force.

The daytime combat missions were quite different from the night missions. Daytime ground alerts were the norm (with only a few fragged missions [a fragmentation order is part of a planned operation]) with 30-minute response at Bien Hoa and 15-minute response at Soc Trang. The timing difference being 15 minutes if standing by on the flight line at Operations and 30 minutes if standing by in quarters. Some of the day missions were: close air support for the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) when in contact with Viet Cong, air cover for ARVN troops on an enemy sweep, escort for a C-47 or C-123 aerial drop, escort for helicopter troop deliveries to a landing zone, pre-strike of a helicopter landing zone, train escort, air cover for downed aircraft including helicopters, hitting interdiction targets, and air cover for C-123 aerial spraying. The Air Commando AT-28s were a jack of all trades and were treated as if they could do anything, and we did, true to the Air Commando motto: **Anytime, Anyplace**. There was always some new mission to accomplish, such as searching for a downed helicopter at night in bad weather under flares, or escorting a medical evacuation helicopter at night under a full moon. The ground troops (ARVN and U.S. Army including Special Forces) loved AT-28 support because it was accurate, deadly, and usually available even during bad weather. We would do anything to support troops in combat, even when it seemed impossible to others.

Now I'm going to take you through this combat tour in Vietnam with me chronologically. I intend to convey to you the variety of military, political, and life threatening pressures seen by a

combat pilot. I will skip the dull days and try to give you enough background for each mission type to understand what is going on.

Earlier, Indo-China had been subdivided by a 1954 agreement at Geneva to keep communists in North Vietnam and non-communists in South Vietnam. Cambodia and Laos had also been part of the Indo-China agreement. It was also agreed that no country would introduce jet aircraft into this region. North Vietnam receives support from the USSR (Russia) & China, and South Vietnam receives support from the United States. The South Vietnamese (called the Republic of Vietnam) premier was President Diem (pronounced zee-em) when I arrived in May 1963. He had an army called ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) and an Air Force called VNAF (Vietnamese Air Force). Fifteen thousand U.S. Army "Advisors" were training the ARVN and a few U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy pilots were training the VNAF. The U.S. Air Force Air Commandos were intended to create an improved combat capability against the Viet Cong guerrillas in South Vietnam who are supported by Communist North Vietnam using Russian weapons with the hope that the VNAF would eventually be trained well enough that they would no longer need us. The Air Commando combat missions were flown under the guise of training the VNAF, thus our mission was secret and President Kennedy did not admit to the public via the press that our pure combat operation existed in Vietnam. This is a new way to fight a war, self satisfaction only with no press or public support. The lack of public participation in the war effort against the Communist Viet Cong will later turn out to be a mistake.

Tuesday, June 4, 1963. Today I flew my 5th combat mission in the AT-28. I relate it for background information. We, a flight of two AT-28s, were scrambled from Bien Hoa at 5:45 PM for interdiction. We met the FAC (Forward Air Controller), who was a Vietnamese pilot flying an L-19 light aircraft, north of Tay Ninh (about 75 miles west of Bien Hoa) and he marked a target with smoke which was very close to the Cambodian border. The target was a suspected Viet Cong supply area about 300 meters square, and the FAC cleared us to attack it. I



Photo 10. Crew chief checking out a T-28D

I dive bombed two 100-pound white phosphorous bombs, fired 14 rockets, and strafed all my .50 caliber rounds of armor piercing incendiary (650) on this target. While the target burned vigorously for 30 minutes, results were otherwise unobservable due to heavy jungle cover. We returned to Bien Hoa with a total of about an hour and 45 minutes flying time, which was a typical length for a combat mission. There were many missions where ordnance damage assessment of a target was not observable due to jungle cover. Combat missions are flown seven days per week with no different schedules on weekends or holidays.

Friday, June 7, 1963. I finally got my instrument AT-28 repaired for use, but I couldn't get a VNAF pilot to fly instruments because it was between noon and 3 PM when all VNAF personnel

take a siesta. For them, training, and preferably the war, stopped for three hours every day and also on the weekend. Frankly, I was shocked by the seemingly uncaring attitude. Later, one VNAF pilot explained it to me this way, when I asked why they did not fly the night missions (they fly day Visual Flight Rules only when weather ceilings are above 1500 feet and visibility is above 3 miles): the VNAF pilot was about 25 years old and he said, "I have over 1200 combat missions now (about 6 years worth) in the A-1 aircraft. I am the oldest pilot in the 514th Fighter Squadron. I am not in a hurry to die. To fly night and bad weather missions only speeds the time when I will be shot down and not live through it. You American pilots fly 100 combat missions and go home. I do not have that option. My remaining days are numbered!" That response hit me like a ton of bricks, and I immediately had a great deal more respect for the VNAF pilots. I better understood why the Air Commandos were here flying the night and bad weather combat missions in addition to good weather combat missions. We were part of the attempt to stop the Communist guerrilla hit and run tactics before it turned into Communist held territory, though our help would not extend a VNAF pilot's life by much. I later found out that the average life expectancy for a South Vietnamese male was age 26 due to the war with the Communists. I am now age 28 and expect to live through this war. At 3 PM, VNAF 2nd Lt. Danh (pronounced zan) volunteered to fly instruments with me. He spoke some English which he had learned to attend pilot training in the United States. I was on night alert for the first time tonight but did not get scrambled. Instrument training was not possible on Saturdays and Sundays (no VNAF pilots available), so I was free to stand day alert on the weekend for combat missions.

Wednesday, June 12, 1963. I flew a two-hour instrument training mission in the morning with VNAF 2nd Lt. Dinh (pronounced dean). Then I flew a two-hour instrument training flight after 3 PM in the afternoon with VNAF Aspirant (a Vietnamese rank below 2nd Lt.) Kim (pronounced keem). On the flight with Kim, when it came time to land, the left landing gear indicated unsafe. After 30 minutes of trying to get it down including bouncing the aircraft on the runway on one wheel, I landed with it indicating unsafe. The landing gear was actually down, so the landing was normal except for the fire trucks standing by. Inspection of the aircraft revealed that 6 wires in the wheel well had been cut, apparently with wire cutters between the two flights during siesta time. Bien Hoa is only a couple miles from heavy jungle and I had never seen a security person (ARVN) on base though I was told they were at perimeter outposts. I suppose the guards were not alert enough during siesta time to see a saboteur. There is no patrol of the flight line during daylight hours and they depend on crew chiefs and the control tower to report or question unusual persons present. Although the ARVN probably have a mortar spotter in the control tower, this level of security made me nervous and I wore my .357 magnum pistol everywhere I went everyday when not sleeping. When sleeping I hung it on the bed post where I could reach it while in bed in case of night attack by the Viet Cong which had happened at Bien Hoa about six months ago.



Photo 11. Bien Hoa village, donkey-drawn carts

Saturday, June 15, 1963. I got bumped off the alert schedule this morning by a Colonel from MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group) in Saigon so he could fly, for flight pay and combat pay. We are paid \$65 per month for flying at least once per month in a combat zone. It's laughable that the U.S. government thinks that comes close to the additional risk over non-combat missions. But still, every little bit helps.

Being free from flying, I went to Saigon to do some shopping. The Communist Viet Cong have put out flyers in South Vietnam offering a \$1000 bounty for the delivery of any U.S. Air Commando. The enemy knows we are here, and, personally, I think I'm worth more than a \$1000 because I am going to do a lot

more damage than that amount to them. So with a price on our head, we are instructed by the base Intelligence officer to wear civilian clothes when going into Saigon or any other off-base town, and to carry a pocket gun.

Additionally, we are advised to travel in pairs. So I hunted up a partner that wanted to go to town, changed into my short sleeved shirt and slacks, and stuffed my .32 caliber automatic in my pocket out of sight. We are about 11 degrees north of the equator here, so it is always hot. Rain and thunderstorms are typical during monsoon season (May through October) which is exactly my tour of duty! The base provided a military bus that ran all day (but not at night) back and forth



Photo 12. Saigon Cycalo and Traffic Policeman

between Saigon and Bien Hoa air base, 15 miles each way over a muddy pot-holed dirt road. The bus took 45 minutes each way and went by Tan Son Nhut airport while at Saigon before returning to Bien Hoa. The bus was driven by a U.S. Air Force enlisted person who wore a uniform and carried an M-16 rifle with him on the bus. The bus had been further protected from hand grenades being tossed in by putting a steel grid screen over all the openable windows. When I took the picture of the policeman in Saigon, he turned around and said in perfect English, "Did you take a picture of me?" I said, "Yes." He just beamed a big smile in reply (notice his white leggings).

I got back from town at 1 PM and went on alert at 2 PM. We were scrambled at 5 PM to destroy a downed AT-28. The AT-28 had been shot down this morning 15 miles north of Bien Hoa. The crew of 2 had made a successful belly landing in a small clearing in a wooded area and then were picked up unharmed by a helicopter rescue unit. This location was controlled by Viet Cong because of the surrounding jungle, so operations wanted to destroy the AT-28 wings and guns so that the Viet Cong would not strip the weapons for their use. Before our arrival, a B-26 had bombed and dropped napalm on the downed AT-28 but left the wings and gun pods intact. We were a flight of two and we carried napalm and rockets. It was important that the destruction occur before dark or the Viet Cong would benefit. Napalm is normally delivered at 50 feet, but the nearby trees were over 200 feet, so we had to guess at the sight settings and deliver at 300 feet above the ground. Of the 4 napalms dropped, one (my 2nd napalm) hit the T-28 dead center. We fired our 28 rockets seven at a time, and the first three batches spread and hit all around the target with no hits. My second batch was fired from 500 feet instead of 1000 feet and one rocket hit the center of the wing and had a fuel secondary explosion. The job was considered done, but we strafed it anyway with .50 caliber before going home. I did not enjoy attacking a U.S.-made target, but it certainly reinforced the danger of our mission.

Sunday, June 16, 1963. I was on alert this morning, and Don Randle and I were scrambled in our two AT-28s at 9:30 AM. The Vietnamese FAC met us over the target 75 miles southwest of Bien Hoa in his L-19. The target was 100 Viet Cong hiding in the vicinity of a canal 5 miles from Sadec. The Viet Cong were hiding in various huts and moving from one hut to another when they thought the FAC wasn't looking. The FAC marked with a smoke rocket a hut or brush area between them as he identified the Viet Cong location and asked us to drop one napalm on each target. Randle put his two napalms on the first two targets which were direct hits, and I on the second two, one of which was a 50 by 50 foot hut (house), and then a smaller house, also direct hits. When I hit the smaller house, the napalm canister went through the front door, splashed jelly, but did not ignite. Randle backed me up with an immediate strafing of the unburned napalm on the target with incendiary bullets and the far side of the canal from the house lit, fire swept across the canal and into the back windows of the house exploding inside and blowing the roof off. The FAC then directed our 28 rockets on another structure and we destroyed it. We were strafing the four remaining huts, when my sump warning light came on at about 500 feet above the ground and was blinking at me. This usually means that the engine is about to fail and presently has metal particles in the engine oil sump. I declared an emergency over the radio and started climbing. Randle broke off his attack and we started for home 72 miles away. About this time my oil temperature went above normal range to a little over 100 degrees C and the oil pressure dropped down below normal range to about 60 PSI. I opened the cowl and oil cooler flaps two inches and the oil temperature and pressure returned to their normal ranges. The engine seemed to be operating normally as I leveled off at 6,000 feet and reduced power, but the sump light now quit blinking and stayed on steady. After a simulated forced landing at Bien Hoa, I landed without incident. Thank God I didn't have engine failure as indicated by the light. Inspection of the aircraft revealed a piece of painted metal inside the oil sump on the sump plug and a partially shorted wire for the sump warning light. Since the metal was painted, it was not from the engine and so sabotage is again suspected. That was my 12th combat mission in the AT-28. The ARVN mopped up our target for us on the ground after we left. They gave Don Randle and I credit for 50 Viet Cong killed which was reported to us a few days later in our 7:30 morning Intelligence briefing.

This was the first mission where I had observed ground fire from the Viet Cong being fired at me, which I observed as muzzle flashes during each strafing run just before I started to fire. I had wondered if I would experience fear in such an exchange of bullets, but I found that I experienced anger instead. It was not a reckless anger, but a cool anger that produced adrenaline in my blood stream and a high desire to destroy the shooter. In discussions with other pilots, I noted that not all pilots saw rifle muzzle flashes in daylight from several thousand feet away. A flight surgeon once told me that I had an unusually large number of rods and cones in my eyes which allowed me to see considerably better than the average pilot with 20/20 vision.

Monday, June 17, 1963. It rained very hard from 4 PM to 7 PM today. It got everything in my tent wet, including the mattress, because of leaks.

Tuesday, June 18, 1963. I was on night alert and Capt. Eason (I just called him Eason and didn't know his first name) and I were scrambled in our two AT-28s at 3 AM. It was a fort under attack 76 miles from Bien Hoa located 12 miles east of Can Tho. When we arrived, the C-47 flare ship had been dropping flares for about 5 minutes and the Viet Cong had retreated to a position 800 meters north of the center of the fort. Eason dropped the first napalm on the Viet Cong after flying over the fire arrow in the fort and I attempted to drop the second napalm, but mine would not come off the wing and my pass over the Viet Cong was in vain. Eason dropped his second napalm on the Viet Cong, and I attempted now to drop both of my napalms on a single pass on the enemy, but neither napalm would drop from my wings. I tried two more times to drop the napalms in 50-foot passes over the blazing guns of the Viet Cong, but they would not release. We then fired our 28 rockets against the Viet Cong without problems. About this time, the remaining Viet Cong made it to the jungle and the FAC in the C-47 called off the attack. We flew back to Bien Hoa where we arrived at 5 AM and I still had the problem of landing the aircraft with the napalm aboard in an unknown condition. Being highly motivated, I made the smoothest night landing of my life. The napalm was still hanging on when I taxied clear of the runway. I stopped and waited for the armament people to safety-pin and de-arm the napalms. They removed the nose and tail phosphorous fuses on each napalm after inserting the safety pins in the release mechanism. After I parked, they attempted to remove the napalms from the aircraft only to find out that my taxiing had jiggled the napalms loose from the solenoid drop mechanism down onto safety-pin-held only. That meant if I had landed a teeny bit harder, I would have dropped both napalms on the runway in an armed condition. This would have resulted in two napalms catching the aircraft with aviation fuel aboard during the landing roll. It would have been one big fireball. I am very



Photo 13. Smiley rocket pod and 500-pound napalm on T-28 wing

lucky. It was determined that the reason the napalms didn't release was that the sway braces were set too tight. That was probably caused by an inexperienced ordnance man, but I will catch it during my pre-flight next time now that I know how much sway brace is too much. That was my 13th combat mission in the AT-28 and it was Eason's 200th combat mission (his last on his second combat tour). To some, 13 means bad luck, but I don't believe in that kind of thinking. To me, this had been a good luck mission. After all, I had survived the blazing guns of the enemy several times and the napalm ordnance malfunctions without loss of me or my aircraft. It doesn't get better than that, even though I would have preferred to have inflicted more damage on the enemy during that mission.

It was too late to go to bed, so Eason and I shaved and went to early breakfast at the Mess Hall. After that night mission, the bacon, eggs, and toast with jelly tasted really good. I congratulated Eason on completing his second combat tour. He was now grounded until he goes home on the rotation aircraft. We walked down to Operations on the flight line for the morning intelligence briefing at 7:30 AM.

Friday, June 21, 1963. No VNAF instrument training this morning because of bad weather and no instrument AT-28. The rotation aircraft, a C-135, was due in today but is delayed at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines for maintenance. It brings the replacement air crews and takes back the veterans that have finished their 100 combat missions. I was not on alert today, but two AT-28s scrambled this morning to air cover a downed helicopter. It has been raining all day at Bien Hoa with ceilings as low as 600 feet at times. I tried to get in an instrument flight this afternoon, but when I taxied out and was ready for takeoff, a thunderstorm swooped down on the field. The visibility was not good enough to taxi back in for about 20 minutes because of very heavy rain and fog. Then it continued to rain hard for more than the next two hours with ceilings below 600 feet intermittently. There is no question that monsoon season is upon us in its full fury. I have been here over a month now and my tent is wet inside again.



Photo 14. T-28B Ground alert

Saturday, June 22, 1963. I was on night alert last night but didn't get scrambled. Being the weekend with no instrument training scheduled, I am on day alert this morning. Operations needs an AT-28 to go to Soc Trang to fly a couple of combat missions out of there today and return to Bien Hoa tonight. Soc Trang air base is at Khanh Hung located about 85 miles south of Bien Hoa. I am elected to go and I am to take a full load of ordnance with me including two 500-pound napalms and 14 rockets. I am told by the operations officer that Soc Trang has a

newly opened runway about 5,000 feet long which will be adequate for me to land with napalm. But when I arrive at Soc Trang (a 32-minute flight), I find that the runway is still only 3300 feet long. What they did was grade the dirt overrun in front of the 3300-foot PSP (pierced steel planking) runway. So now I had two choices, attempt a short field landing with napalm aboard or dump it in the ocean before I landed. I couldn't go back to Bien Hoa to get it downloaded as then the aircraft would not be available at Soc Trang for the planned missions. They were short of ordnance at Soc Trang and needed the aircraft on the ground for a scheduled combat mission. Remembering that I had used about 3000 feet of runway the other night when I landed with napalm at Bien Hoa, I figured I could land here if I used all of the runway. So I told Soc Trang Operations on the radio that I was landing with the napalm and to have the fire trucks stand by. I touched down 5 feet short of the PSP runway on the rock hard overrun. I only used 2500 feet to stop. As I taxied in, I hear cheering and see everybody standing in groups outside looking at me. It seems that I am the first pilot to land with napalm aboard an AT-28 at Soc Trang. And everybody had come outside to cheer me on or watch the flames if I failed. The armament people were happy because they didn't have to arm my aircraft for the next mission.

Within a half hour Jim Boggs and I were on our way to the southern tip of Vietnam in a two ship formation of AT-28s. Our mission was to air cover for a sneak helicopter landing of Vietnamese troops who were invading a Viet Cong occupied area. The pre-strike of the landing zone was assigned to a B-26 and he was supposed to soften up the wooded area around the landing zone. But he had maintenance problems and could not drop his napalm or fire his rockets. He did drop 2 bombs from his internal bomb bay and he had his .50 caliber machine guns remaining. So mission control had him take our air cover mission and we went down to do the pre-strike. I had napalm and rockets and Boggs had white phosphorous bombs and fragmentation bomb clusters. We dropped and fired all of that ordnance in a wooded area along a canal and caught 5 buildings on fire. We beat up the wooded area real good with bombs, rockets and machine guns and made passes until the 28 helicopters approached the landing zone with the troops. Then we returned to Soc Trang.

Immediately after we re-armed and refueled (about 30 minutes on the ground), Boggs and I took off again to report to the same area as before and get a job from mission control when we got there. When we arrived, the helicopters were just lifting off the landing zone from delivering their second load of troops. We escorted the helicopters to their base at Ca Mau about 30 miles away. There was 7 CH-21s and 21 UH-1Bs. Then we returned to the target area and flew air cover over the troops while waiting for close air support orders if needed. Finally, we ran low on fuel and asked the FAC for a target. The L-19 marked a target in thick jungle and we expended our ordnance on it. There was no visible results. We returned to Soc Trang and looked each other over enroute for any battle damage or ordnance malfunctions. Boggs discovered that a 120-pound fragmentation cluster had failed to drop from my right wing. So when I landed at Soc Trang, the fire trucks again stood by along with the armament de-arming crew. As I pulled to a stop on the runway, two de-arming men ran under the right wing of my aircraft and caught the 120-pound frag cluster just as it broke free from the pylon and fell. The six clustered 20-pound bombs were not armed to separate, but the cluster could have exploded on contact with the steel runway.

While I waited to be refueled, I went down to the Soc Trang Army Mess Hall to eat and afterward petted their pet Bengal tiger which was outside the Mess Hall. I took off at sunset for Bien Hoa to take this aircraft and me to quarters. It was raining and dark when I landed at Bien Hoa and I was glad there was no ordnance aboard.

While I had been gone, the rotation aircraft had come and gone leaving some hut quarters available for me. So I moved out of my wet tent and into a dry hut before bed time. The hut has a telephone (for scrambles), a refrigerator, ceiling fans, a bar with some liquor still left, box spring mattresses, lounge chairs, and floor mats. What a change, what luxury, no more aching back. As I mentioned earlier, there are 5 men to a hut. My hut mates are: Don Randle (T-28 Flight Commander); Bob Gochnouer (T-28 Scheduling Officer), Tom Cain (who is also on temporary duty from MATS like myself), and Con Terry (who is presently flying out of the forward base at Soc Trang for a month or so). I immediately went over to the O club and bought a 6-pack of beer for my refrigerator. There would be no more waiting for the O club to open to get a beer. That didn't mean I was going to get drunk, although some days I sure felt like I needed to. But for me, when things don't go right, I just want more combat missions so I can take it out on the enemy. After all, if the Viet Cong had not invaded this beautiful country, we wouldn't be having any of these problems. But today, I can't complain compared to other pilot's missions. While I was gone from Bien Hoa today, two of our Bien Hoa AT-28s got shot full of holes from ground fire during a combat mission. One plane got hit in the engine and right landing light. The engine quit as he landed at Bien Hoa from lack of oil due to a bullet hole in the oil sump. The other AT-28 had multiple bullet holes from nose to tail but landed OK.

Monday, June 24, 1963. Two more of our AT-28s got shot up today. One took a bullet in the front canopy shattering it and cutting the forehead of Tom Cain in the front seat, who was dazed and went into a dive but recovered shortly. The other aircraft, piloted by Capt. Con Terry, got shot in the rear cockpit, one bullet going through the hand and into the leg of the Vietnamese crew member there. Both aircraft landed safely however. They had been escorting helicopters when they got hit and were operating in the same area as I was last Saturday. We didn't have any aircraft in commission tonight because we have four aircraft with

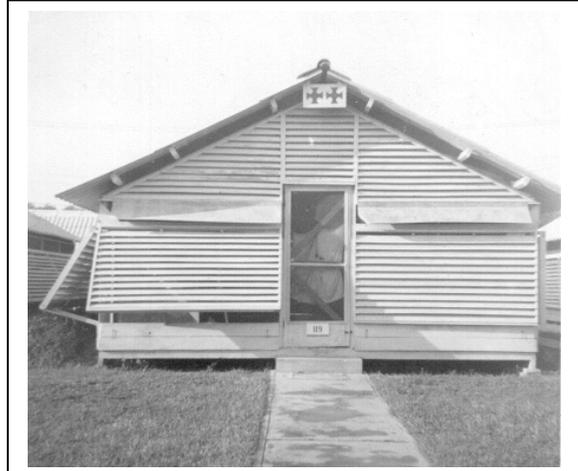


Photo 15. T-28 Crew Officers Quarters



Photo 16. Bed, mosquito net, pistol, locker, pinups

unrepaired bullet holes in them. So there is no night alert tonight. We partied (drank beer) and then watched the USO show.

Thursday, June 27, 1963. This morning at 11:00 AM, one of our AT-28s flying out of Soc Trang was shot down. The pilot was Capt. Condon Terry (age 29, married) of Dallas, Texas, one of my hut mates. The aircraft was on a strafing pass firing at the Viet Cong. Just as he started his pull up at about 50 feet above the ground, he was hit and the aircraft rolled upside down and crashed immediately contacting the ground upside down in a 30 degree dive. Both Con Terry and the Vietnamese crew member in the rear seat were killed. It is unknown whether the pilot was hit or if the aircraft went uncontrollable due to battle damage, but the aircraft was found to have bullet holes in it when inspected at the crash site later. While other pilots got drunk tonight, I stood night alert with Bob Gochnouer. We did not get scrambled.

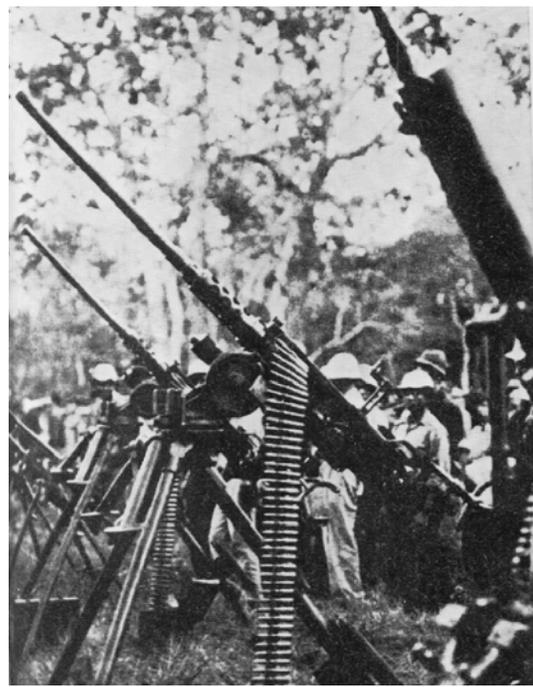


Photo 17. Viet Cong anti-aircraft guns (captured photo)

Friday, June 28, 1963. Today, Lt. Gen. Sharp (3 stars) visited us to fly a mission with us. He will be the new PACAF (Pacific Air Force) commander next month. Also, our Detachment 2A of the 1st Air Commando Group will become the 1st Air Commando Squadron, 34th Tactical Group, PACAF, effective July 1, 1963. So Gen. Sharp will be our boss in a few days. A static aircraft display was set up for the General. They used my instrument AT-28 so there was no instrument training in the morning. Then they asked me to stand in front of the AT-28 when the General inspected the aircraft. The static display also included an Air Commando B-26 and an A-1H from the Vietnamese Squadron. All General Sharp said when he walked hurriedly by the AT-28 was “Good Morning” as I saluted him. I can think of more useful things to do in a combat zone than a static display, but rank has its privileges! This is a good place to tell you that all combat missions are logged in aircraft flight records as “combat support.” This is part of our secret cover story. My personal Air Force flight records later recorded all this flying time appropriately as combat time.

Saturday, June 29, 1963. I was on night alert last night and got scrambled at 5:30 AM to protect a fort under attack. When we arrived at the fort, we found that we were the secondary strike team of two AT-28s behind two Vietnamese A-1s and a C-47 flare ship both of whom went home just as we arrived because they had finished their strike and it was daylight with flares no longer needed. I was surprised to see VNAF A-1s flying night missions. I was impressed with their spirit in the face of the short life span that Vietnamese pilots face. We orbited and waited for an L-19 FAC to show up and mark some jungle escape routes for us to attack. No results were visible due to jungle cover, but that was not the end of the day’s work.

In the afternoon, all the T-28 pilots went to Con Terry's funeral except for myself and Bob Gochnouer, who stood alert with two AT-28s. At 3:30 PM, we were scrambled for a close air support mission for the ARVN who were in contact with 200 to 300 Viet Cong. They had the Viet Cong bottled up in a treed area a little bigger than four football fields which was surrounded by open rice paddies. This was located about a mile from the Cambodian border, 100 miles west of Saigon. The ARVN were sitting in the rice paddies in their M113 armored personnel carriers on both sides of the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong would not surrender. So rather than go in and fight, the ARVN called for close air support. I was leading the flight of two AT-28s out of Bien Hoa in response to this call. After over a month of flying wing man, they had started to let me lead some formations in combat. Enroute we encountered two AT-28s headed for the same target from Soc Trang, piloted by Tom Cain and Swede Johansen. They joined on my wing, and I now commanded a four-ship formation. I looked at the ordnance available. Each aircraft had two 500-pound napalms and 14 rockets and 650 rounds of .50 caliber. So the formation had 8 napalms, 56 rockets, and lots of .50 caliber ammo. Not only that, but all four pilots were very ready for a fight with Con Terry's funeral in progress as we prepared to attack. The L-19 FAC met us over the target and directed us to attack the Viet Cong in the treed area. We started with the eight napalm attacks. On each pass, the FAC corrected our next hit from the last so that as the Viet Cong ran around in the trees, the ordnance followed them. The napalm was vicious delivered at 50 feet in good daylight. On my second napalm pass, just as I released the napalm, I was suddenly sure that my aircraft would be hit by the enemy just below the seat that I was sitting in. I don't know how I knew, but I was sure and I instantly rolled the aircraft into a 90-degree right bank at 50 feet above the ground. I heard the hit but felt nothing in the cockpit, so I continued with the remainder of the ordnance deliveries for rockets and guns. At first, the Viet Cong had fired at us with anti-aircraft machine guns, homemade junk mortars during napalm passes, and a lot of automatic rifle fire. This small target area and the precision with which we delivered the ordnance to avoid hitting the friendlies on both sides of the target caused every square foot of the target area to be hit multiple times. By the time Bob Gochnouer, Tom Cain, Swede Johansen, and I had delivered all of our ordnance, the Viet Cong were no longer shooting back.

The IV Corps Air Strike Operations Center controller (call sign King Pin) asked us to refuel and re-arm at Soc Trang to be ready quickly for a second attack on this target. We all landed at Soc Trang and while we were refueling and re-arming, King Pin called us on the telephone and told us that we had killed all of the 200 to 300 Viet Cong during our attack, and therefore, we would not be needed for a second attack. The IV Corps commander asked us for the names of the four pilots so that he could recommend us for a medal. Actually, the results had been from a team effort. The ARVN armored company, under the guidance of a U.S. Army Advisor, had trapped the Viet Cong. And the VNAF FAC had provided precise highly professional attack instructions at great risk to himself at low altitude in a light aircraft with known Viet Cong anti-aircraft weapons present. Additionally, a special situation occurs when four fighters can attack the target in coordination. The aircraft attack from a rectangular pattern, one at a time, where if four aircraft are present, the pattern is full with one fighter attacking the enemy at all times. Thus the enemy do not shoot at the aircraft pulling off target or the FAC because they have to contend with another attacking aircraft. This is especially effective during strafing where continuous firing at the enemy can occur via 60 individual aircraft passes (a solid 15 minutes of machine gun fire on the target with no breaks). That is the main reason that there was almost no combat

damage to the attacking AT-28s. Nothing ever came of the medal recommendation because of our secretive mission. My aircraft was the only one that received battle damage and it had one bullet hole that had grazed the bottom of my aircraft through the speed brake directly under my seat while I was in a 90-degree banked turn. That was my first battle damage since I had come to Vietnam. Bob Gochnouer and I immediately returned to Bien Hoa to be ready for another alert. That was my 20th combat mission in the AT-28. When we got back to Bien Hoa, we found that all the other pilots had gone into Saigon to booze it up after Con Terry's funeral. So Gochnouer and I stood the night alert since we were the only ones left. I had done everything possible to even the score for Con Terry's death, but I found that revenge still doesn't satisfy. Con Terry was still gone and there was nothing anyone could do to bring him back. It was a tough lesson. An Associated Press news story, reported in the Sacramento Bee¹ on July 1, 1963, stated, "President Diem's forces claimed they killed 172 Communist guerrillas in weekend ground and air strikes in the Mekong River delta. Vietnamese officers said 110 Reds were killed yesterday when an armored column struck at guerillas in Kien Phong Province on the Plain of Reeds. American sources said fighter plane strikes Saturday killed 62 guerrillas. Newsmen who flew to the area beside the Mekong River said they saw 20 bodies charred by napalm." I believe the Air Commando strike killed 172 Viet Cong, and the results were divided up for the press.

Monday, July 1, 1963. Today, the Air Commando detachment became the 1st Air Commando Squadron. This afternoon I flew an instrument training flight with VNAF Lt. Luong under the hood. While I flew these instrument training flights with no ordnance on the wing stations, I did require the .50 caliber guns to be armed with a full load of ammunition since I flew as a single aircraft with no formation help. To make matters worse, in the Intelligence briefing this morning, the Intelligence officer had advised that Cambodia now had T-28s and A-1s and therefore we could no longer assume all T-28s and A-1s in the skies over South Vietnam were friendly. Up until now, we had full control of the skies over South Vietnam. While Cambodia was supposedly neutral to the Communist war, it was known that they allowed the Communists to transport supplies through Cambodia to the Viet Cong in South Vietnam. That made them an unofficial enemy. I had just completed the instrument work with Lt. Luong when I noticed two A-1Hs diving on us from 10 O'clock high. Since A-1s have four 20 mm cannons, I decided that I needed to cut down his shooting time so I jerked the flight stick out of Lt. Luong's hand and made a head-on pass at the two approaching A-1s placing my wing in a bank in between the two aircraft which were in close formation about 10 feet apart. I followed this maneuver with a steep 180-degree turn and found myself facing only one remaining A-1, head-on again. No one had a chance to fire yet because of the speed and angle of the head-on passes. After this head-on pass, I did a split S and looked upward for the A-1. I saw that he was in a level turn, so I pulled up into an immelman which ended up on his tail. He didn't know how I did it, but he saw me behind him. He lowered his landing gear in an attempt to quickly slow down and make me fly by him. But I just actuated my speed brakes and sat on his tail. I was in good firing position, so I armed the .50 caliber machine guns. Now they would fire at the touch of the trigger on the flight stick. I called Combat Operations (call sign Paris) on the radio in Saigon and asked for permission to shoot him down. They denied that and asked what insignia the A-1 had. I replied that I didn't know and I wasn't getting out of firing position to find out. They replied, then follow him and see where he lands. I did, and he landed at Bien Hoa. I landed right behind him and we were parked a 100 feet apart.

¹ Associated Press, "Vietnamese Claim Reds Lose 172," 1 July 1963, Sacramento Bee.

I walked over to the A-1 to see who was flying it. I could see the Vietnamese Squadron insignia now on the tail. The pilot that walked toward me was not Vietnamese though. It was a U.S. Navy pilot (a Navy Lieutenant) of my same rank. He introduced himself and complimented me on winning the dog fight saying that was fine flying. He asked where I was from. I told him that I was on temporary duty with the Air Commandos from my normal duties with Military Air Transport Service. I didn't tell him that I flew single-engine jets for MATS. I just let him think he had been beaten in a dog fight by a multi-engine cargo plane driver. Then I pursued the issue, "Didn't you hear the intelligence briefing this morning about Cambodian aircraft?" "No," he said. "Why did you jump me in a combat zone?" I asked. "I didn't," he said. He went on to explain, "I didn't see you until you passed through the middle of my formation head-on. I had a Vietnamese student pilot on my wing with 12 hours flying time and you scared the shit out of him and he left." I said angrily, "I was armed and I almost shot you down. I would have if Paris had authorized it. You need to get the latest intelligence briefing and then watch where the hell you are going in the future." I didn't even know there were U.S. Navy personnel at Bien Hoa, much less what they were doing, and that doesn't say much for my in-country indoctrination briefing.

I walked back to my AT-28 where I was in for another surprise. About ten T-28 crew chiefs from the Air Commando Squadron were standing at my aircraft. One said, "That was great, sir. The whole dog fight took place right over the ramp. All the Air Commando crew chiefs were routing for the T-28 and all the Vietnamese crew chiefs were routing for the A-1. You should have heard the cheer from the Air Commandos when you waxed his ass, sir." "Well," I said, "that wasn't a Vietnamese pilot, it was a U.S. Navy pilot!" I didn't explain it to the crew chiefs, but I did explain what happened to my T-28 Flight Commander, Don Randle, who just sat there and laughed. We couldn't have a beer over it because the two of us were on night alert. The next day, when I asked for a Vietnamese pilot volunteer to fly instruments, instead of having a hard time getting a volunteer, there were six volunteers! I assured them that every instrument training session does not end up with a dog fight. Perhaps they were just honoring me, because they knew that I could only fly with one of them at a time. This dog fight just added to the good reputation that the Air Commandos already had. Most people on base thought that I had intentionally sought out the Navy pilot on our first day as the 1st Air Commando Squadron just to seal our reputation for the new organization. But not so.

But the day of the dog fight was not over. I stood night alert and Randle and I in our two AT-28s got scrambled at 11 PM to escort a UH-1 helicopter which was making an emergency evacuation of an American to Saigon for medical treatment. The helicopter picked up the patient at a little airstrip at 2000 foot elevation in the foothills 110 miles west of Saigon. The weather was clear with almost a full moon, so the helicopter was easy to see in the night. The helicopter refueled at Vinh Long enroute to Saigon and we orbited overhead waiting 15 minutes for them. Then on to Saigon and we were done with almost a 3-hour mission. No one fired on the helicopter and we did not expend ordnance. I hope the American survives OK. I would guess he was with the U.S. Army Special Forces with a combat injury. That was probably the unit's first night helicopter escort mission. I crawled back in bed about 2 AM.

Tuesday, July 2, 1963. I had no trouble getting two instrument flights in today. In the morning, I flew with VNAF Lt. Hoi under the hood. He speaks almost no English, so my limited Vietnamese came in real handy. I had been taking Vietnamese language training from a teacher and wife of one of the Vietnamese pilots since I arrived in Vietnam. I was able to give headings and turn instructions in Vietnamese while airborne, but for the more complicated ground briefings, I used an interpreter if the pilot could not understand English. In the afternoon, Lt. Luong, who was in the back seat during the dog fight, flew with me. My last day as instrument school instructor is scheduled for this Friday, July 5th. After that, Jim Boggs will take over those duties. All of the Vietnamese pilots I had trained here in instrument flying were with the VNAF 514th Fighter Squadron, who flew A-1H aircraft from Bien Hoa on combat missions.

Friday, July 5, 1963. I was on night alert last night. We had a frag order for a 5:45 AM mission this morning escorting some C-123 spray aircraft just after dawn when the air was calm. They were spraying defoliant called Agent Orange on jungle areas between Bien Hoa and Pleiku along an electrical transmission line. I don't think we ever flew into the spray, though it is a controversial subject of latent illnesses today. Frag order means a fragment of an overall operational order that applies to an individual aircraft or formation. About a week later, we escorted a C-123 along this route to see the results of the previous spraying. You could see where they had sprayed. The jungle was still there, but it was a different color and dying.

Saturday, July 6, 1963. I was on night alert and Bob Gochnouer and I got scrambled at 8 PM. It was raining with a 300 foot cloud ceiling. Our mission was to find a downed CH-21 Shawnee helicopter and fly air cover over it until the ground forces secured the area. These helicopters were flown by U.S. Army pilots. The weather was better over the area where the helicopter was supposed to be down (5,000 foot ceiling, but still raining). We met a C-47 flare ship in the vicinity of the downed helicopter 10 miles south of Tay Ninh which was right on the Cambodian border. The flare ship began dropping flares and we began looking for the helicopter. After about 15 minutes, we found the helicopter in a rice paddy about 25 yards from a road which was 25 yards from the river separating Cambodia from South Vietnam. The helicopter looked like it was in good shape. We air covered it for about an hour, raining all the while. Our circling orbit was taking us over Cambodia during the western half of the orbit which was necessary to see all approaches to the downed helicopter. During this time, I observed a dark (no navigation lights) unidentified aircraft making a pass at Bob Gochnouer's AT-28 in front of me while we were over Cambodia. I advised Bob over the radio, "Duddy lead, you have a bogey on your tail, break left and turn off your nav lights." He did. All pilots know that a "bogey" is an unidentified aircraft and therefore probably an enemy aircraft. The bogey passed below Bob. I was observing it from the blue flame coming out of the exhaust stack of its engine which was all I could see of the aircraft. I had closed to within a 100 feet of the bogey with my navigation lights off, when the bogey probably saw my exhaust flame and realized he was in danger of being shot down. He turned sharply toward central Cambodia and I lost sight of his exhaust stack. Later analysis of exhaust patterns revealed that it was a Cambodian T-28. We didn't see it again, but I reported it to Intelligence. They finally got the area around the downed helicopter secure with ground troops and we went home. The weather at Bien Hoa was still 300 feet and raining when we got there. The low frequency homer at Bien Hoa was the only navigation aid they had and it was always off the air when the weather was bad or raining. Thus, we always flew the combat missions below the clouds with visual map reading navigation on all combat missions. We could

fly combat missions under cloud ceilings of 200 to 300 feet for certain mission types. It was more risky at night because you depended on flares in the target area and runway lights for final guidance to land.

Sunday, July 7, 1963. This morning I went to Soc Trang, 85 miles to the south of Bien Hoa, to stay for a month and fly missions out of there in the AT-28. I got transportation on a C-47 at 9 AM. We currently have five AT-28s and six T-28 pilots at Soc Trang, but the number varies some with mission needs. The base is a Vietnamese air base that has about 2000 ARVN ground troops and some U.S. Army advisors with helicopters. The other five T-28 pilots are Tom Cain, Art McNay, Joe Holden, Jim Martin, and Jim Ahmann (all Captains). As soon as I got there at 10:30 AM, I went on 15-minute alert with Tom Cain. Since alert is on the flight line in an air-conditioned trailer about 50 feet from



Photo 18. Soc Trang Operations

the aircraft, it is a 15-minute scramble instead of the 30-minute scramble at Bien Hoa. There are no runway lights at Soc Trang, so there is no night alert. Day alert is from dawn until sunset.

We didn't get scrambled today and they called off alert before sunset. We all six went into town (in our civilian clothes), Khanh Hung, about a mile away for dinner and a beer. We ate at a restaurant called The Chinaman's. Then we all wandered down to the canal to have a beer on one of the little candle-lit docks, open air style. The street was very crowded as today is Vietnamese Independence Day. There were many children and several good looking girls. I think the woman that waited on us was the prettiest though. They sat us in little bitty chairs around a little bitty table just barely big enough to hold our beers. The waitress only spoke Vietnamese so she didn't know what "beer" was. So I ordered "Ba Muoi Ba" for the six of us. She knew what that was, "Thirty Three," a Vietnamese beer brand name. I don't think she served that brand, but she got the idea and we got beer. There was a beautiful sunset as we finished our beers. We went back to the base to catch the free movie in the Tiger's Den (O club) starting at 9:30 PM: "Lady's Man," with Jerry Lewis. The projector bulb burned out half way through the movie, and there was no replacement bulb on hand, so we didn't see the rest.



Photo 19. Vietnamese Girl

Monday, July 8, 1963. Don Randle brought Swede Johansen down to replace Tom Cain who is going to Tan Son Nhut at Saigon to set up a new T-28 stan-eval section for PACAF. PACAF has only been in charge of the operation for a week, and already they are making it like a state-side operation. It was a better job before they got in the act.

Wednesday, July 10, 1963. There has been very little activity for three days now, mostly standing by on alert. I went out to an AT-28 and put a name on its nose with a black grease pencil, "Than Ho," which means male tiger who is in heaven. Jim Ahmann went out to another AT-28 and sketched some outlines for Tiger teeth and eyes. We decided that as soon as we could find some paint, we would paint tiger teeth on all five AT-28s. The crew chiefs went looking for red and white paint.

Thursday, July 11, 1963. The reason for the delay in activity is now apparent. A big operation against the Viet Cong has been in planning to be executed today. The ARVN plan to make helicopter invasions of a group of hard core Viet Cong numbering 200 to 300 that also have an anti-aircraft team using four .30 caliber long-range machine guns. This operation is complicated enough that they elect to use a U.S. Air Force FAC pilot to direct the operation from the air. His call sign is Blue Boy. Jim Ahmann and I scrambled at 7:30 AM, call sign Extol 58, to pre-strike the first helicopter landing zone. The landing zone was 12 miles southeast of Ca Mau. About half way there, Blue Boy called and asked us to hurry up so we could replace a B-26 that was assigned a pre-bombing mission as he wasn't going to be there on time. We were able to shave 10 minutes off our enroute time, and Blue Boy handed us off to Texas Alpha, a VNAF L-19 FAC who marked some trees along a canal and said "hit my smoke." This target was about a mile from landing zone 1, and our napalms hit sampans in the canal, several huts, and docks. As we finished strafing this target area, Blue Boy cut in on the radio and said "Extol 58, how about breaking off from the pre-bombing mission and coming over to landing zone 1 and strafing the north side wooded area for us." He said there was A-1s attacking the south side of the landing zone but that they couldn't get them to hit the north side because of radio difficulties. We were out of ammo however, but we went over and made low passes on the north tree line anyway as the helicopters were already coming across the edge of the landing zone and they needed some "head ducking" done for them. We returned to Soc Trang.

Swede Johansen and I scrambled at 10:30 AM. We were to pre-strike for a second landing zone, but the helicopter landing was delayed so they diverted us to air cover the ARVN ground troops that had already landed in landing zone one. The L-19 FAC present found some Viet Cong trying to escape in sampans on a canal. He first called in a B-26 who managed to put all his napalm about 300 meters away from the canal. Next he called on us, call sign Extol, to hit the sampans. There were about 10 sampans and we hit 4 of them before we were called off. They



Photo 20. Crew Chiefs painting tiger teeth on T-28 at Soc Trang

wanted some ammo left for air cover which we continued until we had been airborne for 2 and a half hours. Then we returned to Soc Trang to refuel and re-arm. We landed at 1:30 PM.

I got scrambled again at 2:30 PM, with Jim Ahmann this time. We reported over Ca Mau where we were requested to wait until the helicopters take off

there and then head for the landing zone and do the pre-strike. We did. Just as we were completing the pre-strike with strafing, the helicopters approached from the north and one UH-1 helicopter fired two rockets toward the landing zone hitting the ground just under Jim Ahmann's aircraft while he was at 50 feet above the ground strafing. That was too close for me, and I called our flight off the pre-strike and advised the helicopters that they were now responsible for flak suppression. We returned to Soc Trang. Since I had flown 3 combat missions today, I now had 26 combat missions, enough for the first Air Medal.



Photo 21. Viet Cong in Sampan, notice the U.S. Browning machine gun (front) which was captured in Korea and passed to the North Vietnamese by China (captured Viet Cong photo)

Friday, July 12, 1963. I flew three combat missions today in support of the Vietnamese Army sweep that we supported before (7 hours and 5 minutes of combat time). We killed 5 Viet Cong on one of the missions which was confirmed by ground forces later. When we landed close to sunset on our last mission of the day, the maintenance troops threw a beer party for us under the wing of an AT-28 sitting on ammo cans. It lasted until 2 AM, 6 hours before my next flight.

Wednesday, July 17, 1963. Jim Ahmann and I escorted 17 helicopters to a landing zone on our first scramble of the day.

When we went to depart, the Army below was screaming on the radio to keep us for air cover instead of the assigned B-26. But Blue Boy control said negative and we left. I bring this up,



Photo 22. Crew chief hosted beer party at T-28

because the T-28 fighters had an excellent reputation for good close air support whereas the B-26s often missed their target by 300 yards making their close air support extremely dangerous for the friendly ground troops. I flew three combat missions today for a total of 6 hours and 55 minutes of combat. On the last mission, we attacked Viet Cong headquarters where they operated from the night before last when the Viet Cong raided Can Tho air base wounding 10 Americans (a helicopter company was stationed there with U.S. Army pilots).

Friday, July 19, 1963. They located a Viet Cong radio this morning so they sent in some troops to get it. Jim Ahmann and I took off in two AT-28s at 6:30 AM to escort 39 helicopters. After the first lift of troops, we pre-struck the second landing zone and returned to Soc Trang.

As soon as we had refueled and re-armed, Ahmann and I took off again to provide air cover for the troops. Then we returned to Soc Trang for lunch and to stand 15-minute alert.

We had no sooner sat down in the alert trailer, when Ahmann and I were scrambled to cover a downed CH-21 helicopter just 10 miles away. We were there in 3 minutes. When we arrived, we saw about 75 civilians with rifles approaching the CH-21 on the ground. We had radio contact with the downed CH-21 and they wanted no part of those civilians near their helicopter as they can easily contain Viet Cong infiltrators. We buzzed the civilians at about 10 feet altitude hoping to scare them off, but that didn't bother them, they just waved. So I rolled in for a strafing pass, and drew a line in front of them with the .50 caliber guns. They got that message, and turned away from the downed helicopter. We flew air cover for two and a half hours and were replaced by two other T-28s.

After our replacement had been there two hours, we came back and replaced them and stayed until sunset. The CH-21 Shawnee helicopter had thrown a rod in its engine, but they were unable to repair it before dark. According to the helicopter crew on the ground, the AT-28s were receiving ground fire from a sniper located about a 100 yards north of the downed helicopter. However, we could not locate this target and did not fire on it. We went home so as to land before dark since Soc Trang has no runway lights. That gave me four combat missions today for a total of 9 hours and 30 minutes of combat time (a new record for one day).

Saturday, July 20, 1963. We were scrambled at noon with me leading three T-28s, with Jim Ahmann #2 and Jim Martin #3. We were to escort an H-37 heavy lift helicopter who was picking up a downed UH-1B helicopter and carrying it to Ca Mau on a cable. It was quite a sight seeing that much helicopter-muscle in action. They made it look easy. Then they went back with about a dozen helicopters to get the troops out that had protected the downed helicopter over night. As we escorted these 12 helicopters out on their first lift, the helicopters received ground fire from near the landing zone. As soon as we got the helicopters to a safe altitude, we returned to the landing zone and strafed the wooded area by the canal where the ground fire has been coming from. We saved some ammo and when the helicopters returned for the second airlift, we strafed the Viet Cong sniper positions the entire time they were on the ground. The helicopters didn't receive any more ground fire and there were no friendly casualties. We were out of fuel and ammo when we returned to Soc Trang.

Same day, back on alert again, we got a 4-ship scramble mid-afternoon. Jim Ahmann led, I was #2, Jim Martin #3, and Swede Johansen #4. We arrived over the target about 10 miles east of My Thou which was a rubber plantation with the ARVN friendlies located about 200 yards north.. According to the FAC, inside the plantation compound there were 50 to 100 trapped Viet Cong and they had anti-aircraft teams with special weapons. The L-19 FAC was flying at 3,000 feet altitude instead of his normal 1,500 feet. He said he would mark the target and threw out a red smoke grenade from 3,000 feet. The ARVN ground troops did not think the FAC mark adequately distinguished the enemy from



Photo 23. Capt. Dick Pierson at Soc Trang with T-28

the friendlies so they marked the Viet Cong with a white phosphorous mortar round which was highly visible. We had fragmentation anti-personnel bombs, rockets, and guns. The FAC cleared us to strike the Viet Cong. During the dive bombing with the frag clusters, a Viet Cong anti-aircraft gun hit Jim Ahmann's plane in the wing. It did not catch on fire but streamed fuel heavily and he broke out of the attack pattern because it was not safe to fire rockets and guns in the presence of the fuel. He held off to one side, and I took over as lead for the remaining three AT-28s. When Jim had been hit, I could see the gun firing that hit him, so I rolled into a dive on that target from where I was which was a steeper than normal dive and put a frag cluster bomb right down his throat. Scratch one anti-aircraft gun. We continued the strike until we had dropped all our bombs, fired all of our rockets and strafed all of our ammo. At first, on every pass, each aircraft received heavy ground fire from the Viet Cong. It looked like they had about a dozen or more automatic weapons, probably .30 caliber. After about half our ammo was gone, there was no more return fire from the Viet Cong. We headed home and began to look each other over. Jim Ahmann asked me, "Have you looked at your wings yet?" I twisted my head around to look at my wings. Both wings were rippled from the fuselage to the wing tips. I looked at my G meter. It said I had pulled 7 Gs somewhere during the attack. The maximum G force for the T-28 is 6. I had over-stressed the wings. Other than the visual impact, the aircraft was flying OK. I made a straight-in emergency landing at Soc Trang. The main spars had not broken, so I volunteered to fly the plane to Bien Hoa for repair. At Bien Hoa, they said it needed a new pair of wings. The main problem – using aircraft stressed for training in combat. Anticipating this damage, they had brought six spare wings. Mine was the first wing change. In an Associated Press newspaper story on July 21, 1963, the Sacramento Bee reported², "Striking from air and ground, South Vietnamese troops launched a big offensive against Communist Viet Cong guerrillas yesterday and scored a major victory. The Vietnamese Air Force said 500 guerrillas were killed but ground forces said they could account for only 300 dead. U.S. military authorities in Saigon said they could confirm 200 dead. But even the lowest figure is extraordinary. South Vietnamese casualties were 18 killed and 50 wounded in the battle 25 miles northwest of My Thou. The government forces took into battle several companies of

² Associated Press, "South Vietnamese Attack Rips Reds," July 21, 1963, Sacramento Bee newspaper.

armor, air force support and helicopter borne troops.” Air Commando Intelligence advised that 68 Viet Cong killed were credited to the AT-28s.

Wednesday, July 24, 1963. Bien Hoa. They got a T-28 ready for me to take back to Soc Trang at 11:00 AM. But when I was ready for takeoff, the Viet Cong were at the east end of the runway shooting at all aircraft below 2500 feet. Bien Hoa air base was temporarily closed to air traffic while the ARVN lobbed a lot of mortar shells at the Viet Cong and then sent troops in to mop up. That took an hour or so, then I was cleared for takeoff to go to Soc Trang.

Wednesday, July 31, 1963. The last week netted a lot of helicopter escorts, landing zone pre-strikes, and interdiction against a couple of 400-Viet-Cong concentrations which were actually never located by the FAC. Toss in a few C-123



Photo 24. Captains Jim Ahmann, Joe Holden, Swede Johansen, Dick Pierson, Art McNay, and Jim Martin at Soc Trang



Photo 25. Hats from left: Captains Dick Pierson, Jim Ahmann, Swede Johansen, and Joe Holden with seven Vietnamese T-28 crew members

aerial drop air covers and there you have the week's summary. We did not fly at all today out of Soc Trang, and when that happens there is usually something in the planning. Sure enough, in the evening all five T-28 pilots were invited down to the Army operations building for a briefing on tomorrow's activities. So I complete this month with a total of 62 combat missions since I have been here in Vietnam (it takes 50 missions for two Air Medals). I flew 94 hours and 15 minutes this month, which is a career monthly high for me, and a hell of a lot of combat time for a month. We all went to bed early for a 7:15 AM takeoff tomorrow.

Thursday, August 1, 1963. To give a feel for the shuffle, here is an interesting two day shuffle. After a morning 4-ship scramble for helicopter escort and pre-strike of landing zones, I flew in a 2-ship air cover mission over ground troops at 1 PM. The weather was 1,000 feet overcast today with light rain. This morning Joe Holden took a T-28 back to Bien Hoa for repair (flying with the canopy open) that had flight controls enmeshed with the canopy cables (it went into a dive when you closed the canopy). This evening Jim Martin and Swede Johansen took two planes back to Bien Hoa to be used for night checkouts tonight at Bien Hoa. That left myself and Joe Potter here at Soc Trang with two T-28s.

Friday, August 2, 1963. The next morning, we took off at 7:30 AM to escort an Eagle flight of UH-1 helicopters (gunships flying low looking for a fight). When we got to the rendezvous point, they called us on the radio and said it was 100 foot ceiling and an 1/8 of a mile visibility where the helicopters take off from, so they were grounded, and for us to go home. When we got back to Soc Trang, we noticed that two T-28s had returned from Bien Hoa. They had brought back Joe Holden, Jim Martin, and Tom Schornak. Now there were 4 AT-28s and 5 pilots again.



Photo 26. T-28 aircraft on ground alert at Soc Trang

Tom Schornak and I scrambled at 10:15 AM to escort a C-47 making an aerial resupply. It was Tom's first combat mission in Vietnam. The weather was 800 feet overcast most of the mission and Tom did a good job. Late this afternoon, Joe Holden and I flew two T-28s to Bien Hoa so they could use them for night checkout of new pilots in Vietnam. Joe Holden was getting a night checkout and I was going to be his instructor pilot for the night checkout. We flew a simulated fort counter-attack. We had to hunt down our C-47 flare ship, who couldn't find the fort and vector him to the fort so he could drop flares for us. That is pretty bad when two pilots and a navigator in a Gooney Bird can't find a lighted fort at night only 37 miles from Bien Hoa (must be FNGs).

Saturday, August 3, 1963. Early the next morning Joe Holden and I took two AT-28s back to Soc Trang.

Sunday, August 4, 1963. Joe Holden and I have to return to Bien Hoa from Soc Trang this evening for our normal rotation back. We took one AT-28 and all our clothes, leaving 4 pilots and 4 planes at Soc Trang. The next morning, our replacements (Bob Gochnouer and Jim Boggs) flew the AT-28 back to Soc Trang 86 miles away making 5 airplanes and 6 pilots at Soc Trang again.

Monday, August 5, 1963. The Officers Club at Bien Hoa shows free movies every night. Tonight I went to see "Merrill's Marauders," a World War II army guerilla feat accomplished behind Japanese lines during the early part of the war.

Thursday, August 8, 1963. This morning, Dennie Sides was taking off at Tan Son Nhut airport at Saigon in an AT-28 and his engine quit. He made a 180-degree turn and landed on the same runway he took off on. However, he landed gear up damaging the aircraft. The crew of two was unhurt.

This afternoon, Joe Potter, flying an AT-28 out of Soc Trang, got a bullet hole through the fuel tank in his left wing. It trailed fuel but did not catch fire.

Sunday, August 11, 1963. Jim Martin and I got scrambled on night alert at 1 AM. It was a fort under attack by 100 Viet Cong about 5 miles from Saigon. They had broke off their attack when we arrived, and we threw napalm and rockets at their retreating position. They were escaping by sampans in the river and my strafing sunk one sampan with about 7 Viet Cong on board. I have never seen the Viet Cong so close to Saigon before – a very dangerous situation. The enemy must be testing our defenses or trying to get some of the deployed ARVN spread a little thinner. Our response time was 3 minutes after takeoff.

This afternoon, I took Maj. Barney Cochran (T-28 pilot) to Soc Trang in an AT-28. On the way back, I stopped at Tan Son Nhut airport to drop off some parts for Maintenance and pick up a VIP passenger going to Bien Hoa. Yes, jack of all trades, anytime, anyplace.

Monday, August 12, 1963. I was on night alert tonight. We didn't get scrambled, thank God. It has been raining hard all night. But we would have taken off if scrambled. The enemy does not get off that easy.

Tuesday, August 13, 1963. Tom Schornak and I took off at 8:30 AM in two AT-28s to fly train escort. I led. The weather was pretty bad. It was 300 feet overcast variable 100 feet overcast with visibility 2 miles. We headed down the railroad tracks on the deck looking for our train at the rendezvous point about 10 miles east of Bien Hoa. We were supposed to have an L-19 for a FAC, but he aborted his take-off because of engine trouble. We found our train which turned out to be two trains with turrets for guns in the top of some of the box cars and many soldiers aboard for protection. We checked the tracks ahead of the trains for breaks or barricades and looked for Viet Cong ambushes but found none of these. The tracks were usually in heavy jungle with the jungle only being cut back about 20 feet from the tracks on both sides.

Either the Viet Cong were not present or they were afraid to attack in the presence of the fighters and soldiers. After we had escorted the trains about 15 miles down the track to their destination, we went to meet our FAC for an interdiction target. But the weather toward our rendezvous point closed down to the ground, so we headed to Bien Hoa to land. Before we could reach Bien Hoa, their weather reduced to a 300 foot obscured ceiling with rain and ¼ mile visibility. I decided to hold about 5 miles north of

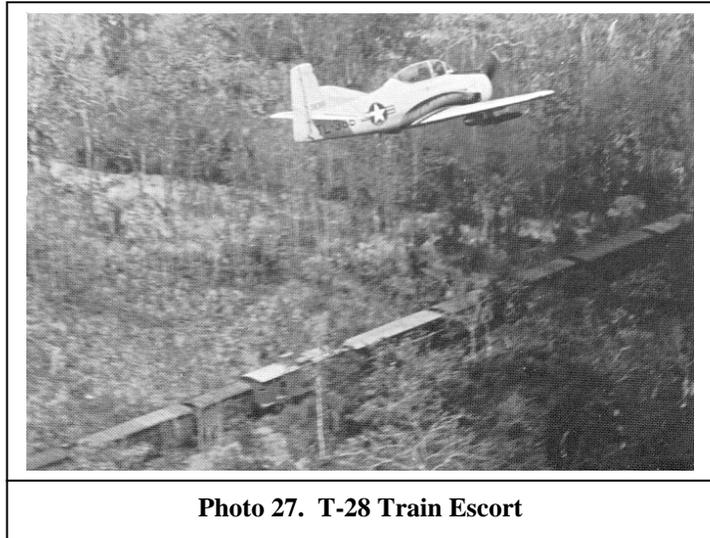


Photo 27. T-28 Train Escort

Bien Hoa at 300 feet until the shower passed. After holding about 15 minutes, we went to look at the runway to see how the weather was. As we approached the runway, I could see only the west end from a mile out in the rain. I decided we should land on this visible end of the runway even though it meant landing downwind with a 12-knot tail wind with napalm aboard. The landing was not a problem with 10,000 feet (about 2 miles long) of concrete runway available and we landed without incident. I now have 73 combat missions in Vietnam.

Wednesday, August 14, 1963. I am not on day alert today, so I have been laying outside in the sun getting a tan (the clouds only go away when I am not flying it seems), drinking coffee at the O Club, and writing letters. I even found time to do some exercises. I am trying to keep in good shape so I can easily pass my annual Exercise test in November. At 5 foot 9 inches tall and 153 pounds, I am fairly trim. I do pushups and jogging in place to keep up my arm strength, leg strength, and lung wind. I am on night alert with Jim Ahmann, but we didn't get scrambled.

Thursday, August 15, 1963. Today makes 11 years in the U.S. Air Force for me. I don't regret a minute of it.

Friday, August 16, 1963. This morning we lost a B-26 at Da Nang (about 400 miles north of Bien Hoa). It was observed by another B-26 who said one wing came off while the B-26 was below 100 feet altitude on a napalm pass. Then the other wing came off before it hit the ground. All crew members were killed: pilot Capt. John McLean (age 34, married) of New York, NY, navigator 1st Lt. Arthur "Skip" Bedal (age 25, married) of Tarzana, CA, and a Vietnamese crew member. A newspaper story³ is partially quoted: "Capt. John McLean and Lt. Arthur Bedal, USAF advisors, have died in hostile action in Vietnam, bringing to 24 the number of American airmen killed in the little-publicized campaign against the Communists in Southeast Asia. ... It is acknowledged that American pilots fly on a good percentage of the dangerous combat missions. ... In one 30-day period, more than 900 guerrillas were killed in air strikes."

Saturday, August 17, 1963. I was on alert today at Bien Hoa. We got scrambled at 11:30 AM. They wanted all the AT-28s we had in commission, which was three. I led, Frank McCallister was #2, and Swede Johansen was #3. The mission was for Close Air Support (CAS) against Viet Cong forces which attacked a U.S. Army Special Forces outpost. We were Duddy 21 and our FAC was Mustang X-ray. The coordinates were off my local map so I had to get more maps. We were to first fly to Pleiku and refuel. Pleiku air base is 200 miles north of Bien Hoa (about an hour and 15 minutes away in a T-28). The weather varied from 300 feet to 600 feet overcast enroute and we flew at tree top level in among the mountains all the way. This is where the low level navigation training at Hurlburt came in handy. I always tracked my exact position against the terrain as I flew, while many other pilots only flew dead reckoning (a heading for a period of time) and then tried to find out where they were at the end of the projected time to destination. This latter procedure used by others failed about 10 percent of the time because a lot of terrain in Vietnam looks the same. Whereas I always knew exactly where I was and could immediately change mission destination enroute if weather required it or operations requested it on the radio. Therefore, I had great confidence in myself to lead this formation through the mountains below the clouds. Pleiku only had fuel and no ordnance support, so we took our ordnance with us including the safety pins which we would install ourselves on the ground. I had been to Pleiku before in a C-47 Gooney Bird so that experience was useful at this point. We landed at Pleiku without incident, and while the U.S. Army was refueling our three AT-28s, we went into II Corps Operations to get briefed.

BRIEFING INFORMATION	
DATE	17 AUG 63
MSN NBR	201
TYPE MSN	CAS
NBR TYPE ACFT	3 T-28's
CALL SIGN	DUDDY 21
TGT DESCRIPTION	VC FORCES WHICH ATTACKED SPECIAL FORCES OUTPOST
COORD	IN VICINITY OF YA 804939 (Polei Jar Tok Bok)
FAC C/S	MUSTANG X-RAY
PRI FREQ	142.74
SEC	142.20
RENZ COORD	ZA 110 000
	(INTERSECTION OF KRONG POKO + DAK BLA RIVERS)

Photo 28. Briefing information for actual combat mission

³ "2 More AF Advisors Die In Vietnam Bringing Total of Airman Fatalities to 24," Sacramento Bee, Aug. 28, 1963.

After refueling at Pleiku, we were to strike a force of 1,000 Viet Cong that had raided a U.S. Army Special Forces camp about 30 miles from Pleiku last night. The Viet Cong had overrun the outpost killing at least 12 Americans in that raid and numerous indigenous personnel. The VNAF A-1H squadron usually stationed at Pleiku was deployed to Da Nang (200 miles further north) and were unable to return to Pleiku because of weather. Of course that didn't stop the Air Commando AT-28s. So here we were, the only three airplanes in the whole of Vietnam that were within striking distance of the 1,000 Viet Cong. To make things more difficult, we had to bring our own ordnance since they didn't have any. Together, we had six 500-pound napalms, 42 rockets, and 1,950 rounds of .50 caliber ammunition. Additionally, they had no ordnance people to arm or de-arm us at Pleiku and no crew chiefs to park us. Also there were no chocks for the wheels and very little parking space. The runway was on a hillside and consisted of 6,000 feet of pierced steel planking at an elevation of 2,400 feet above sea level. We had landed, de-armed ourselves, and set the parking brakes in lieu of chocks. Finally, about 3 PM, the cloud ceiling raised enough for an airplane to squeeze through the saddleback on the mountain ridge that surrounded the valley where the Viet Cong had attacked our outpost.

We scrambled out of Pleiku, arming our own armament and removing the landing gear safety pins ourselves before getting into the cockpit. We met the L-19 FAC at our rendezvous point, the intersection of the Krong Po Ko and Dak Bla rivers a few miles west of Kon Tum where the FAC was based. We followed him west to the saddleback entry into the valley at Polei Meo and we all zipped into the valley in trail about 10 feet above the ground in the saddleback. We were now about five miles from the Cambodian and Laotian borders in a box canyon between two 3,500 foot mountain peaks. The clouds were about 1500 feet above the canyon floor. The FAC immediately marked two targets where the Viet Cong were reported to be. Both targets were on a 45-degree slope and heavily covered with jungle. We dropped our napalm and fired our rockets going downhill over these targets, but we didn't visually see any Viet Cong because of jungle. Then the FAC had us strafe and kill three water buffalo which were Viet Cong property (I didn't like this target). I would have preferred to have 1,000 Viet Cong shooting at me than to not see them in the jungle. But there was nothing that I could do to change that. We returned to Pleiku to refuel. With our ordnance used up, our mission was complete, so after refueling we took off from Pleiku for Bien Hoa. The weather was still very bad enroute and we nicked many clouds as our three AT-28s cruised in formation at 160 knots at 50 feet above the trees in the valleys between the hills and mountains. We arrived safely at Bien Hoa without incident.

A word about call signs: At Soc Trang, the AT-28s were Extol 66, for example, with a different two digit number to go with Extol for each mission. I liked that call sign as it had some prestige. But all missions flown out of Bien Hoa by AT-28s used Duddy 66 with varying digits for different missions. I didn't like Duddy as I thought it was insulting to the T-28 pilots. It seems in the beginning of the operation in 1961, they were using the oldest World War II bombs first (20 year old bombs). A good policy for ordnance use. Back then, because of age, about half of the bombs did not explode when they hit the ground, called duds. The Army ground troops were not impressed with this record even though they were old Army Air Force bombs being dropped, so they would say, "Here comes another Duddy!" when the aircraft approached. And 50 percent of the time, they were right. Some smart-aleck operations officer picked up on that fact and actually assigned the operational call sign Duddy to the Bien Hoa T-28s whose delivery accuracy

was second to none. But in 1963, bombs not going off was a rarity, and the call sign was no longer appropriate. But that didn't stop Operations from using it.

Monday, August 19, 1963. Today, the ARVN and their U.S. Army advisors started a new campaign against the enemy. The city of Tay Ninh is located about 80 miles west of Bien Hoa and only a few miles from the Cambodian border. The terrain around Tay Ninh is all within 30 feet of sea level except for Tay Ninh mountain, located 5 miles north of Tay Ninh city, which extends upward to 3,200 feet and is only a half mile in diameter. The Viet Cong had long ago decided to use the mountain as a safe haven and probably a supply depot. So they had dug many tunnels between the natural caves in the mountain and moved in. They had now been there for 6 or 7 years and were well entrenched. But the ARVN planned to take it away from the Viet Cong. So this morning, we had a frag order for a 7:00 AM takeoff in a 3-ship formation. I led, Swede Johansen was #2, and Frank McCallister was #3, target Tay Ninh mountain. A FAC met us over the mountain and had us deliver all our napalm, rockets, and strafing on a jungle covered ridge on the mountain while the friendly troops waited 400 yards south of the mountain. There were two VNAF A-1s waiting to hit the ridge when we were done and we went home to Bien Hoa. At 11:00 AM, Jim Ahmann and I went back again with two AT-28s to attack Tay Ninh mountain. This time we held back some machine gun ammo for air covering the friendly troops moving onto the mountain after the strike. When we ran out of fuel, the FAC had us expend the rest of our ammo on the mountain. I got a gun jam at this point and Jim's guns were not firing accurately, so we quit and went home. When we landed at Bien Hoa, I found that my right .50 caliber gun had jammed because a bullet got caught in the mechanism and bent to a 90-degree angle. It is a wonder it didn't explode while pointing at the cockpit. The rocket pod on my right wing was half blown away, apparently having come apart when I launched the rockets. On Jim Ahmann's plane, he said come look at this! His left machine gun had blown up while he was firing it, splitting the barrel lengthwise in two and bullets had continued firing in every direction with many large holes in the gun pod. The mission had been 2 hours and 40 minutes long with no added danger sensed while airborne.

T-28 pilot status today is that there is only four pilots available at Bien Hoa including me to fly combat missions. I like that because we are very busy and the time goes fast. But I wondered where the rest of the T-28 pilots were, so I asked. We have 2 T-28 pilots on R & R (Rest and Relaxation) to Japan, 2 are on temporary duty to Tan Son Nhut airport at Saigon training VNAF pilots, 7 are deployed to Soc Trang, one is sick (Duty Not Including Flying), one is R & R to Hong Kong, and one is grounded with 100 missions completed and waiting for the rotation aircraft to arrive. R & R is a privilege of the permanently-assigned Air Commandos, so I have skipped that treat.

Tuesday, August 20, 1963. Swede Johansen and I were scrambled at 2 PM. I was #2. It seems Phuoc Vinh air field had some snipers firing on them. We were to meet the FAC over Phuoc Vinh. When we arrived at Phuoc Vinh airfield, the FAC was still on the ground there. We buzzed him and found the L-19 pilot standing beside his plane waving at us. He then took off and we followed him to the edge of the field to the target area. He was not receiving us on the radio, but we were receiving his transmissions and he didn't know it. He dropped smoke on a target and asked us if we saw the smoke. We said yes, but of course he did not hear us with his receiver out. He wasn't smart enough to tell us to strike and see if we did. So I broke off

Swede's wing and went over and got on the L-19 FAC's wing at 70 knots. I know he didn't think a T-28 flew that slow, but we can with enough flaps which I had down for slow flight. The FAC pilot, now 30 feet from me, hand-motioned me to strike the target. Then he marked it again. I told Swede we were cleared to strike the smoked target, and we dived in-trail dropping napalm, followed by rockets and strafing. On the strafing run, I saw several semi-automatic weapons being fired back by the Viet Cong from the middle elevation of a large tree. My .50 caliber armor piercing incendiary bullets cut off the little branches from the tree and then cut the trunk in half right where the guns were firing from and the upper 100 feet of the tree toppled. The FAC didn't know we could hear him on the radio or he might have confirmed that the target was Viet Cong snipers. We went home and I now have 79 combat missions.

Wednesday, August 21, 1963. I was on night alert last night with Tom Cain and we got scrambled at 4 AM this morning. It was a fort under attack 50 miles south of Bien Hoa near My Tho. We arrived there 17 minutes after take off. About T-28 cruising speeds: we normally cruised to the target area at 160 knots with a full load of ordnance. If they asked us to hurry, we could increase the speed to 180 knots using climb power. In order to attain an ordnance delivery speed of 250 knots, we used maximum throttle, maximum RPM, and full rich mixture (all three balls forward to the wall) and dived. When we arrived over the fort, we could see the fire arrow in the fort pointing north and search lights shining on the terrain outside of the fort. The C-47 flare ship was there but he would not drop any flares. He said he didn't have contact with the fort by radio and he was not cleared to drop flares or allow us to expend ordnance. After about an hour of orbiting, King Pin (IV Corps ASOC) sent us home. Something was fishy, but I couldn't figure out what was going on. When we got on the ground at Bien Hoa, we found that while we were airborne President Diem has declared Vietnam under martial law. In Saigon, road blocks were everywhere and many soldiers were out running around in Saigon with fixed bayonets. Armored vehicles roamed Saigon streets with .50 caliber machine guns mounted on top. All Americans were restricted to base when on the ground. Otherwise, the war was still on with the Viet Cong.

Thursday, August 22, 1963. We don't too often get a fort attack by the Viet Cong in daylight, but we did today. Jim Martin and I got scrambled at 1:30 PM for a fort under attack about 15 miles west of Bien Hoa. Unfortunately, the armament officer had ordered my alert aircraft downloaded (which had four .30 caliber machine guns for test instead of two .50 caliber machine guns) about 20 minutes before I arrived to fly it. They said it would take 20 to 30 minutes to upload it. I asked if any other planes were ready. They said yes, so I transferred planes and had to do a quick pre-flight before taking off. I lost 5 minutes due to this aircraft change and was consequently angry with the ordnance officer, Capt. Brown, for not coordinating with me earlier. We got to the fort and met an L-19 FAC over the fort (no flare ship required in daylight). The 100 attacking Viet Cong had already retreated to the jungle trees upon sight of the FAC before we arrived. We attacked the suspected enemy position as marked by the FAC and expended all our napalm and rockets. Just as we finished that much of the attack, Paris (III Corps ASOC) called us and ask us to escort two helicopters who were coming to the fort to evacuate the wounded. We could see them a few miles out, so we continued holding over the fort until the wounded were loaded and the helicopters departed. We escorted them to Tan Son Nhut airport at Saigon without further incident and went home. I couldn't help wondering if there would

have been wounded if we had arrived a little earlier. I discussed the downloading of an aircraft on alert with Capt. Brown after I landed.

Sunday, August 25, 1963. They lifted the base restriction today and we can go into Saigon now. But the country is still under martial law with a curfew in effect.

Monday, August 26, 1963. This morning an A-1 here at Bien Hoa crashed on takeoff. The new Vietnamese pilot got out unharmed. The aircraft had apparently gotten away from him during the high engine torque part of the takeoff.

This afternoon, an Army Mohawk aircraft flying out of Soc Trang was shot down by the Viet Cong near the Cambodian border. The Mohawk is a twin-engine turboprop aircraft with a triple tail. They also carry a Vietnamese crew member as we do. It's a two seater. The U.S. Army pilot and the VNAF observer both ejected and parachuted. The pilot was killed by bullets which he received either while in the airplane or while parachuting down. The observer is alive and OK. AT-28s from Soc Trang were sent to demolish the Mohawk before dark to prevent the Viet Cong from stripping the weapons at night.

The Mohawk pilots at Soc Trang thought their killed pilot had been shot coming down in his parachute, so they got permission to make a "reconnaissance" flight in two Mohawks. The purpose being to troll at low altitude until fired upon by the Viet Cong and then return fire under the rule of being fired upon. That way, they thought they could force the Viet Cong to give away their position and then the Mohawks would attack and have their revenge. However, this plan went astray when they crossed the border unknowingly into Cambodia. When they approached an armed Cambodian village, the local militia fired on the Mohawks. The Mohawks, thinking they were in Vietnam and taking fire from Viet Cong, returned fire, shooting up the village pretty bad. They returned to Soc Trang believing they were heroes only to be faced with, "What were you doing in Cambodia?" The two Army pilots are up on court martial charges, and Cambodia has broken diplomatic relations with South Vietnam. As I said earlier, the Viet Cong use Cambodia for a safe haven, so there weren't too many military people crying in their beer over this. But that won't help these two pilots who should have done a better job navigating.

George Deken (an FNG T-28 pilot) and I got scrambled from Bien Hoa this afternoon at 4:30 PM. We were to get to Phuoc Vinh airfield "as soon as possible." We did. They were under attack by 50 to 100 Viet Cong. When we arrived, the ARVN troops present at Phuoc Vinh asked us to hold northwest while they fired artillery southwest at a very high angle landing near their own runway in a wooded area. The 105 mm howitzer rounds were going through our altitude, so we paid attention to our location. When they got done, they called us in and the FAC marked the Viet Cong position and cleared us to attack. We delivered napalm, rockets, and strafing and nothing moved in the open wooded target area when we were done. We headed home estimating that we had contributed 15 Viet Cong killed.

Tuesday, August 27, 1963. They woke me up at 6:30 AM this morning and informed me that I had to have an AT-28 and myself to Soc Trang by 7:30 AM to assist with a large ground operation today. I made it down to Soc Trang by 8:00 AM, but didn't takeoff for the mission until 12:30 PM. Don Randle and I air covered the ARVN ground troops sweeping an area for

Viet Cong for 3 hours and 35 minutes. Our replacements were supposed to replace us after we were on air cover for an hour and a half, but because of bad weather at their airport they didn't take off. So we stayed. The normal mission for an AT-28 is about 2 hours before you run out to fuel. However, if you know ahead of time that you need to stay in a small holding area, you can bring the engine to best loiter at low RPM, low throttle, and lean out the mixture. If you do this, you can loiter for about 4 hours before you run out of fuel. So that was our procedure and it has worked very well several times when needed. It scares the Operations controllers when they realize you have been airborne for almost 4 hours and they ask several questions over the radio in disbelief that your mission is still airborne. We returned to Soc Trang. After refueling, I flew my AT-28 back to Bien Hoa. I am on backup night alert, but won't get scrambled unless they need four aircraft. It seems like so much happens in a single day anymore. I did not get scrambled this night, but that is OK as I needed the rest. I now have 86 combat missions.

Wednesday, August 28, 1963. I didn't fly today. I started taking Vietnamese from 1/Lt. Con-Son who is the Vietnamese base communications officer. He is running a 3-month course in the language for 600 Dongs apiece. He is presently teaching eight people including me. We meet on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday for an hour each night.

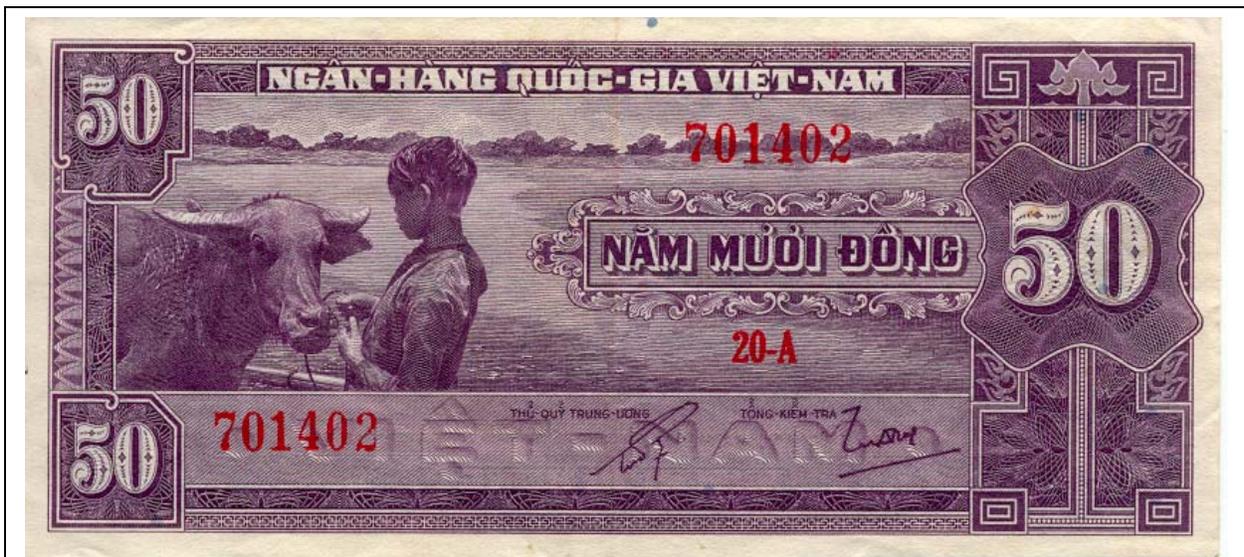


Photo 29. Fifty Dong Vietnamese money

Friday, August 30, 1963. Today two Army CH-21 Shawnee helicopters were shot down. Two pilots in one helicopter were killed and they sent AT-28s in to destroy what was left of that helicopter. The other helicopter will be recovered and that crew got away safely. Eight helicopters were hit in all, but only two were downed.

This evening I was informed that next Friday I will be going to Qui Nhon as part of Deployed Air Strike Team No.5 which will consist of three AT-28s and three pilots at Qui Nhon. This operation is supposed to exist for only ten days. Qui Nhon is located 200 miles northeast of Bien Hoa and is on the coast. That is an extremely mountainous area to operate in.

Monday, September 2, 1963, Labor Day. This afternoon, a B-26 failed to return from a mission out of Da Nang. He is presumed down and listed as missing in action (this B-26 was never found). All B-26s are again grounded. So that leaves the AT-28s to carry a higher combat load. Also this afternoon, one of our AT-28s flying out of Soc Trang took a bullet in the canopy, wounding the VNAF in the rear seat with canopy fragments. Tom Cain was flying it.

Wednesday, September 4, 1963. Jim Boggs and I got called down to Bien Hoa operations at 1:00 AM this morning for 15 minute alert. When we arrived at operations, they said scramble. We did, for a fort under attack. We had to wait over Tan Son Nhut airport at Saigon for the flare ship to take off. Then we went to the fort under attack about 30 miles south of Saigon. We started our attack 500 meters south of the fort and the fort kept relaying to us "Right on target, more in the same place." After the napalm and rockets were delivered, they moved our strafing over a little and this flushed about 70 Viet Cong into a run in an open field. I could see them now under the flares and hit about half of them before my guns jammed and Jim ran out of ammo. We landed at 3 AM. The fort later confirmed a body count of 30 Viet Cong killed in action by the AT-28s. I now have 92 combat missions.

Thursday, September 5, 1963. This afternoon another U.S. Army Mohawk crashed at Soc Trang. The two crew members both ejected successfully. I don't know the cause. The Mohawk crashed on base narrowly missing the quarters area and the bomb dump.

Friday, September 6, 1963. Today I am scheduled to go to Qui Nhon. So Lt. Col. Jack Robinson and I took off in an AT-28 for Qui Nhon at 9:30 AM. Colonel Robinson flew front seat as he was getting checked out in the aircraft and I logged Instructor Pilot time. This is about his 5th flight in the AT-28 and he has already soloed in it. He is our new Squadron Commander. He used to be team captain of the "Thunderbirds" jet demonstration team. Bill and Buck Pattillo flew with him then on the Thunderbird team. I had attended the Air Force Institute of Technology at the University of Colorado with the Pattillo brothers. The runway at Qui Nhon was 3900 feet of pierced steel planking and the ramp and taxiways were the same material. I am to stay here for 7 days.



Photo 30. Qui Nhon MAAG Compound

Colonel Robinson is going back to Bien Hoa today with Maj. Barney Cochran. We have three AT-28s here. I am staying in the MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group) BOQ (Bachelor Officer Quarters) which is in the town of Qui Nhon right on the beach. So the first thing I did after I checked in was to walk across the street and take a swim in the ocean (South China Sea). That was nice. The beach has beautiful white sand here with palm trees. My BOQ room was

really nice. It had a good bed, a refrigerator, ceiling fan, good lighting, a dresser, a desk, a night stand, and lounge chairs. Just like good state-side quarters. It was hard to believe that I was in a combat zone. Connected to the BOQ was a large dining hall, an officer's club, a lounge, and a bar. The location is a half mile from downtown Qui Nhon and a half mile from the air base. We will be picked up at 7:45 AM to be taken to the base. Like Soc Trang, Qui Nhon has no runway lights so no night alert.

Saturday, September 7, 1963. We are flying mostly interdiction missions on unseen targets in the jungle. Instead of napalm, we are carrying 500-pound tritonal bombs. This is my first time for this bomb, and it makes a 50-foot crater. You don't drop this baby from too low or you will blow yourself out of the sky.

Sunday, September 8, 1963. This afternoon, we were fraged to fly over to Pleiku with three AT-28s as soon as the afternoon interdiction mission landed. But one of our 3 aircraft was out of commission for a broken prop governor cable so we only took two AT-28s to Pleiku. Jim Martin and I made the trip. I led. We had to cross the mountains to get to Pleiku and the weather at Pleiku was supposed to be around 500 feet overcast with rain. They don't have an instrument approach, so we went under the clouds on the tree tops. It was very windy and bumpy all the way and going through the mountain pass enroute we only had 100 feet overcast (and rain). We had to go single file through the narrow pass and I radioed for Jim to watch out for that flag pole that I almost hit in the pass. When we arrived at Pleiku, the weather was 300 foot overcast and raining and the wind sock was standing out straight at 25 knots with higher gusts. We had brought our ordnance with us since they had none at Pleiku. Besides guns, we each were carrying two 500-pound tritonal bombs, and two 100-pound white phosphorous bombs. The 6,000 feet of pierced steel planking runway was extremely slick because it was wet. We landed safely, but breathed a big sigh of relief when we set the parking brakes. It had been so rough when airborne in the gusty wind, that it shook one of my 500-pound bombs loose but it didn't fall off. We were to stay overnight at Pleiku and make a pre-strike of a landing zone for a helicopter operation tomorrow. They set up some beds for us at the Army BOQ, and we had steak for dinner in the Army mess hall. The steak was really good. Being at an elevation of 2,400 feet, it was 65 degrees F (and raining) when we went to bed and we had to use blankets to sleep for the first time since I had come to Vietnam.

Monday, September 9, 1963. We slept in until 8 AM and then went over to II Corps ASOC (Air Strike Operations Center) on base to get our flight briefing. The helicopter operation was delayed 2 hours for weather, and then an additional 2 hours for weather. And then 30 minutes more and a go signal given. We were to pre-strike the 2nd landing zone and VNAF A-1s were to pre-strike the 1st landing zone. But the VNAF A-1 squadron said the weather was too bad for them to go. So the pre-strike of the 1st landing zone was given to Jim and I. We took off from Pleiku at 2:30 PM and headed north towards the target. The weather at Pleiku when we took off was 500 foot overcast with scattered rain showers. The target area was supposed to be above a 1500 feet ceiling which was located in a 3800 foot high valley between two 7000 foot peaks. However, half way to the target we encountered zero ceiling and zero visibility. I called II Corps ASOC, call sign Pagoda, to advise them, and they advised me that the target area was also zero-zero weather. So they gave us an interdiction target on the coast and told us to recover at Qui Nhon when we were done. As we passed Pleiku enroute to the coast, it was now at 400 foot

overcast and rain. We had to go through the pass with the flag pole again and it was 200 feet with rain there. Then Pagoda called us on the radio and said that our interdiction target was cancelled and to go ahead and land at Qui Nhon. When we arrived at Qui Nhon the weather was 3000 feet scattered clouds, but a rain shower had just passed over the runway and the 3900 feet of pierced steel planking runway would be as slick as ice with the wind a 90-degree cross wind at 15 knots with gusts to 25 knots. Since we had plenty of fuel and I didn't want to drop our 500-pound bombs in the ocean, I decided to hold over the field until the runway dried. A half hour later the runway was dry and the wind had died down to 6 knots, so we went in and landed safely with our bombs aboard. It seemed like so much effort for a mission to not accomplish anything. I went back to my quarters on the beach and went for a swim in the surf. I now have 98 combat missions in Vietnam.

Tuesday, September 10, 1963. I didn't fly today because it wasn't my turn. It was a nice sunny day, so I went across the street from my quarters to the beach about noon. I swam out to the raft which is about 300 yards off shore. The current was so strong against me that it took me a half hour to reach the raft. When I got there, I saw two girls headed out for the raft. One girl was sitting in an inner tube holding a fishing pole and the other was pushing the inner tube. When they got half way to the raft, the outgoing tide began to sweep them out to sea. Though they continued to swim toward the raft, they were getting farther away. Since they were about 600 yards from shore and getting farther away from shore, I

swam out to them to help. When I reached them, I could see that they both had bikini bathing suits on, were both

about 23 years old, were both good looking with good figures, and one was Chinese (Kim Lee) and the other Vietnamese (Mii). They both spoke English, though obviously not their native tongue. Mii was the one sitting in the inner tube and she didn't know how to swim. They wanted help to get to the raft so they could fish there with their new fishing pole. So I tried to make that happen. With both myself and Kim Lee pushing the inner tube with Mii in it, we still couldn't make any progress against the tide toward the raft. I told them they would have to abandon the raft goal and that we would be lucky just to get to shore somewhere. They finally agreed, and then Mii dropped the fishing pole in the water. She thought the pole was gone forever. I dove down to see if the fishing pole could be retrieved. Luckily, it was a sandy bottom only 10 feet deep and I found the pole on the first try. I brought it up to her and she beamed an amazed smile. I directed Kim Lee to help push the inner tube perpendicular to the tidal current which course would take us about a quarter mile down the beach. A half hour later, we reached the beach and I had to rub Kim Lee's leg calf to remove a cramp. I felt good about



Photo 31. Beach at Qui Nhon from Balcony of MAAG Compound

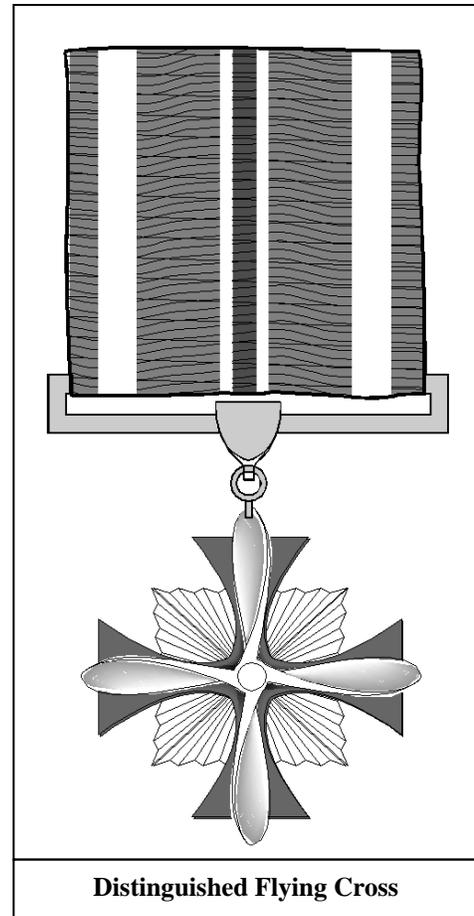
helping them. At least no sharks had approached. I had probably saved their lives. It had been sunny the whole time and I had gotten too much sun, so I spent the rest of the day and evening in the MAAG bar drinking beer and telling war stories with the other T-28 pilots. I didn't bother to tell my friends of the water rescue because I thought they would not believe me.

It was still hard for me to believe that some Viet Cong hadn't come running down the beach with an AK-47 and spoiled it all. There were no military guards on the beach at all, and of course, no life guards. There was only a couple of guards at the MAAG compound where we were staying. Looking back on the escapade with the girls in bikinis, I have to laugh. It was real, but highly out of place for a combat zone. But it was a nice break from combat.

While today was an easy day for me, the T-28 DAST at Soc Trang was having a tough day. Three T-28s were riddled with bullet holes by Viet Cong ground fire. One T-28 went down, but the crew got out with no injuries and were picked up. The T-28 that crashed was destroyed. One of the other T-28s that got hit and got back had so much battle damage that it is not flyable until repaired.

Thus only two T-28s were flyable now at Soc Trang. But their problems were not over. About 11 PM, the Viet Cong attacked Soc Trang air base with mortars. Two of our T-28 pilots there, Don Randle and Jim Ahmann, got the two remaining AT-28s airborne 8 minutes after the attack started. They did this with the mortars falling around them without being scrambled by the ASOC, and without runway lights, under a pitch-black, 600-foot-overcast sky. But they didn't just save the planes, they were armed with frag clusters, rockets, and machine guns and they attacked the Viet Cong mortar under the overcast without flares! The Viet Cong fled leaving their dead, mortar and unused rounds behind. The AT-28s went to Bien Hoa to land because they couldn't land at Soc Trang without runway lights. They reported the attack to Paris, JAOC (Joint Air Operations Center) at Saigon, by radio on the way to Bien Hoa. The ARVN battalion and the U.S. Army helicopter and Mohawk companies on Soc Trang were very pleased with the Air Commando reaction to the mortar attack and many owe their lives to the Air Commando success in chasing the Viet Cong away before serious damage was done to the base.

Wednesday, September 11, 1963. According to rumor, Captains Don Randle and Jim Ahmann were in the 1st Air Commando Squadron commander's office at Bien Hoa briefing Lt. Col. Jack Robinson on last night's Viet Cong mortar attack on Soc Trang and the T-28 DAST reaction. They had just finished covering all the facts, when a Sergeant popped his head in the door and advised Colonel Robinson that the Commander of 2nd Air Division in Saigon, a U.S. Army Major General, was on the phone asking for him. Colonel Robinson had the Captains wait in their chairs and took the call. On the phone, the General asked if the T-28 pilots that



counterattacked the Viet Cong at Soc Trang had used a Forward Air Controller to direct the attack. Colonel Robinson, now well informed, answered, “No, sir. They were attacked by the Viet Cong on the ground, and the rules of warfare allow them to defend themselves without a FAC. The T-28 was the best weapon available.” The general advised that all airborne strikes are required to have a Vietnamese FAC mark the target, and therefore he intended to court martial the two T-28 pilots. Colonel Robinson responded, “Court Martial, Hell. I’m going to recommend them for the Distinguished Flying Cross, sir. Their action saved lives!” They were not court martialed.

Wednesday, September 11, 1963, Qui Nhon. We got a 3-ship frag order for an 8:15 AM takeoff for an interdiction target. I flew #3. When we reached the FAC rendezvous point, we were notified by radio that no FAC was available and to return home. Since we had not expended ordnance, we did not look each other over for battle damage before landing. That was a mistake, as unknown to me, a tail fin had fallen off one of my 500-pound bombs which pulled the arming wire as it fell off arming the bomb. Now the firing pin was resting on the detonator waiting for the slightest jar. When I landed, I made a very smooth landing on the pierced steel planking, and I remember thinking that I had even missed all the potholes as I taxied in. After I parked, the crew chief noticed the bomb was armed and we all evacuated about 400 feet away. The crew chief then notified me that we had no EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) team on base to de-arm the bomb. I asked the ordnance Sergeant, if the fuses were anti-withdrawal type. He said no, they could be unscrewed without exploding. Who installed the tail fin that fell off, I asked. A young enlisted man was identified. I asked him if he would volunteer to remove the fuse on the armed bomb? He said he would. I asked him if he knew how and what the danger was? He said yes. So we all stood way back, while he carefully unscrewed the fuse and removed its detonator. When he got done, he brought the firing pin to me free of its detonator and asked me if I wanted it for a souvenir. I said yes, and kept it as a good luck charm for many years. The ordnance people were surprised that an armed bomb could be landed without exploding and commented that I must belong to the right church. Not really, but I do pride myself in making the smoothest landings possible every time. And I do have the right guardian angel looking over me.

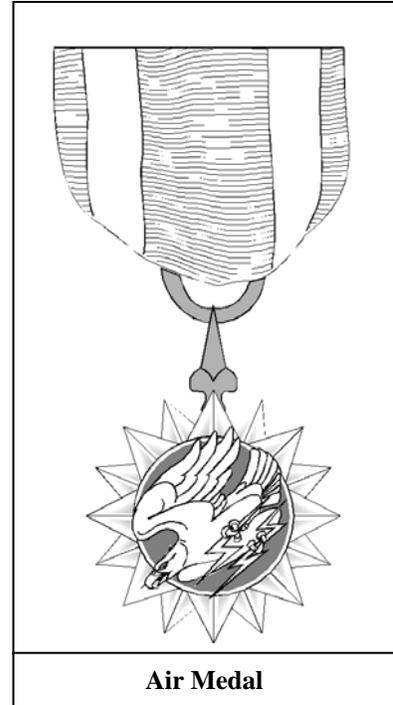
This afternoon, we finally got a pre-strike in for a helicopter landing zone, and we didn’t have to go to Pleiku to do it. The target elevation was 4,000 feet. It was a three shipper and I was #3. We delivered 500-pound tritonal bombs and 100-pound white phosphorous bombs under an 800 foot overcast. For the 500-pounders we pulled up into the clouds before releasing to get more spacing for the aircraft from the bomb explosions. They were still very accurately delivered.



Photo 32. T-28 fighter

Then we went home. That was my 100th combat mission.

Thursday, September 12, 1963. This morning, Air Operations Center wanted one of the three AT-28s at Qui Nhon sent back to Bien Hoa and I was elected to fly it because I was out of combat missions. However, I flew a visual reconnaissance mission enroute which counted as my 101st combat mission. Tomorrow, they are sending the two AT-28s at Qui Nhon and two AT-28s from Bien Hoa to Da Nang (400 miles north of Bien Hoa) and there will be no more aircraft at Qui Nhon. This will make five T-28s at Soc Trang, four T-28s at Da Nang, and none at Bien Hoa except for maintenance. I note that we only have 9 T-28s now versus the 12 we had when I arrived in May 1963. That's a 25 percent loss in 4 months or a rate of 75 percent per year. All T-28 pilots will be deployed to Soc Trang or Da Nang except three pilots to cover operations duty officer and command post operator at Bien Hoa. That means night scrambles for fort attack defense will be handled by the A-1s in the VNAF 514th Fighter Squadron at Bien Hoa since AT-28s at Soc Trang will not respond due to no runway lights.



Friday, September 13, 1963. Friday the 13th is here, and Maj. Barney Cochran elected me to the command post as duty officer in combat operations. I have completed my 100 combat missions in less than 4 months, a new record, but now they want other services from me before I leave. I am now eligible for four Air Medals. They are automatically approved.

Saturday, September 14, 1963. Lt. Col. Jack Robinson told me to go work with the duty officer for the day down at Air Operations Center in Saigon to understand their setup and problems because they control all air operations in Vietnam. So I did, then I came back and worked half the night until after midnight in our command post getting checked out. You don't dare mention 8-hour shifts around here as 12-hour shifts are the norm. The schedule calls for 12-hour shifts. They do give days off though, and swap you back and forth between day shift and night shift.

Monday, September 16, 1963. This is my first regular duty officer schedule at Bien Hoa today. It is from 6 AM to 6 PM. It wasn't a dull day. Twice during the afternoon, a B-26 came home from a mission all shot up and flying on one engine with about 10 bullet holes in his



Photo 33. Douglas B-26 Invaders

aircraft. Wednesday I will work the night shift from 6 PM to 6 AM.

Tuesday, October 8, 1963. Late this afternoon, one of our AT-28s crashed while flying 80 miles south of Da Nang. His wingman, Jim Tally, said the wing appeared to explode and separate from the aircraft and it immediately crashed. The pilot and Vietnamese crew member are presumed dead because there were no parachutes. The lost pilot was Capt. Dean Wadsworth (age 32, married) of Clarendon, Texas, one of my good friends. We now have only eight T-28s remaining of the 12 we had in May.

Friday, October 11, 1963. I caught the C-135 rotation aircraft back to the States today and returned to Scott Air Force Base a week later after picking up Roberta and the three boys at Carmichael, California. So my combat tour had only lasted 143 days (a little under 5 months). One of the requirements for each officer leaving Vietnam was to write a letter to President Kennedy expressing the usefulness of our operations and making any recommendations desired:

I said that the Air Commando operation was not replaceable with Vietnamese Air Force personnel due to the morale of Vietnamese pilots who did not want to die sooner. Therefore, I recommended that the lost Air Commando aircraft be continuously replaced which were being consumed at the rate of 9 T-28s and 5 B-26s per year. There needed to be an end in sight for the war. Current operations were self defense and control of non-jungle areas only. No one was attacking the enemy supply routes through Laos and Cambodia from North Vietnam, and no one was attacking North Vietnam to force them to stop sending troops south to attack the South Vietnamese. Therefore, we were currently in a no-win situation, I advised him. With replacement aircraft, I believed the current effort could maintain the status quo.

November 1&2, 1963. A military coup overthrows South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. He and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, are murdered.

November 6, 1963. General Duong Van Minh takes over leadership of South Vietnam.

November 15, 1963. Following a prediction by Defense Secretary McNamara that the U.S. role in Vietnam will end by 1965, the U.S. government announced that 1,000 of the current 15,000 American Advisors in South Vietnam will be withdrawn early in December 1963 (home for Christmas mentality).

November 22, 1963. President John F. Kennedy was assassinated today in Dallas, Texas, by a rifle bullet. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson became President. He was elected to an additional 4-year term as President in 1964. President Johnson, who had been a U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander during World War II, authorized attacks on the Communist supply routes in Laos and Cambodia, and air strikes against North Vietnam.

Air Medal Awards. The four Air Medal awards dribbled into Scott Air Force Base one at a time over the nine months after my September 11, 1963 accomplishment of 100 combat missions.

I was awarded the first Air Medal about April 1964 at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois, by an Air Force Colonel where I was stationed. They maintained the public cover story. The newspaper article with my picture read:



Photo 34. 1405th ABW Commander Col. William Nix, Roberta and Capt. Richard Pierson, 1964

“Capt. Richard E. Pierson, a T-33 instructor with the 1405th Air Base Wing, received the Air Medal from Base Commander Col. William E. Nix during ceremonies this week. Pierson earned the medal upon completion of 25 missions over hostile territory in Vietnam piloting a T-28 Trojan two-seater fighter with a Vietnamese student. The students are receiving their training under actual combat conditions. Pierson flew the missions between May and October 1963 while on temporary duty from the Wing at Scott.”

I was awarded the second Air Medal at a Memorial Day Parade in St. Louis, Missouri, in May 1964 by a U.S. Army Major General.

The third and fourth Air Medals were awarded to me by Air Force Colonel William Nix at Scott Air Force Base, near Bellville, Illinois, in the summer of 1964.