

Puff the Magic Dragon



The AC-47 Gunship by Garnet Bracca

"Puff the magic Dragon,
a bird of days long gone,
Came to fly the evening sky
In a land called Vietnam."

Unknown

The USAF became involved in Vietnam in early January, 1953 when it sent teams of mechanics to help the French maintain their C-47s, some of which were from US Air Force reserve stocks. When France yielded independence to Vietnam in February 1955, a small air force was formed with two squadrons of C-47s in the southern half of the country. The United States trained and provided assistance to this fledgling air force. By 1961, additional C-47s had been supplied to the South Vietnamese Air Force to help their fight against the increasing threat from the Viet Cong. As the Viet Cong activity shifted to nighttime operations the C-47 was virtually born again into a new role, twenty years after production of these airplanes had ceased. What Donald Douglas had designed as a basic passenger airplane evolved into a highly efficient gunship, designated the AC-47.

The idea for the gun ships came from an Air Force officer, Captain Ronald W. Terry, who had seen DC-3s delivering mail and supplies to remote jungle areas in South America. The aircraft

would circle in a steep pylon turn, lowering a bucket on a long rope. The bucket would orbit in a tight circle, suspended from the cargo door, and someone on the ground placed mail in it. Captain Terry suggested adapting this procedure to warfare situations by replacing the rope with a line of machine gun fire.

They tried the idea with ten, 30 caliber machine guns mounted in a C-47. The idea worked and the Air Force replaced the machine guns with three General Electric, six barrel, rotating mini-guns, reminiscent of the Civil War Gatling guns. These 7.62 mm guns were capable of covering every square foot of a football field with one round, in one minute.

AC-47 gun ships had three window-mounted electrically operated 7.62 mm machine guns, positioned on a 12 degree angle in the fourth, fifth and sixth port windows. Sometimes these ships flew with the forward half of the cargo door removed and another gun installed in the opening. In Vietnam, AC-47s provided murderous firepower to protect helicopter landing zones and flew over the eerie, nighttime jungle, dropping flares on Viet Cong positions. In this role, the gunship flew with a crew of eight; the pilot, copilot, navigator, mechanic, two ordnance men (to load the machine guns), a flare launcher and a Vietnamese observer. The gun ships carried 2,000 pounds of ammunition and 45 five minute, 5-million candlepower flares.

For the most effective use of this new weapon, the pilot circled the target at 120 knots and rolled 30-degrees to port. Using a gun sight over his left shoulder, the pilot would blanket the area with machine gun fire at a rate of 18,000 rounds per minute. The flames and tracer bullets coming from the gunship were so awesome that the Viet Cong called the old Gooney

Birds, "Dragon ships," and from that came the American nickname, "Puff the Magic

Dragon." Our GIs and Marines said it looked like a Fourth of July fireworks display whenever Puff was on the scene.

With a normal fuel load, the AC-47 could stay airborne longer than any fighter, providing eight hours of continuous cover at any station. Although "Puff" was primarily a night creature, when it wasn't flying station, it acted as Forward Air Control or performed search and rescue missions of downed pilots. One of its principal duties was to provide night cover around the large airbases like Da Nang.

"Spooky", as it also became known, had such awesome firepower it was almost invulnerable to small arms fire. On a typical black starless night in July, 1973 "Spooky" lifted into the sky over Bien Hoa. Like a vulture "Spooky" slowly circled its target at 2,000 feet and with all its guns blazing at the rate of 6,000 rounds a minute, there was no place to hide. "Whoever built 'Puff' had a sick mind." said one soldier. "At night it looked like a red line of light coming from the heavens, like Hell leaking fire."

"Once 'Puff' had done his work on an North Vietnamese Army company and we went out on patrol to count bodies," said another soldier. "We walked for about a mile and didn't see anything. First we could smell it, and then we couldn't believe what we saw. What was once 200 men was now a stream of slush. 'Puff' had shredded them to bits leaving nothing but communist mush. It was just like putting 200 men through a meat grinder. When Puff did his work there wasn't enough left to put in a bag and send home to Mama."

Although they usually flew out of the range of small arms, at least five gunships were lost to enemy action. The Air Force introduced the AC-47 into its weapons system in 1964, and it was an unqualified success. Four squadrons of these ships flew more than 20,000 missions, day and night from 1965 to 1969.

The US Air Force also used the venerable C-47 in the role of an electronic jamming platform. In order to generate enough power to operate the increased electronics equipment, the engines were replaced with Pratt & Whitney R2000-7s, that had been built for the Douglas C-54 transport. (see EC-47 article this issue)

In another role the C-47 earned the nickname "Gabby." As part of a psychological warfare program, "Gabby" had a speaker mounted in the cargo door through which a South Vietnamese soldier would talk to the Viet Cong below.

The C-47 also flew search and rescue missions and leaflet drops. In the New Year season of 1966, more than 1,600 Viet Cong surrendered using leaflets dropped by C-47s.

When the USAF replaced the AC-47 with the four engine AC-130, they turned the gunships over to the South Vietnamese Air Force. When the South Vietnamese fell to the North and Viet Cong, many of their AC-47s were flown to Cambodia and Thailand where some remain today. Others were flown to the Philippines where they were given to that air force. An unknown number of AC-47s and C-47s fell into the hands of the North Vietnamese. Today, little is known about those survivors.

An AC-47 pilot, Major Robert P. Knoph, penned some lyrics to the tune of the popular Peter, Paul and Mary song, "Puff the Magic Dragon." He closed the song, "Now dragons live forever, and Puff is just the same. The Gooney Bird will still be heard when grandpa is my name." We don't know if Major Knoph is a grandpa, but the Gooney Bird is still around.

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What inside the AC-47 can often be seen were the Gatling guns seen here.
Photo US Air Force



What the Gatling guns looked like in action.
Photo US Air Force