

Air Force Special Operations History

A "Rich Legacy"

BY **ROBERT F. DORR** - AUGUST 19, 2010



A Jedburgh team prepares for a flight into occupied France during World War II.
National Archives photo

High over Nazi-occupied France, an all-black B-24 Liberator plowed through the night. Homing on a beacon from Resistance fighters on the ground, the Liberator approached its intended drop zone. The crew intended to sneak in and sneak out, but all eyes were alert for muzzle flashes that would reveal they'd been spotted. At exactly the right moment, the Liberator opened its bomb bay and disgorged its cargo – not bombs but human beings, Allied secret agents being deposited surreptitiously behind the lines.

Not long ago, the Secretary of the Air Force told airmen in special

operations units that they “represent a rich legacy of service to our nation.”

Special Operations airmen fight like no one else, depositing Green Beret teams in the enemy’s back yard, aiming gunfire from orbiting gunships, using aviation as a tool to disrupt an enemy’s command, control, and communications.

When the lone B-17 made an unscheduled stop at a North Africa base, GIs were surprised to see a motley gaggle of folk in non-regulation attire with no insignia of rank. Those who began the special operations tradition had no need for formality. They knew each other. That was enough.

Today, their tools are digital, their techniques polished, and their mission after Afghanistan an accepted part of the nation’s work. But the “rich legacy” began amid manual typewriters, vacuum tubes, and sputtering piston engines.

The first true special operations sortie took place Dec. 24, 1942, when two C-47 Skytrain transports dropped paratroopers behind German lines to blow up the El Djem Bridge in Tunisia. Pilot of the first Skytrain was Lt. Col. Philip G. “Flip” Cochran, a fighter pilot who’d strafed the bridge and knew it well. As German troops closed in on them, the paratroopers set off their charges, then trekked 110 miles across the desert to friendly lines. Only eight made it; the rest were either killed or captured, but the bridge went down. Cochran was soon to reappear in the world of unorthodox air action.

In mid-1943, the Army Air Forces were ordered to develop a behind-the-lines capability to support the clandestine warfare efforts of the Office of Strategic Services. In October 1943, the 5th Bombardment Wing in North Africa launched a mission in what may have been the first special operations airplane, a modified B-17 Flying Fortress bomber.

As they settled into their work, these men became flaky and irreverent compared to the spit-and-polish traditional military. When the lone

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“CARPETBAGGERS”

In November 1943, although it had no bombers to spare, the AAF yanked the 492nd Bombardment Group from daylight missions, moved the group to a new base at Harrington, England, and gave it a new job. Col. Clifford J. Heflin’s unit became known as the “Carpetbaggers.”



A Carpetbagger crew in front of their gloss black-painted B-24 Liberator. National Archives

Heflin’s airmen dropped agents and resupplied resistance forces. The 492nd was directed not by the military chain of command but by the OSS. With nose guns removed and a new paint coat of gloss black, B-24 Liberators with names like Baby Bug II and Tiger’s Revenge flew 2,809 sorties to drop agents and supplies. Although their war was in Europe, the Carpetbaggers sent one B-24 to Myitkyina, Burma to explore the possibility of supporting clandestine operations there.

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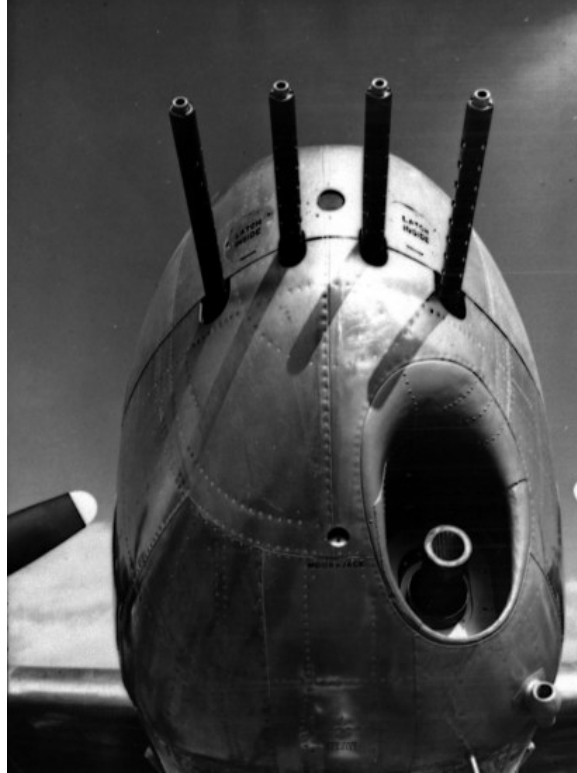
The 492nd also carried out radio countermeasures and leaflet-dropping missions, always in secrecy and usually in B-24s that flew alone. A related OSS operation, called the Halyard Mission, extracted downed American airmen being protected by partisans in Yugoslavia.

Between June and August 1944, OSS agents in AAF C-47s landed behind enemy lines and recovered 432 Americans and 80 Allied combatants.

Independent, untidy, at times arrogant, and commanded by a mere colonel who answered only to Washington – Cochran – the Air Commandos became the personal air force of Brig. Orde C. Wingate, the unorthodox British commander in the CBI. Their tools were the P-51A Mustang fighter, B-25 Mitchell bombers packing a 75-mm cannon in the nose, the Stinson L-5 liaison aircraft, the Waco CG-4A glider, and, of course, the trusty C-47.

AIR COMMANDOS

If the “Carpetbaggers” were one leg of what became today’s Special Operations forces, the Air Commandos of Southeast Asia were their heart. In the book *Apollo’s Warriors*, Col. Michael E. Haas compares the arrival of the 1st Air Commando Group in the China-Burma-India Theater with “a brick exploding through a plate glass window.”



Air Commandos in the China-Burma-India theater operated aircraft such as the 75mm cannon-armed B-25. Robert F. Dorr Collection

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The Air Commandos, known originally as “Project 9,” were conceived as a one-of-a-kind outfit to fight only during the 1944 dry season. Their job was to support Wingate’s “Chindit” long-range raiding parties, named after a legendary winged stone lion. With 528 men and 348 aircraft, Cochran and air ace Lt. Col. (later Maj. Gen.) John R. Alison wreaked havoc on Japanese forces, giving the Allies an edge in a campaign that had stagnated for two years.

The boxy R-4 was challenged by the high, hot conditions of Burma, but the Commandos pulled off history’s first combat helicopter rescue.

On March 5, 1944, they launched Operation Thursday, using C-47s and CG-4A gliders to haul Chindits behind Japanese lines. More than 100 C-47s, each pulling two gliders, hauled 2,500 troops 260 miles to a drop zone scouted by Cochran in a P-51A and dubbed "Broadway." Contrary to all wisdom, much of the flying was done in darkness with no lights or radios, and the C-47 pilots used almost two-thirds of their fuel on the outbound leg. Some returned to base with less than 40 gallons. In 24 hours, troops secured a landing field, making the gliders unnecessary. The Japanese never again saw success in the region.

Instead of going away when the season ended, the group expanded to become the First Air Commando Division. Learning of a new aerial gadget being tested in the U.S., the commandos tested their political leverage in Washington by requesting four Sikorsky YR-4B helicopters. The boxy R-4 was challenged by the high, hot conditions of Burma, but the Commandos pulled off history's first combat helicopter rescue.

Before V.J. Day, AAF boss Gen. Henry H. "Hap" Arnold authorized two additional Air Commando Groups. The 2nd joined the 1st in the CBI while the 3rd fought in the Philippines. In those islands, the Army Air Forces became a navy of sorts, operating boats including a 63-foot rescue boat similar to the real Navy's PT boats. The AAF also operated an 85-foot rescue boat powered by two Merlin aircraft engines, with a 14-member crew and a range of 1,000 miles.

History's most horrendous war gave AAF special operations pioneers opportunities to test tactics and techniques they would use well into the 21st century, including close air support for clandestine operations, a "quick snatch" device that enabled a C-47 to snatch up a glider (and, later, a person), a primitive night vision device (the size of a footlocker), short takeoff and landing methods (with aircraft flaps that resembled barn doors), and other innovations.

Upstarts who would have failed a white-glove inspection were the norm among Carpetbaggers and Air Commandos. "We wouldn't have shined on the parade ground," said Col. Fleming Johnson, an Air Commando veteran, in an interview. "We weren't good at snapping salutes or saying, 'sir.' And regular Army officers didn't understand that we were different." In fact, Cochran, Alison, Johnson, and company were more

than different: They were the point of the spear.

POSTWAR YEARS

World War II taught many lessons. They led to the creation in 1947 of a Secretary of Defense, a Department of Defense, a Central Intelligence Agency, and the Air Force. Not created, however, was an Air Force Special Operations component. The Air Commando units folded in 1948.

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When the U.S. helped the Philippines against the Huk insurgency in the late 1940s, Lt. Col. Edward G. Lansdale had to begin from scratch to throw together an unconventional fighting force of C-47s, P-51s, T-6 armed trainers, and other aircraft. Lansdale refined an important technique that would evolve over the years delivering loudspeaker and leaflet messages by air. Lansdale later said that he received greater cooperation from the CIA than from the Air Force.

Many examples of unorthodox warfare sprang up with little direction or coordination, among them a mission in which Air Force crews flew a CIA-owned YH-19 helicopter far behind the lines to salvage a crashed enemy MiG-15 fighter for intelligence analysis.

When North Korea overran its southern neighbor on June 25, 1950, there was no special operations component in the U.S. Air Force. Many examples of unorthodox warfare sprang up with little direction or coordination, among them a mission in which Air Force crews flew a CIA-owned YH-19 helicopter far behind the lines to salvage a crashed enemy MiG-15 fighter for intelligence analysis. The CIA used numerous aircraft including the ubiquitous C-47 and an all-black B-29 Superfortress to deploy intelligence teams and supplies through short- and long-range low-level penetration into both North and South Korea, and to drop agents across the border in what was then called Red China.

C-47 MISSIONS

During Korean fighting, much secret work was carried out by the Air

Force's tiny "Special Air Missions Detachment," also called Unit 4, headed by a young captain, Harry C. "Heinie" Aderholt. The detachment was part of the 21st Troop Carrier Squadron, the "Kyushu Gypsies."



C-47s dropped agents and supplies in clandestine missions throughout the Korean War.
National Archives photo

Equipped with C-47s, now often called Gooney Birds, Aderholt's detachment dropped spies, saboteurs, and partisans behind enemy lines by parachute in risky night missions as part of Operation Aviary. "The agents, called 'Rabbits,' were given virtually no training," remembered historian Haas in an interview. "For many, their first parachute jump was the one they made into North Korea."

Haas recalled, "One C-47 pilot told me. 'We had the most beautiful babes in the world and we were kicking them out the door in 30-below-zero weather in the middle of the night.'"

The key to success was accuracy in dropping an agent. Most were men, chosen for their brawn, bravery, and passionate hatred for the North

Koreans. One C-47 sortie dropped half a dozen men 100 miles behind the front, to blow up a bridge. On another night, a lone partisan parachuted into North Korea to monitor troop movements. The agents were equipped with crude radios and little else, but one American officer claimed that 70 percent were successful.

Some agents were young women from Seoul's pre-war glitterati of actresses and models, hand-picked for espionage by Francesca Rhee, the wife of South Korean president Syngman Rhee. The young women parachuted behind the lines, ingratiated themselves with North Korean officers, gathered intelligence, and escaped southward to report. One of the women brought back details of a planned Chinese attack on the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division, information that made possible a victory on the battlefield.

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In the book *Air Commando One*, a biography of Aderholt, author Warren A. Trest gives a sense for the pressure-boiler tempo:

"During the brutal battles raging up and down the Korean peninsula in 1950-51, Aderholt's detachment of C-47 Gooney Birds flew a punishing schedule of special airlift missions in support of the ground campaign. These included parachute drops into the thick of combat and perilous low-level night penetrations as far north as Manchuria to airdrop Korean partisans and secret agents behind enemy lines. These intrepid men and women became a vital source of human intelligence during this critical phase of the war."

The C-47 detachment sometimes seemed to be fighting the brass as much as the enemy. When Aderholt asked for exhaust shields and camouflage paint, to make his C-47s less visible at night, it took months for the Air Force to cough up the money.

The detachment received significant backing from the Central Intelligence Agency, which had a role in its behind-the-lines drops. The C-47s carried out other missions. Some, equipped with the

SCR-300 infantry radio and a trailing coaxial cable antenna, orbited near the front lines and relayed field reports from agents. Two C-47s were equipped with loudspeakers for aerial psychological warfare broadcasts, and also dropped psychological warfare leaflets. On at least one occasion, a C-47 used racks intended for parachute supplies to drop two napalm bombs in a surprise morning raid on a North Korean headquarters.

So secret were the ARCWs that when a 581st H-19 helicopter piloted by 1st Lt. Robert Sullivan rescued the top U.S. air ace, Capt. Joe McConnell, after his F-86 Sabre went down in the Yellow Sea, the Air Force reenacted the rescue at a freshwater lake in Japan to create a much-published photo that gave the impression McConnell had been picked up by the Air Rescue Service rather than the clandestine unit.

Flying repeatedly into Chinese and North Korean gunfire, the detachment lost just one C-47 in combat, plus one that was damaged so badly it had to be written off.

The Korean War saw many other kinds of special operations, including Air Force troops using crash boats to insert ground agents into North Korea.

MORE KOREAN OPS

Very late in the Korean era (in January 1952), the Air Force created the 580th, 581st, and 582d Air Resupply and Communication Wings (ARCWs) for unconventional warfare. The 580th served at Wheelus Field, Libya. The 581st was at Clark Field, Philippines and the 582nd at Molesworth, England. In great secrecy, they operated B-29s, C-47s, SA-16 Albatrosses, and helicopters, and took their orders from Air Force officers in an unmarked building on Wisconsin Avenue in Washington, D.C.

On Jan. 15, 1953, a B-29 crew known as Stardust 40, led by 581st ARCW commander Col. John K. Arnold, Jr., was shot down during a leaflet drop in a coordinated effort by MiG-15s and ground searchlight

crews. Its nine survivors became the last American POWs released after the Korean War in 1955.

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An A-26 Invader fires up its engines. The old aircraft flew counter-insurgency missions in Vietnam. Robert F. Dorr Collection

In the late 1950s, with Korea behind, the Air Force dismantled the ARCWs and turned the special operations mission over to Air National Guard units in California, Maryland, Rhode Island, and West Virginia, all equipped with black-painted SA-16 seaplanes. Former Guardsmen from two other states, Arkansas and Alabama, flew B-26 Invaders during the April 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, a paramilitary attempt to oust Fidel Castro that failed. During this era, with CIA funds, the Air Force developed the Helio U-10 Courier light aircraft (known initially

as the L-28) which was capable of landing and taking off in as little as 50 feet.

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SOUTHEAST ASIA

When Air Force members began operating in Laos and Vietnam at the start of the 1960s, the U-10 was just what they needed to reach remote villages that lacked an airstrip. But the Air Force lacked much more. Once again, because of a lull between wars, it had no organized special operations units. Air Force members who worked directly for the CIA flew the first U-10s and T-28 fighter-bombers. For years the war in Laos, which included airmen known as Ravens secretly flying forward air control missions, was directed not by some brass-hat general but by the American ambassador in Vietnam.



An Air Commando A-1E Skyraider escorts an HH-3C rescue helicopter as it goes to pick up a downed pilot in Vietnam, 1966. National Museum of the USAF

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy gave a fresh breath of support to the Army's Special Forces, the Green Berets. In April, eager to revive the World War II tradition, Chief of Staff Gen. Curtis E. LeMay authorized the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron (code-named Jungle Jim), which eventually took T-28s and B-26s to Vietnam in the

Farm Gate program. The Air Force resurrected the term Air Commandos and gave the men a distinctive uniform, which included an Australia-New Zealand campaign hat, blue flying scarf, starched fatigues, and combat boots. As their presence grew in Southeast Asia, this new breed of Air Commandos were anything but military in appearance, however: They packed .45 automatics or Swedish K submachine guns, wore whatever they pleased, spoke smidgeons or more of the local language, and seemed more comfortable in a village than in the company of traditional airmen with their sleek and un-Commando-like fast jets.



Two U.S. Air Force Bell UH-1P helicopters from the 20th Special Operations Squadron over Cambodia, circa 1969.

If there was a symbol of the Air Commandos in Southeast Asia, it was the clattering A-1E Skyraider, a prop plane in a jet war. Few aircraft evoked such a mix of affection and frustration. Pilots rued the way the Skyraider's four 20-milimeter cannons overheated, melted down, and sometimes set the wing on fire. One pilot complained that the big radial engine leaked so much oil, he might slip and fall on the flight line and break his neck before the Viet Cong could ever get a shot at him. The Air Commandos eventually fielded two squadrons of these aging warplanes. In the bullet-raked A Shau Valley of South Vietnam on March 10, 1966, Maj. Bernard F. Fisher landed his A-1E under enemy fire to rescue a downed airman, a heroic action that won him the Medal of Honor. Four more special operations airmen won the nation's highest award during the Vietnam era.



Majors Fisher and Myers after the dramatic rescue of Myers. Fisher received the Medal of Honor for landing under fire to pick up the downed Myers. Robert F. Dorr Collection

In 1966, the Air Force reached its peak strength for special operations forces with a total of 10,000 people, 550 aircraft, and 19 squadrons. The service introduced AC-47, AC-119, and AC-130 gunships, the only warplanes in the world that engage a target while flying in a pylon turn. In 1967, the term “Special Operations” replaced “Air Commando,” not to the pleasure of all, and in 1970, Special Operations airmen participated in the raid on the Son Tay prisoner of war (POW) camp.

POST-VIETNAM

The Air Force emerged from Vietnam, as from previous wars, with considerable special operations expertise but with no permanent special operations force. As late as 1980, the service still had no system for identifying special operations skill codes in its personnel records, making it difficult to locate airmen with appropriate talents when they were needed. The tendency to approach special operations on an ad hoc basis highlighted numerous deficiencies during the failed attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran in April 1980, and again in Operation Urgent Fury, the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983.

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Something resembling a permanent home on military organization charts emerged from the Desert One debacle in Iran in December 1982 when the Air Force assigned responsibility for Air Force special operations to the Military Airlift Command. MAC activated the Twenty-Third Air Force at Scott Air Force Base, Ill. This new numbered air force was charged with the worldwide missions of special operations, combat rescue, weather reconnaissance and aerial sampling, security support for intercontinental ballistic missile sites, training of USAF helicopter and HC-130 crewmen, pararescue training, and medical evacuation.

It was something of a misfit. Special operators considered themselves truly different, not just from others in MAC but from others in their service branch. Congress had long recognized the need for a distinct, joint-services command for unconventional warfare. In April 1987, the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) was established at MacDill Air Force Base, Fla., and Army Gen James J. Lindsay assumed command. Four months later, 23rd Air Force moved to Hurlburt Field, Fla. but remained part of MAC, still not quite the arrangement the service needed. The command arrangement made many uncomfortable in December 1989 when the largest paratroop drop since World War II kicked off Operation Just Cause, the invasion of Panama.

“The formation of AFSOC was inevitable.”

By now, Special Operations forces were well-equipped. Their inventory included AC-130A/H gunships, EC-130 Volant Solo psychological operations aircraft, HC-130P/N Combat Shadow tankers, MC-130E Combat Talons, and MH-53J Pave Low and MH-60G Pave Hawk helicopters. Special tactics combat controllers and medics provided important support to combat units during this operation. A Combat Talon crew ferried captured Panama President Manuel Noriega to prison in the United States.



A sight never to be seen again. AFSOC MH-53 Pave Low helicopters, stationed at Hurlburt Field, Fla., fly over the Gulf of Mexico June 12, 2008, during the last five-ship formation flown by the 20th Special Operations Squadron before being transferred to Cannon Air Force Base, N.M., with the rest of the 27th Special Operations Group. The MH-53 is now retired. U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Airman Emily S. Moore

In a speech, F. Whitten Peters, who was an Air Force secretary in the 1990s, described how the new era called for a permanent Special Operations establishment and for lawyers:

“Two years before I became the Secretary of the Air Force, I was the senior Department of Defense lawyer who worked the special operations portfolio. That meant that there was a certain rhythm to my life. Every Friday at about 4 p.m., Col. Jeff Ellis of the Army or Col. Johnny Wachop of the Air Force would stroll into my office with simple questions like: ‘We want to take down a terrorist on a Greek cruise ship in international waters tomorrow morning – any legal issues we need to know about?’ Or, ‘What can we do with a boatload of illegal Chinese migrants on a sinking ship just off Boston?’ Or, ‘You know we are working at the Olympics in Atlanta. Any problem with us making arrests?’” Peters later said, “The formation of AFSOC was inevitable.”

In an overdue change on May 22, 1990, Gen. Larry D. Welch, Air Force chief of staff, reorganized Twenty-Third Air Force into Air Force

Special Operations Command. AFSOC's first commander was Maj. Gen. Thomas E. Eggers. Some said this should have happened in 1947, or 1953, or 1972, not in 1990, but at least it happened. The new command comprised three wings – the 1st, 39th and 353d Special Operations Wings, plus smaller units and reserve groups. This was the unconventional warfare force that performed so well in the Persian Gulf War in 1991, and in subsequent conflicts, with the motto, "Anytime, anywhere."

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