

SOG

By John Gargus

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Studies and Observations Group, SOG, was established early in 1964 as a top secret unconventional joint task force to conduct clandestine operations against North Vietnam. Its mission to conduct a program of harassment, diversion, political pressure, capture of prisoners, physical destruction, acquisition of intelligence, and to generate unfavorable propaganda was well in step with our strategic limited war thinking of that day. We were prepared to assist nations that were resisting communist aggression, believing that by helping them in their defense and nation building we could win their hearts and minds and promote the evolution of democracy. We also believed that by conducting covert activities we could discourage their ongoing aggression against South Vietnam. Everyone was aware of our dedicated support for the South, however, only the active SOG participants knew about their individual roles in their compartmentalized top secret organization.

Initially, the secrecy of SOG was so profound that there were only five top officers in Saigon who were briefed on its mission. They were General Westmoreland, his chief of staff, his (J-2) intelligence officer, the 7th Air Force commander, and the commander of the U. S. Naval Forces. Obviously, this number of high officials grew as the war expanded, but SOG's umbilical cord ran directly to the Special Assistant for Counterintelligence and Special Activities (SACSA) in the Pentagon who had direct access to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS).¹ All SOG's commanders in Saigon were U. S. Army Colonels who had distinguished themselves in prior special and clandestine operations.



SOG unit patches

SOG's ambitious operations required dedicated airlift support. This was promptly provided by the First Flight which was later described as the most secret squadron in Vietnam.ⁱⁱ It evolved from the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) 1949 support to evacuate Chiang Kai-shek from the mainland of China to Taiwan. It arrived in Nha Trang in 1964 with 5 C-123 aircraft that were specially configured by the Big Safari procurement program to support clandestine operations in Vietnam. These black painted aircraft with added outboard jet engines that increased their airborne performance had no identifying markings. Internally, they had enhanced navigation suitable for low level flying and passive electromagnetic systems for detecting emissions from hostile radars. Their crewmembers did not wear customary flight suits nor identifying military uniforms. They flew in normal casual street clothes and even with sandals instead of shoes. Even more bizarre was the fact that they were a mixture of Americans, Vietnamese and Taiwanese Chinese. Their daytime flying was conducted by the Air Force crews. This consisted of shuttle airlift for the Green Berets to their in-country outposts which had suitable air strips. Nighttime missions were clandestine low-level operations over North Vietnam flown by either the Vietnamese, or the Chinese crews. When SOG terminated the employment of Vietnamese crews, the First Flight retained their nonflying ground support personnel which performed warehousing and parachute rigging.



First Flight's "Heavy Hook" C-123

The First Flight could not keep up with the expansion of SOG's operations. From its early 1964 beginning, the top-secret chain of command requested additional and more capable C-130, aircraft to cope with the steadily accumulating airlift backlog.ⁱⁱⁱ Once more the Big Safari procurement provided the answer by modifying a fleet of 14 C-130 aircraft for clandestine operations in what became the Stay Goose program. Four of these aircraft went to Pope AFB for crew training. Four went to Nha Trang in 1966 to share the First Flight's well established support facilities there and four more were destined to go to Germany to support European Command's (EUCOM) special operations forces. These aircraft, which soon acquired their present-day Combat Talons name, were the most sophisticated transport aircraft of their time. Their most important feature was an integrated navigation system that included a terrain following radar which permitted them to fly at low altitudes where they could avoid early detection by enemy radar net. They also possessed an array of up-to-date electromagnetic countermeasure systems that would identify and even passively counter some enemy threats. However, the most distinguishable feature of these Combat Talons was their modification for the Fulton Recovery System, now better known as the

STARS (Surface to Air Recovery System). Each aircraft had an unconventional nose drooping radome on top of which was a “V” yoke with a truss for retractable fork arms that also held propeller guard cables that stretched between it to the aircraft’s wing tips.^{iv} This appearance revealed that it was a very special aircraft. On top of that, the aircraft was painted with very dark green jungle camouflage color and its fuselage bottom as well as the bottoms of wing surfaces had dirty white clouded sky color. This paint had very special stealth characteristics. It contained diatomaceous earth particles that made the painted surfaces feel like they were covered with very fine sandpaper comparable to a manicurist’s fingernail file. This surface absorbed much of received energy from scanning radars which gave their receivers much smaller aircraft signature.

Combat Talon’s security was unprecedented. Our Combat Talons had to be parked in a secure area away from other aircraft assigned to the base and required two armed guards to control access to individuals with special security ID cards. This policy was followed even after Vietnam no matter where or in which country the aircraft had to remain overnight. On such temporary duty assignments (TDYs) the aircraft support personnel included the necessary complement of armed guards. These guards also discouraged curious photographers who came their close proximity. Photography of the aircraft’s systems and instrumentation from the inside was forbidden. Terrain following radar (TFR) and its integration into the navigation systems was classified as Top Secret. Even more guarded was the Electromagnetic Countermeasures (ECM) equipment that was located outside of the cockpit behind the aircraft’s bulkhead where it was hidden behind a thick curtain to conceal it from anyone except the crew and the ground maintenance technicians.



Stray Goose MC-130E(I)

At the start of the Stray Goose program, C-130 qualified airmen were chosen based on complex criteria that included the scope of knowledge and performance during their military careers. For example, “flight engineers were required to have a minimum of 4,000 hours experience in the C-130.”^v All were surprised by the secrecy and the lack of information about their future missions in Vietnam. Those of us who volunteered for the Stray Goose program were told by the Air Force personnel which issued our reassignment orders that we would learn all we needed to know from our instructors at Pope AFB. Once at Pope, we learned that none of our instructors had prior experience with the aircraft in Vietnam. They were trained at Lockheed Air Service in Ontario, California by technicians who performed aircraft modifications and who were proficient only in training us with the new aircraft systems that included the STARS and a tactic to deliver leaflets from high altitudes. They simply did not know anything about the missions we would perform once in Vietnam. The first six crews that deployed with Combat Talons to Vietnam were being reassigned to Ramstein AFB in Germany which was receiving its complement of four aircraft. The word we had was that we did not yet have a need to know about our aircraft’s missions in Vietnam. However, we concluded from our training that we would be flying in a hostile environment, conducting psychological operations with leaflet drops and rescuing downed crewmembers with the STARS.

In 1967 each class at Pope AFB trained two eleven member crews. Our class had crew numbers S-05 and S-06. This told us that we were the 11th and 12th of the crews that had been trained for Vietnam. Assignments to a crew were made on the first day of training and remained fixed even after deployment to Vietnam. Each crew had three pilots and two navigators that were required by the terrain following radar system. The sixth officer crewmember was the Electronic Warfare Officer (EWO). Two of the five enlisted crewmembers were flight engineers (required by STARS), two loadmasters and one radio operator. Everyone had a specific task to perform during pick-ups of people from the ground.

Our training at Pope AFB also taught us not to fraternize with other airmen who were naturally curious about our special aircraft and our secret nighttime flying. This was even more important once we arrived in Vietnam after we were finally briefed on our new unit’s mission. Tight Combat Talon security restricted our interaction with other Air Force units and friends that we knew from prior assignments. All were curious about our unusual aircraft and our mission, and we were discouraged from fraternization with them because we could not speak about our mission. Only our enlisted crewmembers and maintenance personnel were quartered on base where they lived in self improved well-furnished air-conditioned quarters. Officers lived in a contracted hotel down town where they had their own club and bar for feeding and entertainment. All First Flight personnel also lived off the base in a big well protected and isolated French built villa on the beach.

Our incorporation into the 14th Air Commando Wing (ACW) in October 1967 is an example of some ridiculous security hurdles. Prior to that date, both the First Flight and our Stray Goose detachment belonged to the 314 Tactical Airlift Wing based at Ching Chuan Kang (CCK) Air Base in Taiwan. It was logical to have us transferred into the special operations wing at Nha Trang that was already hosting us and employed about a dozen aging aircraft types that were modified for special operations missions. At the time of the transfer to the 14th ACW, our Stray Goose detachment was renamed as the 15th Air Commando Squadron. This transfer did not change our mission at all. We remained the SOG’s airlift asset along with the First Flight. We also remained

outside of General Westmoreland's command that managed the war in Vietnam. Our immediate boss was Colonel John K. Singlaub who expressed his chain of command as follows: "I reported directly to the SACSA in the Pentagon, but always kept General Westmoreland well briefed on our past operations and future plans. The General had veto authority, but approval for operations came from Washington. We were also required to inform the Commander in Chief, U.S. Forces in the Pacific, (CINCPAC)...^{vi}



Nha Trang - Special Forces Camp McDermott and the Air Base.

The 14th ACW Commander at that time was Col. John M. Patton. He was kept out of the chain of command between us and Colonel Singlaub. He was not briefed in on the SOG missions of the C-123 and C-130 units he had just acquired because he had no "need to know". He required an escort to enter our guarded aircraft and he definitely did not have the need-to-know what kind of electronic countermeasures we had behind the curtain inside of our aircraft. When he showed up unannounced and unescorted to check out the First Flight's living quarters on the beach, the Nung guards (Vietnamese of Chinese origins) would not let him pass through the gate. He had to wait until a member of the first Flight came out to escort him in. We also had Nung guards at our hotel, however, he would always come in invited and accompanied by our commander. It was awkward and unusual to have a wing commander who was not fully involved in the wartime operation of his subordinate units because he did not have the need to know. I spoke with Colonel Patton about this anomaly 45 years later. He was still very upset over the fact that the first officer who came to the gate of the First Flight's quarters had no idea who he was and another officer had to come to vouch for him.^{vii}

ⁱ Plaster, John L. *SOG; The Secret War of the American Commandos in Vietnam* 23

ⁱⁱ Moore, Bernard II. *Tip of the Spear*, "Vietnam's Most Secret Squadron" 36-37.

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- ⁱⁱⁱThigpen Jerry L. *The Praetorian STARship – The Untold Story of the Combat Talon*. 15.
^{iv} Bill Grimes, *The History of Big Safari*, “Stray Goose” and “Combat Talon”, 255-275.
^v Michael E. Haas, *Apollo’s Warriors: United States Special Operations during the Cold War* 295.
^{vi} John K. Singlaub with Malcolm McConnell, *Hazardous Duty*, 294
^{vii} Phone conversation with author on June 14, 2013.



Alternate photo