

A Brief History of the AC-119 Gunships

In the annals of Vietnam gunship history, the fixed-wing AC-47 *Puff the Magic Dragon*, or *Spooky* to some, and the AC-130 *Spectre* Gunships were legendary to combat troops on the ground. But another, seemingly unknown, quieter and deadlier legend emerged in the late 1960s. One that struck a great fear into the hearts of the enemy in Southeast Asia. It was the legend of the fire-spouting dragonships of the 71st, 17th and 18th Special Operations Squadrons flying their AC-119G *Shadow* and AC-119K *Stinger* gunships.

The fixed-wing gunship was a great developmental and operational success. The basic gunship concept is quite simple: an aircraft flying in a level turn around a point on the ground (as if tethered to a pylon, hence called a “pylon turn”) can deliver fairly accurate firepower from guns firing perpendicular to the line of flight. For *Shadows* and *Stingers* that meant unleashing 3000 to 6000 deadly rounds a minute upon the enemy below.

The gunship concept was used in two very different roles. The first was to provide heavy firepower to ground forces engaged in combat in South Vietnam. This role went to the *Shadows* of the Air Force Reserve’s 71st Special Operations Squadron in late 1968. The first two AC-119G *Shadow* gunships departed Lockbourne for Vietnam on December 5, 1968 and became part of the 14th Special Operations Wing on December 20th, 1968. Flying their first combat mission out of Nha Trang on January 5, 1969 they took up the AC-47’s mission in South Vietnam: defending hamlets, providing fire support for ground troops, and flying close air support and escorting convoys. In 1969 the 71st returned its flag to the United States leaving behind many of its personnel to form a new gunship squadron designated the 17th SOS.

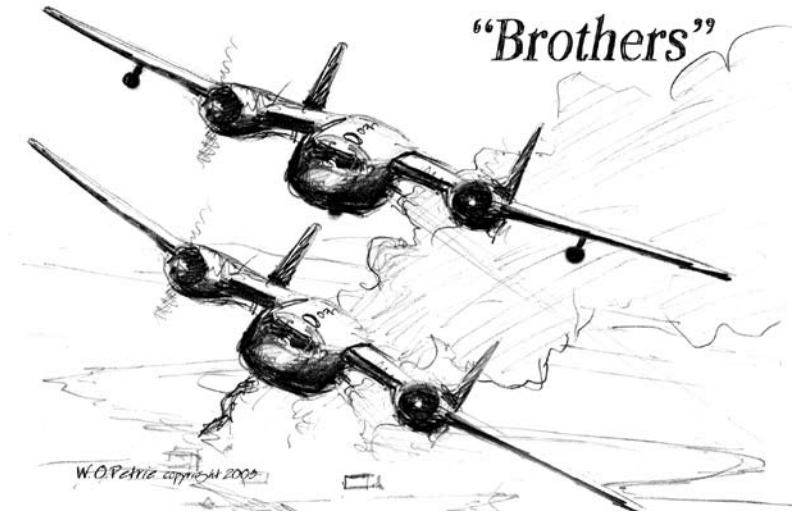
The AC-119K *Stingers* of the 18th SOS were to interdict enemy logistics in Laos. In 1969, The K model, with the addition of two J85 jet engines, heavier armament (two 20 mm guns in addition to the four 7.62 mini guns), an improved fire control system, and forward looking infrared radar (FLIR), started earning its reputation as one of the most feared truck hunters on the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Despite heavy anti-aircraft and small arms fire, both AC-119 gunships proved invaluable during the Vietnam War, and fortunately, suffered few losses. A fact directly attributed to the superb airmanship of the gunship aircrews and fighter escorts, and superb maintenance of their ground crews.

On September 30, 1971, the 14th SOW was deactivated, and by 1973, the war wound down for the *Shadow* and *Stinger* squadrons. The AC-119 gunship would fight no more.

The *Shadows* and *Stingers* had been a very effective fighting force for the short time they were involved in the Vietnam war. The tremendous advances in technology from those pioneering efforts with the AC-47 more than 35 years ago made possible the United States Air Force’s successful AC-119 gunship program. Continued advancements have led to the USAF’s present day, ultrasophisticated AC-130 gunship fleet.

For all these unquestionable improvements, however, technical advances can never replace the qualitative link that binds today’s gunship crews, maintenance and support personnel, with those of the legendary *Shadow* and *Stinger* Dragonships that once roared as they spat streams of fire from the night skies over Indochina.



AC-119 Gunship Association Reunion VI Banquet

Elks Lodge
Ft. Walton Beach, Florida
October 1, 2005



71st SOS • 17th SOS • 18th SOS

AC-119 Gunship Reunion VI, 2005

Banquet Agenda



Brigadier General, USAF, Ret.
Harry C "Heinie" Aderholt

5:00 p.m.

- Happy Hour

6:00 p.m.

- Call to be seated
- Posting of the Colors
- Welcome & Introduction of Special Guests,
President Craig Corbett
- POW/MIA Ceremony, Bill Petrie
- Invocation, Assoc. Chaplain, Larry Hunter
- Dinner

8:00 p.m.

- State of the Association, President Corbett

8:15 p.m.

- Introduction of Guest Speaker by
President Corbett

8:45 p.m.

- Association Presentations
~ Gift to Speaker, Bill Petrie
~ Fred Graves, Magellan Award
& Terry Courtney, Above & Beyond Award
Presented by Rogers Stevens

9:00 p.m.

- Introduction of New Officers, President Corbett

9:15 p.m.

- Benediction, Assoc. Chaplain, Larry Hunter
- Auction of Association Coins, Bill Petrie

9:30 p.m.

- Dancing to Norm "Stormin Normin" Evans

During World War II, Brigadier General Aderholt served in North Africa and Italy as a B-17 and C-47 pilot.

During the Korean War, General Aderholt commanded a Special Air Warfare Detachment of the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron.

Among his many assignments, General Aderholt was assigned to Headquarters U.S. Air Forces in Europe, Wiesbaden Air Base, Germany, in October 1954, and served in the Directorate of Plans as an unconventional warfare planning staff officer. General Aderholt returned to Washington, D.C., as a special warfare staff officer.

In 1960 General Aderholt became commander of the 1095th Operational Evaluation Training Group in Okinawa, where he contributed to the pioneering of special air warfare techniques, and was instrumental in developing the Laos airfield complex known as Lima sites. General Aderholt also served as special advisor to the commander of the U.S. Air Force Special Air Warfare Center at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla. Transferring to Hurlburt Field, Fla., he served as vice commander and commander of the famed 1st Air Commando Wing.

In 1965 he was assigned as deputy commander for plans and operations with the 6200th Materiel Wing at Clark Air Base, Philippines. While in this assignment, he joined the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, where he conceived and activated the Joint Personnel Recovery Center in Saigon, and served as chief from July to December 1966. He then was selected by Headquarters Pacific Air Forces to activate the 56th Air Commando Wing at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand. In January 1968 General Aderholt was reassigned to the U.S. Air Force Special Air Warfare Center, later redesignated U.S. Air Force Special Operations Force, at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla., to serve as deputy chief of staff for operations.

General Aderholt returned to Thailand in 1970 as chief of the Air Force Advisory Group, Joint U.S. Military Advisory Group, in Bangkok. He retired from active military duty in December 1972 at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla.

He was recalled to active duty in 1973 and assigned as deputy commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Thailand, and deputy chief, Joint United States Military Advisory Group, Thailand, with headquarters at Bangkok.

General Aderholt became commander, USMACTHAI, and chief, JUSMAG, Thailand, in May 1975.



71st SOS



17th SOS



18th SOS