AMERICAN MILITARY UNIVERSITY

AIR COMMANDOS:

THE HISTORY OF

AIR FORCE SPECIAL OPERATIONS COMMAND

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Abstract

Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC), represents the airpower arm of the United States Special Operations Command. Beginning late in World War II, the Air Commandos performed highly dangerous operations throughout Europe and the Pacific in support of Allied ground forces. Korea saw a rise in aviation related special operations; yet it was not until the Vietnam conflict that Air Force specialized airpower became a major part of theater combat. American special operations forces (SOF) saw a major downfall during the Cold War with numerous small scale operations in addition to a few larger scale failures. Finally, in the late 1980s, American SOF finally earned its place as one of nine unified commands in the American military; along with the creation of the Air Force Special Operations Command in 1990. The long proud legacy and history of AFSOC has formed it into a highly effective organization, able to deploy specialized airpower throughout the world. By exploring the evolution of AFSOC, it is clear why the Air Commandos have earned the reputation of delivering special operations combat airpower anytime, anywhere.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Apollo the archer, the lord who strikes from afar,
sends lone warriors clothed in the mist,
or comes down on the wind as the night comes down,
beguiles and strikes, unknown but knowing.

- The Odyssey[1]



Figure 1

The creation, development and employment of American Special Operations Forces (SOF) is one of the most influential events in shaping the forces which are engaged in today's global wars. An integral part of America's SOF is the Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC); an organization steeped in proud legacy, courage and honor. From their daring beginnings in the jungles of Burma during World War II, through the trials and challenges of Vietnam and the Cold War, to their re-emergence in the 1990's as a powerful, extremely capable organization to complement

the joint forces of the United States Special Operations Command (USSOC), the Air Commandos have been involved in nearly every American military campaign our nation has undertaken.

First off, it is crucial to understand the events which led to the creation of an Air Force special operations organization. Serving proudly in the jungles of the Pacific, the forests of Europe during World War II, and the frozen plains of Korea, the Air Commando legend was born. Secondly, during Vietnam, the Air Commandos again heeded their call to duty, serving honorably and creating the early doctrine for special operations airpower. Later, recovering from tragedy and downsizing during the Cold War, the Air Commandos have continued their legacy in the latter half of the century and performed highly dangerous missions in Grenada, Panama, Iraq, Yugoslavia and many other classified locations. Yet the true professionalism, courage and honor of the Air Commandos has been spotlighted through their valiant efforts in the execution of the Global War on Terrorism in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere throughout the world. Lastly, AFSOC is undergoing many significant changes in doctrine and equipment; these changes will guarantee and strengthen the role of Air Force special operators well into the future, on any battlefield.

The Air Commandos of yesterday, today and tomorrow will continue to serve in the proud, honorable warrior legacy of those who came before; providing specialized combat airpower anytime, anywhere.

Notes

[1]Haas, Michael. *Apollo's Warriors: US Air Force Special Operations During the Cold War*. (Washington: Air University Press, 1997), iii..

Chapter 2

World War II - Korea

"Please be assured, we will go with your boys
any place, any time, any where"

- British Brigadier General Orde C. Wingate[1]

The predecessor to modern day Air Force Special Operations Command was the 1st Air Commando Group (1ACG); an organization which initially developed specialized airpower doctrine during World War II. Aircrews and aircraft of the 1ACG, both fixed-wing and rotary-wing, were used in the clandestine, unconventional and psychological warfare roles in both the European and Pacific Theaters of operation. The success, determination and initiative of the first Air Commandos is evident in the numerous missions successfully accomplished by the 1ACG; from covert infiltration and resupply to psychological warfare and even personnel recovery with the first use of the helicopter in combat.[2]

Prior to the creation of the 1ACG, the earliest Army Air Corps (AAC) special operations missions involved aircrews from the 5th Bombardment Wing in North Africa. Flying missions into France and other parts of occupied Europe, the aircrews from the 5th, with their modified black B-17F bombers, were tasked with delivery of supplies, agents and leaflets behind enemy lines.[3] The 5th later became known as the 885th Bombardment Squadron, later known as the "Carpetbaggers"; flying highly modified B-24 and B-25 bombers on deep-penetration infiltration and resupply missions. While flying out of Brindisi, Italy, members of these groups flew nearly 4,000 successful resupply sorties into the Balkans and dropped nearly 7,200 tons of supplies to resistance groups in

occupied Europe. These aviators also assisted in the evacuation of thousands of allied airmen and wounded partisans between 1944 and 1945.[4]

Another example of the specialized uses of airpower during World War II was the use of AAC aircraft in the agent infiltration of Jedburgh Teams. Jedburgh teams were backed by both the Office of Strategic Services and the British Intelligence Service with the mission to coordinate French resistance and other partisan operations throughout occupied Europe. These teams were invaluable during the months prior to Operation Overlord, as the intelligence gathered by them was critical to the success of the Normandy invasion; proving the need for human intelligence and unconventional warfare.

The Pacific Theater of operations between 1943 and 1945 also shows many examples of the use of specialized airpower by American AAC units. In August of 1943, General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold met with British Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten to review plans for American air support of British Commandos, under British Brigadier General Orde C. Wingate, in the China-Burma-India Theater of operation.[5] General Arnold had the idea to form a self-sufficient, highly mobile unit comprised of fighter, bomber, transport, liaison, glider and rotary-wing aircraft. The unit, codenamed Project 9, was commanded by Lieutenant Colonels Philip D. Cochran and John R. Alison; and was tasked by Gen. Arnold to "spearhead General Wingate's operation."[6] By March 1944, the unit was designated the 1st Air Commando Group; flying long-range penetration missions of General Wingate's "Chindit" forces into Burma to carry out operations against the Japanese. It was from these missions that the 1ACG earned its motto when after a string of 1ACG aircraft accidents, General Wingate assured the Air

Commandos that "we will go with your boys, any place, any time, anywhere."[7] The Pacific Theater not only saw the rise of fixed-wing special operations but also of the first combat mission of an AAC helicopter; an event which began a long legacy of helicopter special operations.

On the 21st of April 1944, a British L-1 observation aircraft was shot down by Japanese forces in the jungles of Burma. Upon news of the crash reaching the headquarters of the 1st Air Commando Group, the commander, Colonel Cochran ordered "Let's try the egg-beater."[8] Immediately a Sikorsky YR-4 "Hoverfly" helicopter flown by 1Lt Carter Harman was dispatched from Lalaghat, India to retrieve the four injured soldiers. With only a 100 mile range, Harman was required to stop five times to refuel enroute to Taro, Burma. Harman and the YR-4 finally arrived on the 23rd and after a rescue mission was planned, Harman and a fixed wing L-1 observation plane headed to the crash site. Harman, over the next two days, while demanding maximum performance from the Hoverfly under enemy fire, proceeded to individually rescue each crewmember and fly them to safety. The first ever American helicopter combat rescue had been executed flawlessly. No one, including Harman knew the tremendous impact that his mission would have on the future of helicopter warfare and the future of the Air Commandos. Harman flew another eighteen combat sorties in his YR-4 in the following weeks until the engine finally quit after serving so faithfully for so long. Harman had now passed into the annals of history as the pilot of the first ever helicopter combat rescue.[9] Though the Air Commandos were a highly effective combat organization during WWII, their existence would undergo major change after the wars end.

With the end of World War II, the U.S. military was reshaped and re-organized. The Army Air Corps became the Air Force, the Office for Strategic Studies changed to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the 1st Air Commando Group was officially deactivated.[10] Though the 1ACG was no longer active, the Air Force was still forced to execute clandestine and covert missions as America's involvement deepened in North Korea. The U.S. Military Air Transport Service and the Air Resupply and Communication Service was created in 1951 and was responsible for numerous covert operations throughout the war.[11] Though the organizations changed drastically from WWII, the missions changed little; covert infiltration, resupply and psychological operations.

With no specific units tasked with special operations, the Air Force was forced to task many units Air Force wide with the execution of "Special Air Missions." Aircraft used for these included the SA-16 amphibian airplane, modified B-29 bombers, numerous cargo planes, and the H-19 Chickasaw helicopter. Fixed-wing special operations differed little from the early "Carpetbaggers" missions; the only improvements being aircraft and certain equipment such as forward looking infrared (FLIR) and crude terrain following radar. One area that did expand and come into its own was with the use of helicopters.

In 1952, Sikorsky delivered the first of its new H-19 Chickasaw medium lift helicopters to Korea.[12] The H-19 was a much larger aircraft than those used during WWII, with a large cargo compartment capable of holding many troops. The Chickasaw had a 400 foot hoist as well as much longer range than earlier variants. These improvements had drastic effects on the aeromedical evacuation role and well as the

combat search and rescue capabilities of the Air Rescue Service. With the introduction of the H-19, along with the improvement in CSAR capability was the real introduction of Air Force helicopters in special operations missions. Helicopters prior to this had played a major role in troop movement and re-supply, but now the special operations forces (SOF) were calling upon helicopter crews to carry out a variety of other missions. The Air Force developed the 581st Air Resupply and Communications Wing, this unit was tasked to conduct psychological warfare against North Korean forces, its helicopters and crews operated almost exclusively at night and were also tasked to deliver covert special operations teams into North Korea.[13] The missions of the 581st were the first true special operations helicopter missions, and from these, the Air Force built a foundation of experience which would lend itself to the development of major helicopter special operational doctrine and operations.

The early mission successes of Air Force special operations forces laid down the foundation of experience, determination and doctrinal groundwork that would be built upon in future conflicts. Without the determined efforts of airmen like General Arnold, Lt. Col. Cochran and Philips, the Air Commandos would never have been established and the legacy of Air Force Special Operations would not exist. It is with the lessons learned from Europe, the Pacific and in Korea that the Air Commandos would face their next challenges in Southeast Asia.

Notes

[1]Kelly, Orr. *From A Dark Sky: The Story of U.S. Air Force Special Operations* (New York: Pocket Books, 1996), 22.

[2]Philip D. Chinnery, *Air Commando* (New York: St Martin's, 1994), 21.

[3]Haas, Michael. *Apollo's Warriors: US Air Force Special Operations During the Cold War*. (Washington: Air University Press, 1997), 4.

[4]*Air Commando Heritage Guide*. (Online Air Force Document, 2004).

[5]Pushies, Fred. *U.S. Air Force Special Ops*. (Osceola, WI: MBI Publishing, 2000), 9.

[6]Ibid., 10.

[7]Kelly, *From a Dark Sky*, 22.

[8]Ibid., 31.

[9]Chinnery, *Air Commando,* 23.

[10]*Air Commando Heritage Guide*. (Online Air Force Document, 2004).

[11]Ibid.

[12]Earl H. Tilford, *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia* (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1980), 9.

[13]Mike McKinney, *Chariots of the Damned* (New York: St Martin's, 2001), 2.



Figure 2: Brig Gen Wingate, Lt Cols Cochran and Philips

Chapter 3

Southeast Asia

There is another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origins-
war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins,
war by ambush instead of combat…

- President John F. Kennedy, 1960[1]

America's involvement in Southeast Asia began in the early 1960s under the auspices of counter-insurgency and foreign internal defense against Communist guerillas in Laos. In 1961, General Curtis LeMay directed the creation of the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron (CCTS) at Hurlburt Field, Florida.[2] The mission of the 4400th CCTS was to provide close air support for American Special Forces teams providing counter-insurgency training and FID in the Laotian interior. By 1961, the 4400th began missions in Vietnam under the code name "Farm Gate." The official mission of Farm Gate was to train South Vietnamese pilots for combat missions throughout the North and South; yet as hostilities escalated, the Farm Gate pilots soon found themselves engaged in combat operations throughout the region. In 1962 General LeMay expanded the 4400th into the Special Air Warfare Center (SAWC), consisting of the newly activated 1st Air Commando Group, 1st Air Combat Applications Group and one combat support group.[3] The SAWC has in its inventory such aircraft as the O-1 and O-2 observation aircraft, the A-37 and A-1 close air support attack aircraft, numerous cargo aircraft and a variety of helicopters. By 1965, the 1st Air Commando Wing, as it was now known, had lost over 40 servicemembers in operations in the region.[4]

A major innovation developed during this time, which is still seen today; that being the use of the gunship for close air support. The men of the 1st Air Commando

Squadron at Bien Hoa Airbase began conversion of the C-47 Dakota into the venerable AC-47 Spooky gunship. The Spooky was armed with three 7.62mm miniguns which would rain fire down upon any target called in by ground forces. The innovation of the Air Commandos, in converting a WWII relic cargo aircraft, into an offensive weapon, is just one example of the type of men serving in the 1ACW. Throughout the war, the gunship matured from the AC-47, through the AC-119, into the mighty AC-130 Spectre gunship; armed with four 7.62mm miniguns, four 20mm bofors cannons and eventually a 105mm howitzer. The AC-130 used during Vietnam differs little from the AC-130 gunships used today throughout the globe in the War on Terrorism.

One of the most influential and noticeable changes in SOF doctrine relates to the use of the helicopter. Amongst the missions Air Force helicopters were tasked with was the insertion/extraction of SF teams, resupply, psychological operation and combat search and rescue (CSAR). Though CSAR was the defining mission of Air Force helicopters in Vietnam, the evolution of helicopter special operations was to take place in in the jungles, deltas, swamplands and mountains of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. Historically, special operations forces (SOF) were not available during peacetime and had only been generated in a time of war. This was the case again during the conflicts in Southeast Asia, as the Air Force was tasked to provide helicopter assets for special operations forces only after the war had escalated. In late 1965, the 20th Helicopter Squadron, was changed to the 20th Special Operations Squadron and became the first dedicated special operations helicopter unit in the Vietnam War.[5] The 20th initially flew the CH-3C "Charlies", a blacked out version of the Jolly Green Giant, supporting the covert wars of Military Assistance Command Vietnam – Studies and Observations Group, or MACV-

SOG. The 20th operated primarily at night, behind enemy lines with Army Special Forces "Green Berets", and indigenous Montagnard guerillas. Another SOF helicopter unit, the 21st Special Operations Squadron was established in Thailand, and along with the 20th, flying the UH-1F/P Huey, established the foundation of special operations helicopter tactics and doctrine which was used well beyond the jungles of Southeast Asia.

The lessons learned by the special operations and CSAR pilots during Vietnam would be tested in the myriad of special operations actions which plagued the mid-1970s and early 1980s. From these operations came major changes in the organizational structure, doctrine and practices of Air Force special operations forces.

Notes

[1]Pushies, Fred. *U.S. Air Force Special Ops.* (Osceola, WI: MBI Publishing, 2000), 17.

[2]Haas, Michael. *Apollo's Warriors: US Air Force Special Operations During the Cold War*. (Washington: Air University Press, 1997), 221.

[3]*Air Commando Heritage Guide.* (Online Air Force Document, 2004).

[4]Pushies, *U.S. Air Force Special Ops.*, 18.

[5]Mike McKinney, *Chariots of the Damned* (New York: St Martin's, 2001), 3.



Figure 3: HC-130P and HH-53 Super Jolly Green

Chapter 4

POST VIETNAM TO PRESENT
Defining the Role

To you all, from us all, for having the guts to try.

- Note, along with two cases of beer from British mercenaries
to American commandos after the disaster at Desert One[1]

The lessons, trials and tribulations of the Air Commandos in Southeast Asia defined the capabilities and limitations of combat rescue and special operations missions in the nation's warfighting capability for many years to come. Some of the most significant operations took place, not in a large scale conflict, but in small, direct actions by American SOF. From these actions, the role and mission of Air Force special operations forces has been defined into the organizations seen in today's military. A few of the defining missions include the rescue attempt of the crew of the American cargo ship the S.S. Mayaguez, the disaster at Desert One in Operation Eagle Claw, operations in Panama, the rescues of downed aircrew in Bosnia, and the actions of Air Force SOF in Operation Desert Storm. One operation, though having taken place during the Vietnam Conflict will be discussed as it is vital to the shaping of American Air Force helicopter special operations doctrine.

On November 21, 1970, the American military launched one of the most defining operations in Air Force SOF history. The mission was an attempt to rescue sixty-one American prisoners of war (POWs) from the Son Tay prison in Hanoi, North Vietnam. Plans for the raid began on June 5, 1970, when General Donald Blackburn, Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activity, received permission from the Joint

Chiefs of Staff to undertake a study concerning the problem of rescuing a large number of prisoners of war from Son Tay prison. In August, planners decided on the composition of the task force, it would consist of two C-130E Combat Talon special operations aircraft, five A-1Es for close air support, five HH-53s, one HH-3E and two UH-1 Hueys. The UH-1s were scrapped as unsuitable for the mission but were kept as backup aircraft if needed.[2] The plan was for the helicopter rescue force to depart Udorn Air Base, Thailand and for the A-1Es to depart Nakhom Phanom RTAB, and join up enroute to Son Tay prison. Upon reaching the prison, the HH-53 gunships were to make low gun passes over the prison and fire at their intended, preplanned target areas. After the first pass, the HH-3 was to enter the compound and make a controlled "crash" landing in the center of the compound, rapidly deploying its shock troops. Upon securing the interior of the compound, two other HH-53s were to be called in from a holding position to pick up the prisoners and the crew of the HH-3. From insertion to extraction, the mission was scheduled to take less than thirty minutes. The mission was planned and rehearsed numerous times on the Eglin AFB range in Florida. All players were involved and each new his role in the rescue attempt; the green light was given to execute the mission.

During the months leading up to the raid, heavy down pours had forced the Son Tay prison to be evacuated. American intelligence had estimated well over fifty prisoners remained in the camp, yet to no one's knowledge, no American was in the prison in November of 1970. After the prison was evacuated, it was made into a dormitory for the nearby sapper school for North Vietnamese soldiers. Thus, satellite and SR-71 photos indicated there was still activity in and around the camp, though no

Americans remained. The most probable cause of the flooding and evacuation was a secret CIA program to seed rain clouds with chemicals in order to cause floods and ruin the North's rice crops. As the rains fell, the camp flooded and was evacuated, a breakdown in communication between the CIA, military intelligence agencies and mission planners may be a major reason the mission was a failure.

The mission was launched on the 21st of November, 1970. The departure, join up with the A-1s and the three hour trip were conducted flawlessly. Upon reaching the operations area, two HH-53s took up holding position seven miles west of the prison. Far to the east, the Navy begun a massive show of force to distract forces from Hanoi and give the low flying helicopters cover from enemy anti-aircraft weapons. The assault formation of three HH-53s and the lone HH-3 approached from the west flying less than 300 feet above the ground. As the helicopters approached the objective area, *Apple 3,* the lead HH-53, began a firing run on what appeared to be the compound. As he approached the target, the pilot realized it was not the correct location and turned toward the prison. Unfortunately, the second HH-53 landed at the incorrect location. The third aircraft saw the mistake and continued to the prison. At 0218, *Apple 3* commenced his firing run on the Son Tay guard tower, destroying the watchtower instantly. *Banana 1,* the HH-3 made a west-to-east approach over the prison wall and executed a controlled crash into the compound courtyard.[3] Upon landing, the assault group secured all corners of the compound and entered and cleared each building, facing heavy yet indirect machine gun fire from NVA troops. Much to their surprise, the assault group found no Americans, and under fire called to fall back to the evacuation helicopters. The assault force was picked up by the HH-53 and the entire assault package returned to Udorn.

Operation Kingpin is considered one of the most "successful failures" in American special operations. While on the surface, the raid seems like a complete failure, it did have many unseen positive effects. The North Vietnamese, fearing another raid, congregated all American prisoners into two camps in Hanoi. This allowed the POWs to communicate and had a significant impact on morale and prison conditions. Colonel Arthur "Bull" Simmons, overall Commander of the task force stated "I thought the thing was great! Okay, we didn't get 'em. Christ, the thing was worth doing without getting them!"[4] What the Son Tay Raiders had done was something truly remarkable. They planned, rehearsed and executed a daring special operations mission, deep in the heart of North Vietnam. Their goal was the noblest of all, to rescue fellow countrymen held against their will. The lessons of the Son Tay raid are still echoed today in special operations training; that a mission properly planned and practiced can succeed even under the most demanding conditions.[5] The success of the Son Tay raid would be shadowed by a disastrous mission nearly a decade later in the deserts of Iran.

As the Vietnam War began winding down, Air Force SOF capability declined as well. In June 1974 all Air Force SOF assets were combined into the 1st Special Operations Wing (1 SOW); by 1979 the 1 SOW was the only active SOF unit in the Air Force.[6] It was comprised of AC-130H Spectre gunships, MC-130E Combat Talon refueling and resupply aircraft, and UH-1N Huey helicopters. The 1 SOW saw little action immediately following the Vietnam War; yet one of it's biggest lessons would follow less than five years later.

One of the most defining moments in the history of Air Force helicopter special operations was not even carried out by Air Force helicopter crews, yet its effect on

doctrine, planning and execution of special operations missions was tremendous and still felt today, nearly twenty five years later. On Sunday, November 4, 1979, the American Embassy in Tehran came under attack by supporters of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Sixty-six Americans were taken hostage in an attempt to force the U.S. to hand over the pro-Western deposed Shah of Iran.[7] The Iranians threatened to execute the American prisoner if the U.S. did not comply; America was forced to take action. After the failure of diplomacy and economic sanctions, President Carter realized that little choice remained but to take military action. The American military formulated a complex plan to rescue the hostages with little or no Iranian casualties. Amongst the units tasked to carry out this mission were Air Force special operations C-130s, Navy RH-53D helicopters, Marine CH-53 pilots, and the newly formed counter-terrorist team "Delta Force". Originally, Air Force HH-53 pilots were chosen to fly the Navy RH-53s, as they were more adept at flying long, night, low-level missions. Yet, in a political move, Marine CH-53 pilots were chosen; as the Marine Corps had no troops originally planned into the mission.[8] The Marine pilots were capable and skilled pilots yet lacked the experience and abilities that the Air Force had. The plan was for the C-130s to depart from Masirah, Oman, and to rendezvous with the eight RH-53Ds from the *USS Nimitz* and *USS Kitty Hawk*, in a remote location in the Dasht-e-Kavir desert; the site was named Desert One. Enroute from the *Nimitz*, the helicopter crews had to fly low-level to remain beneath the Iranian radar. Flying at this low-level at night, the aircrews were already tasked to their limits. Ahead of them in the darkness, a large sandstorm called a haboob was developing. As the crews continued their journey, they flew into the haboob and the visibility decreased to near zero. In the storm one helicopter suffered maintenance

problems and was forced to land. The RH-53 landed and the crew was picked up by its wingman. Now only seven helicopters remained for the mission; the mission required at least six helicopters to continue, and Desert One was still along ways away.

Meanwhile, the C-130s from Oman landed at the desert site to await the arrival of the helicopter force. In the haboob, the fifth helicopter of the force had maintenance problem and was forced to turn around and return to the USS Nimitz, Operation Eagle Claw now only had six helicopters. The helicopters finally arrived at Desert One; the crews were fatigued and tried to convince the commander Colonel Beckwith to terminate the mission. As Beckwith tried to regain control of the mission, nearly ninety minutes behind schedule, one of the helicopters suffered a hydraulic malfunction and was deemed unable to fly. With only five helicopters available, Beckwith was forced to terminate the mission; the RH-53s were to refuel from the C-130s and all were to return to their stations.[9] During the refueling operations, one of the helicopter crews became disoriented and drifted into a running C-130. Both aircraft erupted into flames and the ammunition in them began to explode. In the disaster, eight American servicemen were killed, and many more injured. The remaining personnel were loaded onto the C-130s and evacuated back to Masirah. The hostages were eventually released, yet the damage to the special operations community was great and it would take years to recover.

From the disaster at Desert One, the American military realized the need for joint special operations forces to be able to execute deep infiltration missions, into denied areas, in night and marginal weather conditions. It was from this realization, that the U.S. Air Force realized the need to consolidate SOF and expand the missions and capabilities of the Air Commandos.

In 1982, all Air Force special operations were transferred from Tactical Air Command to Military Airlift Command; in 1983 the 23rd Air Force was activated and charged with all Air Force SOF activities. Amongst the responsibilities of 23rd AF was special operations, combat rescue, weather reconnaissance, inter-continental ballistic missile security, medical evacuation, pararescue and training of all Air Force helicopter and special operations C-130 aircrews.[10]

During the fall of 1986, the Cohen/Nunn Senate bill amended the 1986 Defense Authorization bill and directed the formation of a unified command responsible for all SOF. In April 1987, the United States Special Operations Command (USSOC) was created; four months later the 23rd AF moved its headquarters to Hurlburt Field, FL. In May of 1990, the Air Force Chief of Staff redesignated the 23rd AF into the United States Air Force Special Operations Command; consisting of three operational wings.[11] With this, the Air Commandos finally established a major command wherein lay all Air Force special operations forces. This organization is still in place today, deployed throughout the world in support of the Global War on Terrorism.

Between 1990 and the present, little has changed in the organizational make-up of AFSOC; from Operation Desert Storm, through Yugoslavia, to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, little has also changed in the aircraft used by the Air Commandos.

The primary helicopter used by AFSOC is the MH-53M Pave Low IV; the Pave Low uses the same airframe as the Super Jolly Green Giant, yet its technological advances have placed it amongst the most sophisticated helicopters in the world. The Pave Low's primary mission is low-level, long-range, undetected penetration into denied areas, day or night, in adverse weather, for infiltration, exfiltration and resupply of

special operations forces.[12] AFSOC also employs the HH-60G Pavehawk helicopter in its CSAR role. CSAR responsibility fell under the Air Combat Command until 2003 when it became the responsibility of AFSOC. Because of its versatility, the HH-60G is also tasked to perform military operations other than war. These tasks include civil search and rescue, emergency aeromedical evacuation, disaster relief, international aid, counter-narcotics activities and NASA space shuttle support.[13]

AFSOC currently employs three variants of the Lockheed C-130 Hercules transport. These variants are the AC-130 gunship, the MC-130 refueling and transport aircraft, as well as the EC-130E Compass Call used in psychological operations. In addition to the variety of aircraft in AFSOC are special tactics teams made up of Combat Controllers, Pararescue, and Combat Weather personnel.

Today, the men and women of AFSOC operations, maintenance, and support are involved in special missions throughout the world. They continue to support operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Latin America, Africa and other classified locations. Today's Air Force Special Operations personnel continue to uphold the Air Commando promise to provide reliable, precise Air Force Special Operations air power Any Time, Any Place.

Notes

[1]James H. Kyle, *The Guts to Try* (New York: Ballantine, 1995), 9.

[2]Earl H. Tilford, *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia* (Washington: Office of Air Force History, 1980), 105.

[3]William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare, Theory and Practice* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1995), 312.

[4]Benjamin F. Schemmer, *The Raid: The Son Tay Prison Rescue Mission* (New York: Ballantine, 1976), 239.

[5]Mike McKinney, *Chariots of the Damned* (New York: St Martin's, 2001), 47.

[6]*Air Commando Heritage Guide.* (Online Air Force Document, 2004).

[7]McKinney, *Chariots of the Damned*, 49.

[8]Ibid., 61.

[9]Ibid., 97.

[10]*Air Commando Heritage Guide.* (Online Air Force Document, 2004).

[11]Ibid.

[12]Fact Sheet, "MH-53J/M Pave Low", Air Force document online, 2004.

[13]Fact Sheet, "HH-60G Pave Hawk", Air Force document online, 2004.



Figure 4: RH-53 and wreckage at Desert One

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