

Combat Talon Missions in Vietnam

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I wrote this article as an unpublished sequel to the one on SOG which appeared in the Special Forces Chapter 78 issue of SENTINEL magazine, Volume 12, Issue 1 in January 2021.

Finally, the day arrived for learning about what type of missions we were about to fly in Vietnam. Both eleven member crews, S-05 and S-06, were driven by crew transport vans to the Vietnamese northeast side of Nha Trang Air Base to a big and dark secured room in a building that housed the First Flight's offices.

Our commanding officer welcomed us by cautioning us about the need to know security about our existence and the requirement to avoid shop-talk with other airmen, some of whom would be friends from previous assignments. Then he gave us only the need to know information about our chain of command. We would receive all needed support from the Air Force and that we would be providing airlift support for a Top-Secret joint service organization called Studies and Observation Group (SOG) that was based in Saigon. The First Flight was our sister unit that would provide us with facilities for secure communications with SOG, up to date mission related intelligence, as well as parachute and special cargo rigging for our Combat Talons. First Flight's UC-123K missions were the same as ours, however, we were not to share any details of our missions with their civilian attired crews which included Chinese Nationalist airmen from Taiwan. That one detail was especially sensitive, and we were to keep a rational fraternization distance from them.

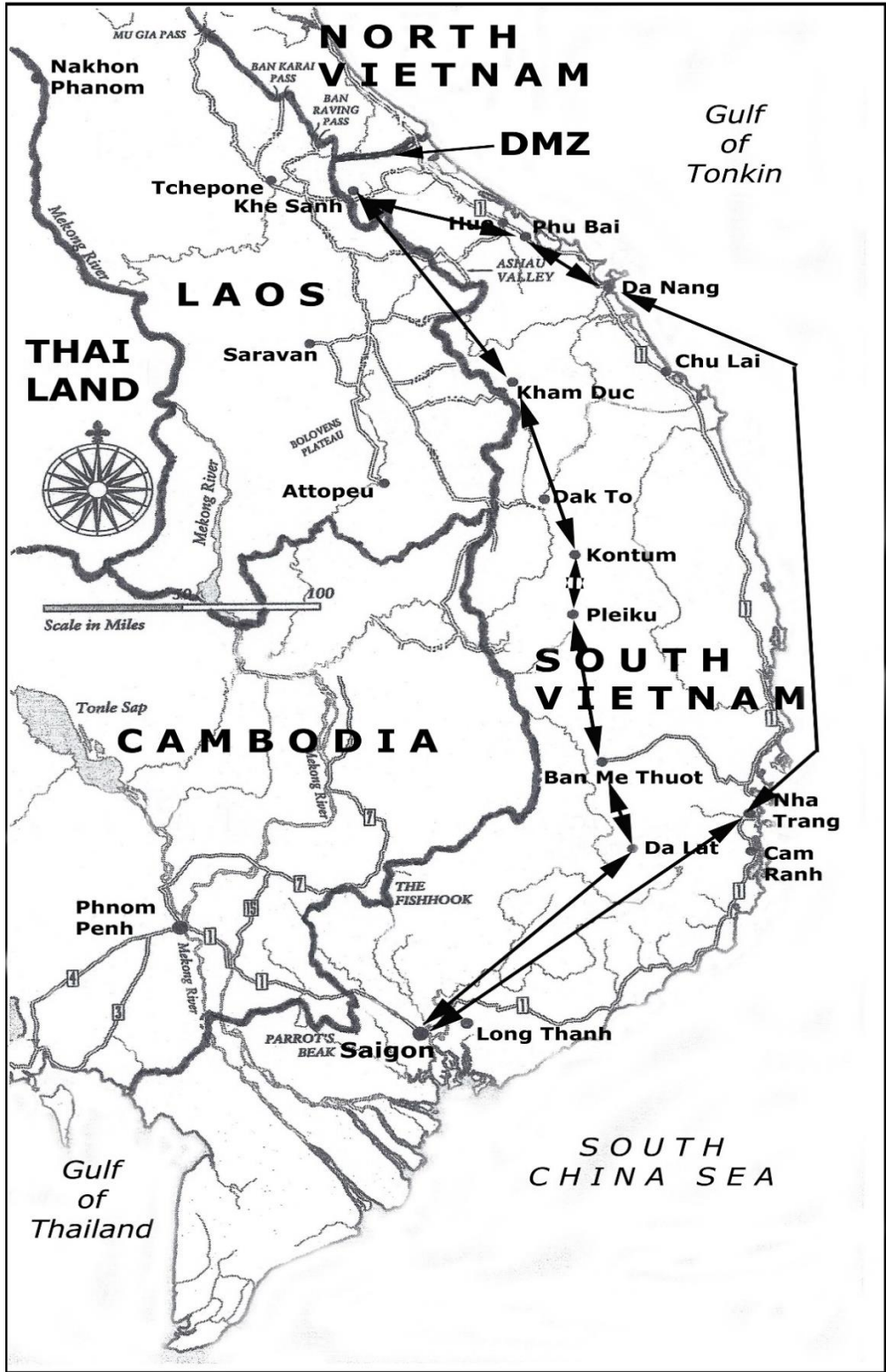
Our operations officer followed with a briefing on daytime missions. These would be in logistical support for the Green Beret camps throughout South Vietnam. Normally we would fly two shuttle missions per day with as many as 6 or 8 locations. It meant that each crew would be expected to fly at least two shuttles per day. There would be occasional flights to various bases in Thailand and TDY trips for training at Clark AFB in The Philippines and for periodically required IRANs (inspection and repairs as necessary) flights to Ching Chuan Kang (CCK) Air Base in Taiwan. Such 3-day TDY missions were rotated among the crews ensuring that each one had its turn.

The next briefer was the mission planner and intelligence officer who was not a Combat Talon crewmember. He was well versed on SOG's combat missions (nighttime missions against North Vietnam) and the enemy's air defense order of battle. For that reason, he could not fly on any combat missions. Normally we would get two combat missions per week. They consisted of inserting guerilla teams into North Vietnam and resupplying them with air drops as necessary. Some missions would be high altitude propaganda leaflet drops for designated regions of the country. Depending on the monsoon wind flows, they would be flown either over the Gulf of Tonkin or over the western mountains. In addition, SOG's psychological operations included occasional drops of radios pre-tuned to clandestine "Patriot" station near Hue that broadcasted programs damaging to the North Vietnam's government.¹ We were sadly disappointed that even though SOG had a role in the Joint Personnel Recovery Center's (JPRC) rescue of downed crews

from hostile environment, we would not have this as part of our regular mission. By that time the employment of refuelable HH-3 Jolly Green helicopters and A-1E Skyraiders had been perfected and the Combat Talons were to be used only for urgent nighttime rescues of evading airmen. Up to that time all tasked STARS (surface to air recovery system) efforts were aborted because the down pilots were captured before our aircraft could get to them. The realization that we would probably not get an opportunity to execute a STARS rescue was demoralizing. Nevertheless, we continued training for such an event and in mid-1968 we began live pick up demonstrations on Air Bases in Thailand for crews that were flying missions over North Vietnam.

Our daytime shuttle missions proved to be far more interesting than somewhat tense nighttime flights into the North Vietnam's air space. We would fly them through Saigon's Tan Son Nhut Air Base in two directions. Clockwise shuttle missions would stop at Tan Son Nhut to pick up passengers and cargo for destinations along a circular route with principal stops at Da Lat, Pleiku, Kontum, Kham Duc, Khe San, Hue Phu Bai, Da Nang and then "feet wet" (over water) back to Nha Trang. The other daily shuttle would go counterclockwise from Nha Trang north to Da Nang, Hue Phu Bai, Khe San and then south picking up people who needed to end up in Saigon. All cargo loading had to be closely supervised by our loadmasters and SOG personnel, who assembled it for us on the tarmac, to ensure that proper cargo for the last destination went on board first. We had no moving equipment at most of our stops for shifting cargo pallets, so all offloading had to correspond to the order of stops on that day's route. This took as much time as was needed. We had only approximate scheduled times for arrivals. Only those landing locations that were manned by Air Force personnel had air traffic control facilities and cargo handling equipment. Consequently, outside of Da Nang, Nha Trang, Cam Rahn Bay and Saigon we were pretty much on our own.

It was unreal to depart from Saigon's Ton Son Nhut AB and then less than 30 minutes later land at an isolated Green Beret outpost. We went from what must have been the busiest and most diversified airport in the world to a place where large, fixed wing aircraft seldom went. Observing the air and ground traffic at Ton Son Nhut was mind boggling. Almost every type of aircraft known to the western world could be seen coming and going. There were helicopters of all kinds, small single engine aircraft, every type of fighter we had in Vietnam, all types of cargo planes and a multitude of commercial airliners that were bringing new troops in and taking old troops back to the States. I don't know how the air traffic controllers kept their sanity. They had to direct all types fixed wings and rotary aircraft that flew at different air speeds and handle plenty of wartime emergencies when damaged aircraft requested emergency landings. Ground traffic was also confusing. It was nose to tail traffic jam on the taxiways with big aircraft dwarfing the small. Other vehicular traffic was also amazing. Motorized vehicles of all types, even motorcycles ran here and there. Cargo that had to be moved somewhere by someone was scattered along the side of the tarmac waiting for a forklift or a truck. There were also several wrecked aircraft dragged off to the grass on the side of active runways and taxiways so that they would not block the way for moving aircraft and vehicles. It was fascinating to watch everything that went on. However, we were always glad once we lifted off one of the Saigon's runways and headed for one of those unimproved landing strips without the incessant air controller traffic chatter.ⁱⁱ



Daytime shuttle routes with principal stops.

We were always welcomed at Green Berets fields. We flew in their mail and we often had couple of cases of beer to trade for garden fresh vegetables the natives grew in their neighborhood. We bought our cases of San Miguel beer on trips to CCK in Taiwan or at Clark Air Base in the Philippines for little less than \$1.50 per case of 24 bottles. Our loadmasters kept them on the ramp of the aircraft where they were always cold upon delivery. It was a good trade for two or three crates of vegetables for our kitchens at Nha Trang.

Our arrivals at these places were anxiously anticipated events of their day. Pilots would contact someone to verify that the landing field was safe to land on and we went in. There were no "FOLLOW ME" trucks to lead us to a parking spot. Our pilots just taxied in the direction where they saw people or, if they remembered, where they had parked during the previous visit. Because there was no ground support at these stops, we would keep the engines idling during loading and off-loading. Many times we would end up landing in isolated places that had Green Beret and Montaignard outposts with narrow dirt strips. We would shut down couple of engines when on the ground there, but never all four. We didn't want to get stuck in places like that. First Flight's UC-123Ks handled most of the shuttles to those jungle outposts. Their wing span was 22 feet shorter than ours and that made a big difference on outposts where the trees appeared to be almost at the edges of dirt runways. Also, their UC-123K models had a J85 engine mounted under each wing to increase their payload weight, shortened their takeoff distance and improve their climb rate.

We came to one place whose name I no longer recall. It was just a short hop from the busiest airport at Saigon. We flew over the field to see if it was safe to land there and we discovered that there were pigs having fun in the rain puddles on the dirt runway. Our concerned aircraft commander had to get someone on the radio to get him to clear the runway. He got very upset when the captain on the ground assured him that the pigs would scatter away from the landing plane. Reluctantly, he had the natives chase away their pigs, however the curious people remained on the edges of the runway and ran off only when they realized the span of our aircraft's wings and that they were in the way of our spinning outboard propellers.

There was another incident where our angered aircraft commander almost pulled his 38 on the captain in charge after we landed at Pleiku. This captain was the one who had cleared us in for landing. On our downwind leg to the field our third pilot, who was standing behind the pilot in the left seat, yelled out that there was an explosion on the tarmac. Combat Talon aircraft commanders flew in the right seat, so he couldn't see it and called our contact on the ground to confirm if they were under mortar attack. He didn't say anything about the explosion and instructed us to continue our landing approach. Once on the ground we taxied to the tarmac where a truck was waiting for our arrival. We had to skirt around a still smoking hole in the ground. I was not there to hear the verbal exchange between our aircraft commander who rushed out of the cockpit to confront the captain. I heard the astounding explanation only after our departure from there. The captain explained that it was quite normal for the Viet Cong to fire couple of mortar rounds at their post and quickly withdraw from their attack location. The response of the Special Forces was always so quick that they would run off with their precious mortar so that they could use it again at a later

date. Consequently, our aircraft was never in danger because the perpetrators of the mortar attack were on the run during our safe landing. Our flight engineer discovered that we had shrapnel pieces imbedded in the tires of our landing gear. This caused us to police the tarmac area for still warm pieces of shrapnel before we taxied to the runway to get out of there. I still have shrapnel pieces I picked up for souvenirs.



Pieces of shrapnel from Pleiku mortar attack.

Several weeks later we heard the same reassuring story from another captain at Kham Duc. We were off the side of the east end of the runway with two engines idling and ready to offload a pallet with a heavy diesel generator sent to them from Saigon. The pallet was already on the edge of the ramp and a mixture of about dozen civilian and military natives was ready to lift it up and set it on the ground when we heard four mortar explosions from the camp that was to the east on the other side of the runway. The natives dispersed and we left there stranded. The response from the camp was immediate. A unit of more than fifteen Montagnards moved into the jungle from where the mortar rounds originated. Our captain in charge was very reassuring. The perpetrators were on the run. There would be no more mortar rounds that day. The mortar tubes were more precious than the lives of the Viet Cong. They did not want to risk their capture. They would use them for another harassment on another day.

It was fun flying from one place to another, often without much contact with the radars that monitored considerable amount of air traffic all over the South Vietnam. We normally exercised our terrain following radar after leaving Saigon that kept us under everyone else that needed to be seen at altitudes for occasional air traffic radar assistance from “Paris” in Saigon or “Panama” in Da Nang that could track us on all our daytime routes unless we were in a terrain following configuration.

ⁱ John K. Singlaub with Malcolm McConnell, *Hazardous Duty*, 296.

ⁱⁱ John Gargus, *Combat Talons in Vietnam*, 48-50.