



MY TOUR WITH SPOOKY

THE AUTHOR TRANSFERS FROM MODERN JETS TO THE DOUGLAS AC-47 "PUFF, THE MAGIC DRAGON" AND GOES TO WAR IN A HOSTILE NEW ENVIRONMENT - PART ONE
BY WILLIAM J. PRATT MAJOR USAF (RET.)

This is a story involving my tour in Vietnam as a combat pilot. It was a very unusual and interesting tour because I was in an Air Commando Squadron (ACS) and because most of my missions were in Laos — a campaign that our country was adamantly denying being involved with during that time period.

The Air Commandos do the same type of operations as the Army Special Forces, most small and quiet operations behind enemy lines. In our case, it was almost always a single aircraft flying low altitude at night without lights and often without radio contact. One advantage of this was that we were such a small unit (three aircraft in my detachment) that we didn't have all the restrictions, procedures, and paperwork that most units are burdened with.

Being as all of this happened decades ago, some small details may be in error but all events actually happened and are as accurate as I can remember.

When I was ordered to Vietnam, I was a Captain stationed at Offutt AFB, Omaha, Nebraska. My assigned duty was as a maintenance test pilot flying Cessna U-3s, Lockheed T-33s, and North American T-39s. I enjoyed my work but was getting tired of being in the Strategic Air Command (SAC) and was anxious to get back into the real Air Force.

In the meantime, the conflict in Vietnam was getting worse; what began with American non-combat advisors was becoming a small war (later a big war). One small unit already there was the 1st ACS with a few Douglas C-47 transports to haul supplies and personnel into remote jungle strips. They became tired of being shot at so they scrounged up a couple old Browning .30-caliber machine

guns and put them in the door of one of the planes and, later, also added them to a couple more aircraft. This arrangement was so successful at making the old Gooney Bird an attack aircraft that the USAF decided to form a squadron of C-47s specifically configured for the job and I was an original member of this unique squadron.

The first plane to get a gun was given the name *Puff, The Magic Dragon* because many superstitious Vietnamese believed in dragons and were scared to death when they saw the tracer fire coming out of the sky. Collectively, we were known as *Spooky*, our radio call sign picked for the same reason but many referred to us as just *Puff*, the name of the plane.

Our training was conducted at Forbes AFB in Topeka, Kansas, by a detachment of the 1st Air Commando Wing (ACW), which was based at Hurlbert Field, Florida. When we arrived, we were assigned to one of two squadrons, some were assigned to the 4th ACS and the others to the 5th ACS. The 5th ACS was a psychological warfare squadron (we called them the "bullshit bombers") while the 4th ACS was the gunship squadron.

The training consisted of checking out in the C-47, low-level navigation, short and dirt field landings, air drops, and gunnery (4th ACS only). There were three types of pilots to be trained: Those already checked out in C-47s; those that had been trained in T-6 Texans; and younger pilots who had never flown a tailwheel aircraft. The Texan-trained pilots (I was in that group) had very little trouble but the younger ones had a difficult time getting used to a tailwheel, because of the inherent difficulties of directional control while on the ground.



Flight jacket patch for the 1st Air Commando Wing.



The AC-47s quickly became nocturnal flyers. As American airpower increased, the enemy troop and truck movements began to travel only at night. The AC-47s became a main threat to anything moving on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The strange glow from the 7.62mm miniguns lights up the cabin of an AC-47.