

BIG GUN--The business end of a 20mm Vulcan cannon looms from the side of an AC-119 gunship. (U.S. Air Force Photo by SSgt. J. Scott Crist)

Wheew!!!

"HAVE WE BEEN HIT?"

by SSgt David B. Drachlis

Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, Thailand -- Engines droned in monotonous rhythm as an AC-119 gunship pushed through the blackness of a moonless night over the enemy-infested trails of Southeast Asia.

"The flak was pretty heavy," recalls Lt. Col. Donald G. Browning, pilot and commander of the aircraft, "but it was nothing compared to what we usually get."

Moving out of the flak, the heavily armed gunship continued its search for enemy cargo vehicles on the trail below. The mission was now 90 minutes long and no targets had been spotted. It appeared that the crew was in for a quiet evening.

What the crew could not know at the time was that in

the next second they would engage in a grueling conflict-- a one-hour, twenty-minute struggle for survival. Suddenly, a violent shudder lashed the aircraft, which began shaking wildly in the blackness, every rivet seemed strained to the breaking point.

The pilot regained control of the ship, but the bone-jarring vibration continued. Crewmembers were being bumped around in the cargo compartment, and loose equipment was sliding everywhere. The aircraft seemed about to disintegrate.

"Have we been hit?" burst an urgent intercom voice. In quick response, crew members checked the airplane searching for damage, seeking handholds to keep from falling. The men strained their eyes to see in the dark.

In the cockpit, Colonel Browning felt sure the ship had not been hit by gunfire, but no one knew exactly what the problem was.

A crew member in the back of the aircraft reported that the vertical stabilizers were oscillating wildly, travelling almost a foot in each direction,

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equipment is in servicable condition."

The team is scheduled to leave NKP Monday.

"We were very close to s

and were moving so fast that they looked blurred. Since the stabilizers controlled the flight of the aircraft, the vibrations had to be stopped, and soon, or the tail booms would snap off.

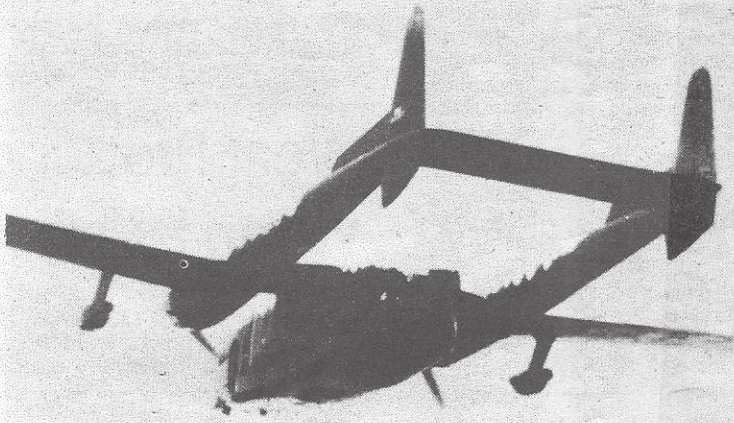
"I wanted to get as much altitude as I could before the bird started coming apart," remembers the colonel. "That would give the crew a better chance to bail out, unless we went over on our back."

He gave the command to prepare to bail out.

The colonel began easing the direction of the stricken craft toward a safer bailout area. The navigator reported that this area and the nearest recovery base were on about the same heading.

"Great!" But they had a long way to go and they were racing against metal fatigue in the tail section.

"Keep lowering your air-



speed." Called TSgt. Leon Webb, as the crew struggled to reduce the vibrations. "Keep that airspeed coming down."

"I got her down to about 100 knots, and with flaps, managed to keep her in the air," recalls Colonel Browning. "We just sort of hung there shaking. We were very close to stallout speed and if we stalled, well, that would have been it."

The crew worked frantically to lighten the stricken ship and reduce the possibility of stalling. They heaved equipment overboard that was once essential to the mission, but made unnecessary by the emergency. Within minutes they had dumped more than 4,000 pounds of ammunition, flares, and other cargo.

The vibrations eased a little.



ON PATROL — A familiar sight on the Nakhon Phanom RTAFB flightline is MSgt. Jerry P. Burt, NCOIC of Base Operations. One of his daily

responsibilities is to check the condition of the airfield. (U.S. Air Force Photo by SSgt. Cas Norvalis).

stall speed....”

but then the rudder pedals began brutally pounding in and out beneath the feet of the pilot and co-pilot. The controls were jerking so violently that neither could keep his feet on the pedals.

Suddenly, about 20 minutes from the recovery base, all vibrations ceased and the craft rolled left sharply. The pilot quickly adjusted the controls to an awkward position to level the gunship.

Emergency conditions had changed three times already, but there was nothing in the rules that said they couldn't change again--for the worse. Therefore, the colonel held the ship at a safe bailout altitude and gave the crew the option of jumping before he attempted to land. If anything went wrong once they started descending, it would be too late to get out.

The crew elected to stay with the ship, and the Colonel, slowly began the descent. "I felt like I was flying a crate of eggs." He recalls "We began easing down at five to six hundred feet a minute and tried to maintain that rate all the way in. I didn't want to make any abrupt maneuvers. Not now. Not after all we had been through."

Steadily, the aircraft sank toward the runway. It seemed like a long time before the gear was lowered and locked into place. The seconds dragged as though they were hours yet the runway still seemed far away. Finally, churp! churp! the wheels firmly kissed the welcome concrete of the runway and the 80-minute ordeal was over.

"When we got out to look at the bird, I glanced up at the tail section and my heart stopped," reflects Colonel Browning with a shiver.

The gunship's control surfaces on its two vertical stabilizers are normally attached by a pivot with three hinges. This aircraft's control surfaces were dangling precariously by one hinge each, and that hinge was severely cracked. Maintenance experts feel that with

luck, the aircraft may have been able to stay in the air another 15 minutes at the most. Her pilot commented, "I'm glad I didn't have to find out."

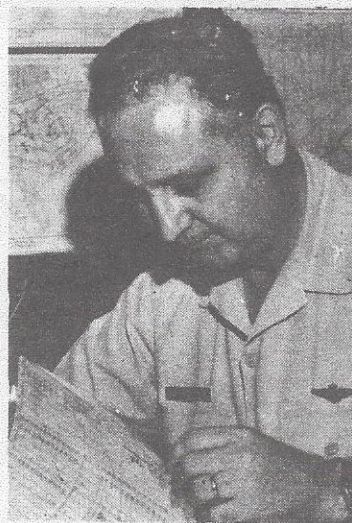
Last month Colonel Browning and the members of his crew received the 13th Air Force's well done award.

Other members of the crew are Lt. Col John D. Cooper, Lt. Col Douglas G. McComas, Maj. Frank J. Rossi, Maj. Robert G. Ryder, Capt. Diedrich O. Pollman, SMSgt. Douglas S. Blair, MSgt. Richard T. Cullen, TSgt. Leon P. Webb, SSgt Earl R. Jeffies, SSgt. David C. Vaux, and Sgt. Donald E. Conner.

C-5 'Space A'-Ready

WASHINGTON (AFPS) — Space available travel aboard the Air Force's C-5 Galaxy is now open to all authorized travelers, the Military Airlift Command announced.

Originally, only active duty members on leave were permitted to travel space available on the giant aircraft. MAC officials said the restriction was lifted because testing the C-5 has advanced to such a point that it will not restrict the transport of passengers.



VIP VISIT -- Col. Morris H. Newhouse, commander of the 1st Weather Wing headquartered at Hickam AFB, Hawaii, recently visited the Detachment 25, 10th Weather Squadron. (U.S. Air Force Photo by SSgt. Kelley Shuman)

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Col. Browning earns awards

Air Force Lt. Col. Donald G. Browning, son of Mrs. Mabel E. Browning, 3102 N. 50th St., has received the Distinguished Flying Cross and five awards of the Air Medal for aerial achievement in Southeast Asia.

Col. Browning earned the Flying Cross for his performance as an AC-119 pilot on an armed reconnaissance mission. The Air Medals were awarded for sustained aerial flight in support of allied forces. He now holds nine such medals.

The colonel was presented the decorations at Langley AFB, Va., where he now serves as deputy director of airlift-support requirements. He is assigned to the Tactical Air Command there.

A 1950 graduate of Benson High, he holds a bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, and is a member of Kappa Sigma fraternity.

Col. Browning's wife, Nanci, is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. D. P. DeBord, 2805 S. 106th St.

